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«Of course, conflicts between inhabitants emerge from time to time. It is still somewhat unusual to share a common space.»



OPEN CALL FOR
A DIFFERENT(IATED)
ARCHITECTURE
Jurek Brügger

► Jurek Brügger, born 1993, lives and works in Zurich and Berlin where he has a collaborative architectural practice. His first built project the «Haus am See» was awarded and published several times. He founded the furniture concept label Eins und Viele. He is pursuing his Master's degree in architecture at ETH.

Comments on the ecological crisis usually end with an urgent call for action — to do more. But do we know what to do? For buildings, the common answer is: insulation! Building regulations are being extended and tightened. «We are now building houses, which are so airtight, that we are forced to install mechanical ventilations [...], to prevent the building from molding and the residents from shortness of breath.»⁽¹⁾ Artificial environments are erected in the form of permanent homogenous climate spheres, which imply a uniform use. The insulating envelopes, that enable these artificial environments constitute inside spaces, which are predominant today.

We are making an enormous technical effort to separate the inside spaces from their surroundings, in order to be able to keep them in a conditioned, constant state — although the weather outside of these spaces and the uses in them change constantly.

But could we also imagine constructing spaces, that do not separate from the environment, but adapt continuously to climate and use? Would it be possible to replace the single insulating barrier that excludes external conditions with a system of layers including them? We wouldn't live in object-like buildings with a uniform outer barrier, which stays permanent, but would inhabit systemic platforms with multiple inner layers, which can change.

Our spaces would alter constantly, depending on weather conditions and resident's needs. We could move and combine different layers, constantly adapting our dwellings, to what seems best in every moment, in every room.

Imagine: When the wind blows, a tarpaulin protects us against the draught, that messes up our papers while we work. At dusk, a net protects from the mosquitoes which prevent us from falling asleep. In the cold, a thermal curtain protects against heat loss in the living area. And many more layers for all other conditions. An intelligent, self-learning system advises us on the combination and arrangement of the layers.

In this way we could succeed in settling on the Earth, instead of separating ourselves from it. This project aims to make the Earth a common concern for all, by integrating climate change into architecture and our lives. Climate is understood here in its broad meaning: «as the relationship of people to their material living conditions.»⁽²⁾

Slavoj Žižek claims that: «We are witnessing something, for which the only appropriate term is the «end of Nature». Nature should be understood in the traditional sense [...] as a reliable back-ground of human history.»⁽³⁾ Especially in modernity we inhabited a world full of natural objects, while regarding ourselves as independently acting subjects. We divided the world into natural and artificial spheres. This conceptual separation seemed realistic for a long time. The artificial realm was believed to be marginal enough not to fundamentally influence natural ecosystems.

But boundaries between the natural and artificial spheres shifted. Driven by capitalism, the artificial sphere grew

steadily, taking over the remaining natural one. Buildings, especially, became increasingly sophisticated to create artificial climates using thick, airtight insulation layers and mechanical ventilation systems.

I DISTINCTION

At the same time, we have established a compromise in order to compensate for the inequalities of the global, capitalist, neoliberal economic system. Consumption, hedonistic pleasure and comfort have become symbols of participation in this artificial cultural world. «Paradoxically, we equate comfort with absence or independence from external environmental influences.»⁽⁴⁾ In today's society, we create distinction by separating ourselves from the natural sphere. We create value through demarcation. Distinction is associated with wealth. These ideals lead us to an existence alienated from the conditions of the Earth. «Capital has become a world.»⁽⁵⁾ We experience a dematerialization, in which money takes on the form of an «indestructible, ghostly presence.»⁽⁶⁾ In our system, existential and ecological conditions of the earth are rarely part of the game. In Western society we have established the ideal of a lifestyle, that is materially unfeasible for everyone on this earth.

