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In Denial

Artai Sánchez Keller

I DON'T DISAPPEAR

In April 2021, a sky-blue Instagram post stopped my casual scrolling: Charlotte Malterre-Barthes and b+ (Arno Brandlhuber's architecture practice) had announced their collaborative initiative «A Global Moratorium on New Construction», which «argues for the necessity of a drastic change to construction protocols: the suspension of new building activity». ⁽¹⁾ As many others might have experienced, the proposition put me in a quandary. I had just graduated from architecture school and ambitiously taken up whatever design work was at hand, but I also have to admit that construction, the way humans enforce it, is an environmental catastrophe. This is a thought I had almost gotten accustomed to as a student: capital «c» Construction is bad for the environment, from CO₂ emissions, over the exploitation of resources, to the conditions of workers. This leaves little space for interpretation.

But «Construction is bad» is really not a helpful thing to say, even if it's somehow true. Although the claims of the «Global Moratorium on New Construction» are provocations rather than actual demands, their general mode is negation. As an ecological statement, they might seem to be the only imaginable conclusion of the ever-growing list of statistically proved problems: to solve the problem, the simplest thing that can be done is to just stop whatever is causing it. But even if formulated in a very radical way, negative propositions are always lopsided: they imply caring, but only through the effort of abstinence. As effective as their approach might seem, it is particularly difficult to cope with them from the perspective of those who should be taking action, because what they are supposed to do is to stop. A moratorium presents them with a disturbing fact: as far as it is concerned, things should disappear. In a world where construction has been abolished, no new constructions will be underway again, no use of cranes nor concrete mixers, but also no planning, neither use of AutoCAD, nor draftsperson, or construction manager, or designer. Things that disappear do not only leave a gap, they also discard the related tools and do not repurpose them.

Just as fast as this radical claim had drawn my support, it also put me in a very dissonant situation. I felt forced to accept the mismatch and cover it up with arguments many of the Moratorium symposium's guests had

already come up with: lots of people are still in need of basic building infrastructure, designing buildings is what architects are arguably good at, and those buildings can have very positive effects on people, and so on. Whether they are mere excuses or not, these are reasons why construction should not just disappear from our world.

In the ecological discourse these arguments allow for a more moderate position. They don't imply a radical negation. They validate current and future action. They are hopeful, presuppose good intentions and offer more than just a good conscience in return. But at the same time, they are tied to a less cheerful discussion: the one around efficiency. It is clear that, under the premises above, whatever will be done shall be done with the most efficient resources and methods available—less money, less labour, less material or less energy. Even though it is constantly being argued that these implications can create innovative solutions, they are also constricting. They are constricting not because they hinder creativity, but because they shift the attention to very specific problems: problems of reduction. In this sense, they are formulated in a similar way as the moratorium: what they put on the table is also a negation. Less is just a milder kind of no. This might be the reason why there is an inherent sense of helplessness and uncertainty around the topic of ecological activism. The point of any action is reduction. Of course, the impasse does not only spread within the field of architecture. It exists throughout the discourse of climate activism, from oil extraction to individual nutrition. All the ongoing debates about efficiency and sustainability are about abstaining from resources – material, energetic, social or economic – not about the possibility to deal with them as something else than mere resources.

II RADICAL FEARS

In fact, few ways of thinking about what needs to change from the ecological perspective avoid this mode. Reading Naomi Klein's essay «Capitalism vs. The Climate», I stumbled upon a surprising attitude.

In the text, Klein puts forward her case for the Green New Deal, a call for public policy in the United States to address climate change. Among other things, the Green New Deal has been labeled as «socialist» and «utopic», the current discussion being heavily influenced by climate warming denialist (mostly oil) lobbies.

During her visit to one of these denialists' conferences, the author realizes that one part of the speakers' argumentation seems actually quite logical. It is not their goals, but their fears that would crystallize into the perfect plan of action, according to Klein: «[...] when it comes to the political consequences of those scientific findings, specifically the kind of deep changes required not just to our energy consumption but to the underlying logic of our economic system, the crowd at the Marriott Hotel may be considerably less in denial than a lot of professional environmentalists, the ones who paint a picture of global warming Armageddon and then assure us that we can avert catastrophe by buying «green» products and creating clever markets in pollution.»⁽²⁾

If something can be a fear, then there must be a way to imagine it actually happening. Similar to the famous «if you can't imagine the next step, imagine where you'd be in ten steps, and then think back from there», this means: «if you don't know how to achieve something, think of what those, who oppose it, fear you could do». For non-denialists, dealing with climate change makes an unconceivable effort of reduction necessary. But for most people at that denialist conference, it makes «some kind of left-wing revolution virtually inevitable, which is precisely why they are so determined to deny its reality». Klein's positive turn is not cynical, nor is it unserious, but it manages to stir up things in a discussion that seemed to hit a dead end. The most rational, radical ideas do not come from where they were expected. They might just need to be understood as such.

III ANYTHING

Concerning construction, the current state of play from the architects' perspective has been somewhat paraphrased by a letter published in October 2020 in the «Domus» magazine. David Chipperfield, at the time guest editor of the publication, had written to Jacques Herzog «about the difficulty for architects to actively act on environmental disasters».⁽³⁾ Jacques Herzog, in his letter, provocatively states that the answer to what architects should do about the long list of problems – environmental catastrophes, inequality and poverty among them – is: «Nothing. Or do you know of

any moment in the history of architecture in which an architect contributed to the decisive issues of society?»

Of course, Herzog's «nothing» means rather something like (my paraphrasing) «nothing outside the realm of architecture, but everything good within it». Based on a few well-chosen examples he explains that in his experience architecture has seldom been the driver of political change, but can have a powerful effect on society nevertheless – in this case especially concerning healthcare architecture. Architects are not running the process of change, but their efforts have an impact. However, his answer is closely linked to the manner his own practice (Herzog & de Meuron) is run. Jacques Herzog wants «good architecture», but he doesn't want to change the way in which architecture is carried out and perceived. In his case – unlike mine – it is surely not out of fear that architectural practice might become obsolete and disappear. His office has little to fear in this respect. Much more, he suggests that the design practice could become «an arrangement or production of ideas, [...] mere decoration and, as such, not only ugly but also detrimental to the entire world of architecture».

And exactly this might be the idea worth considering. It would mean to understand architecture, as a discipline, modified out of its autonomy. If architecture becomes merely an arrangement of ideas, then «The Entire World of Architecture» would play only one part out of many involved in the process of construction. It would be possible to understand architecture not as a discipline that has to get it right, but as one of many things that can and must be changed – a tool. Capital «a» Architecture would be spoiled, because it would finally be allowed to get involved with many other things – inefficient inhabitants, bird nests, corrosion... personal interests and tastes, the interests and tastes of others, things that will happen a long time from now, or that have happened a long time ago... Instead of believing that things need to be rejected first and then reimaged in a right manner, it might be okay to start using some of the inadequate tools that already exist, and see how they can get modified. Ecological architecture might be about expanding, modifying and developing, not restraining.