II ISOLATION

Exp Realty is one of the fastest growing real estate companies in the USA. An article in the business magazine «brand eins» describes the company headquarters Exp World in an appealing way: «[It] lies on a luxuriously furnished island in the middle of a lake. Glittering office towers on a spacious campus offer space for more than 20'000 employees. Brokers, managers and office workers travel by speedboat to meetings on a pirate ship, moored off the coast, when their usual working environment becomes too boring. If there is nothing to do, they can play football on the beach or climb a lighthouse on the coast and enjoy the view. For Halloween and Christmas, the company decorates the island lavishly with pumpkins and Christmas trees and puts food trucks on campus for company parties. On July 4, National Day, managers and their teams meet on the beach, to watch a fireworks display.»⁽⁷⁾

But how does the article's title «Forget the location!» fit in? Further on in the article, the reader notices that the company headquarters does not exist physically, but only digitally... You will need a link to find it and a digital company visa to be able to enter. All employees are asked to create an avatar, when they join the company. In a fantastic way, «Exp World» has accomplished the conceptual separation of culture and nature. The developers have created an artificial ideal world, in which they could push nature completely into the background of action — a background that no longer has any influence. They have created a world, characterized by the complete absence of external environmental influences. It is hard to believe that the real estate group unwittingly chose to set up an island as its new corporate headquarters.

Island in Latin *Insula* is an independent, detached place, free from external influences. An insular state is a state of

isolation. According to Peter Sloterdijk such insulations are «islands in the distant ocean, for revision processes against the definitions of reality on terra ferma.»⁽⁸⁾ Only in an isolated state, is it possible to realize, what is materially unfeasible for everyone on a common earth. According to him «the activity of isolating is the exclusion of an object area»⁽⁹⁾ which becomes the outside. Sloterdijk describes the state of isolation as an «interruption of the continuum of reality»⁽¹⁰⁾, which can only be achieved by the help of technical appliances. «What an apt description!», the inventors of the company headquarters of Exp Reality would probably admit.

III ILLUSION

Isolation creates an apparent independence from the conditions of a shared Earth. Conversely, this creates the illusion, that the Earth is not affected by our states of isolation. But this becomes more and more difficult to believe in: The earth is warming up, biodiversity is decreasing, sea levels are rising, pollution of the seas and landscapes is increasing, air quality is deteriorating, reserves of raw materials are becoming scarcer, weather extremes are becoming more frequent.

Žižek points out that: «Nowhere, is the reversal of virtuality into materiality more brutal, than in the approaching end of nature.»⁽¹¹⁾ We have taken the basis of our existence for granted, and now we realize that its very basic components are affected by and affect us. The separation of culture and nature is a grave illusion of modernity.

We have objectified, modernized, domesticated and ignored our earth. Now it retaliates with dangerous unpredictability. While accommodating ourselves in states of isolation, which resemble substitute worlds — Sloterdijk calls them: «animate inner worlds»⁽¹²⁾ — we enabled ourselves to repress the fact that the way we live is only possible at the expense of the Earth.

Nowadays calls to do more for climate protection are predominant. This applies in particular to the promises of the neoliberal, global, economic system — our distinction generating lifestyle: consumption, hedonistic pleasure and comfort. Every individual is held accountable for his ecological impact: We should fly less often, eat less meat, drive our car less often and live in smaller flats. Above all, these admonitions only appeal to the responsibility of each individual. Everyone should put his own house in order. But we misjudge the reasons why our houses are in disorder. This is how ecology is mistakenly personalized.

IV RESCUE

We attempt to continue as before, without being forced into changing everything. We are trying to transfer the current system, which is based on nature as a reliable background, into a new era of the climate regime, where we start to realize that this has always been an illusion. But how can we maintain a system based on an illusory narrative? We know that this is not possible. And we have found an impossible solution to an insoluble question. We maintain our social

and economic order by isolating ourselves from the Earth. Isolation is the medium that facilitates repression.

We literally flee to islands, to save ourselves from drowning, although we know about rising sea levels. These substitute worlds function all the better, the less they are disturbed by the Earth. The more the Earth returns as an actor, the more we have to isolate to maintain our view of the world — the higher our islands must be raised to escape the rising sea, the thicker the walls must be built to maintain an artificially air-conditioned inside space. We pile up the sand from the shallow shores to escape the rising water. Thus, our islands are getting smaller and smaller.

We justify our hopeless actions with the need to protect nature from us. It is the present dilemma. While we prevent ourselves from getting wet, we claim to secure the sea from mankind. By increasing efficiency, we try to restore balance, reduce our impact on Earth and return to a time when the effects were marginal enough, to maintain the illusion of nature as background.

V TOURIST

The absurdity of our helpless attempts is illustrated particularly well in current tourism. We travel the world like no other generation before us, and we have constructed an enormous corresponding infrastructure: airports, hotels, signposts to the most remote places in the world. We seek the untouched nature, the authentic place, whose illusion we destroy by our own presence. While we all go on holiday all the time, we are afraid to see other tourists or to be called so ourselves. We produce traces of our presence everywhere, which are contradictory to that, what we call the authenticity of a place. We all want to go on holiday any time, without seeing anyone else doing the same. If we could see ourselves, we would try to go on holidays without us.

VI GHOST

It seems like we are trying to live as ghosts in this world — from a dematerialized distance — while in reality we cause extensive destruction below us. «Modernization extracts us from our own localization.»⁽¹³⁾ «We become neutral observers, denying a substantial reality.»⁽¹⁴⁾ Earth appears as matter that we do not embrace, from its existence we try to distance ourselves as far as possible, because we consider ourselves as harmful opponents and imagine a ghost's life to be very comfortable. We are playing a game of self-concealment.

VII OPPORTUNITY

Isn't it a hopeless struggle to insulate more and more — a hopeless fight against ourselves? In 2001, Klaus Wowereit, the well-known former mayor of Berlin, stated «I am gay. And that is good!»⁽¹⁵⁾ Is it not about time to commit: «We are earth. And that is good!» The case of Klaus Wowereit shows the absurdity of isolation and the opportunity of commitment. Let us stop pretending that isolation from external environmental influences is a wealth generating

symbol of distinction. Let us stop protecting the earth from our harmful social and economic system. Let us change the system! If we criticize insular aspects of our life for ecological reasons like we do in personalized ecology, we can only overcome them by recognizing them as immanent parts of our social and economic arrangements. To dissolve isolation means to admit social and economic inequality. That is why it is so difficult. That is why it is so important! Let us stop insulating architecture more and more. Let us change architecture!

VIII

DIFFERENCE

To give life to the ghost, we have to start changing the way we are designing buildings and live differently. Certainly, the ghost will struggle to return to the mortal sphere. We must be pushed out of an inertia. We must be forced to be free. «Freedom and responsibility hurt, they require an effort.»⁽¹⁶⁾ For us, the island dwellers, who are protecting ourselves from rising sea levels on a shrinking piece of land, it will be inevitable to getting wet if we want to reach the mainland. By differentiating rather than isolating, we can dissolve the separation between nature and culture. Because one is an immanent part of the other. Neither one nor the other is possible by itself. While isolation separates both spheres, differentiation mediates between them by creating states of exposure, where the one is always dependent on the other.

Let us imagine a future, in which architects have succeeded to materialize this narrative. Once we began constructing

buildings as an immanent part of the Earth, we noticed our former mistake: only trying to minimize our impact was contradictory — we now feel obliged to contribute actively to our planet in a positive way.

We perceive the exterior environment as ours, to be taken care of actively instead of simply protecting it passively. We erect buildings not only for humans but also for plants and animals. Architects declare that constructions have to be made as an overlay of the soil, differentiated by multiple layers. Of course, conflicts between inhabitants emerge from time to time. It is still somewhat unusual to share a common space. But the methods of differentiations are getting better and better, layers and combinations become more and more sophisticated... Architecture, acting as a mediator, allows a peaceful way of living together and the maintenance of Earth.

Will you be one of these architects, who succeeded to materialize a different(iated) architecture? Can you imagine how to contribute actively to our planet in a positive way? How to give life to the ghost? How to design architecture as an immanent part of the Earth? How to adapt buildings to climate and use? How to differentiate? Let us imagine this future, collect ideas, experiences, knowledge.

→ *Together we can build up a different(iated) architecture.
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