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Giotto di Bondone, *The Expulsion of the Devils from Arezzo*, 1297-1299

OASE#114 Optimism or Bust?

Stefan Devoldere, David Peleman, Jantje Engels (eds.)

‘Feelings that seem the truest, seem so because of their spontaneity – which is no proof of their authenticity . . .’ – Paul Valéry¹

‘Live: Means not simply to exist but to thrive, to flourish, to inhabit, and to express life, tapping into architecture’s inherent optimism.’ – Hashim Sarkis²

‘Optimism and danger, very simply, are affirmations of the wildness of life – of the life that resides even in places and things – while utopianism remains an affirmation of the stillborn universe of the metaphysician’s *Idea*: transcendent, fixed, and quixotically indifferent to the vivid roilings of a historical world.’ – Sanford Kwinter³

Despite climate catastrophes, worsening commodity shortages and inequality, a global pandemic and growing geopolitical instability, architecture remains stubbornly optimistic about the future. Indeed, it usually sees itself as a discipline especially well-placed to show society a way out of disaster, hardship and calamity. The life-affirming theme of the latest edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale, *How Will We Live Together*, even imposed so much optimism on projects that it undermined their credibility. It seems architectural practice hides an intrinsic optimism that can only be credible if it feels spontaneous and unprogrammed and does not come at us in disproportionate amounts.

Noam Chomsky describes optimism as a genuine ‘strategy’ for building a better future. This strategic aspect is also very considerably present in architectural and urban design practice. We can hardly imagine a different – and hopefully better – built future if we are not optimistic about it or believe in it ourselves. Giotto shows us that in the Renaissance, optimism helped us to resist the devilish challenges of everyday life and helped save us from destruction. Today, optimism allows us to dispel tormentors that show up for all sorts of reasons. This is what we saw happening in the sketches, collages and plans submitted to Desired Spaces, a joint call by Belgium’s architecture institutes for ‘future scenarios for the (un)built environment’ meant to offer prospects for hope during the recent Covid-19 lockdown.⁴ At a time when people were banging their heads against the walls of their own bubbles, architecture provided a trajectory towards hope, desire and optimism.

The image of architects as experienced purveyors of doom and gloom thus seems far from true – especially when they are at the drawing board. Between the moment of the critical, analytical – and frequently downright pessimistic – reading of the context that results in a

¹ Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*, translated into Dutch and introduced by Jan Fontijn (Amsterdam: De Buitenkant, 2017), 241, English translation by InOtherWords.

² Hashim Sarkis, Curator’s Statement Biennale Architettura 2021: *How Will We Live Together?*

³ Sanford Kwinter, ‘Flying the Bullet or When Did the Future Begin?’, in: Sanford Kwinter (ed.), *Rem Koolhaas: Conversations with Students* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 67-94.

⁴ desiredspaces.be.

design commission and the moment they formulate a design proposal, designers undergo a kind of optimistic revolution. According to Alain Badiou, this is related to a question that humanity has been asking itself for a long time and to which it invariably formulates a positive response: 'To Be Happy, Must We Change the World?'⁵ Reversing the logic of this, Badiou argues that to change the world, we must first and foremost be happy – and perhaps optimistic as well?⁶

Badiou's reflection can help us give focus to the specific position of optimism in architecture and urban design. Does it coincide with the progress-oriented thinking that feeds the positive charge of reconstruction projects and modernism? Or, rather, is it comparable with the optimism that current social debate puts forward as a proactive strategy against (climate) catastrophe? In the latter case, the optimism does not arise from a belief in technological developments and the solutions these can provide, but the optimism itself becomes the engine of a necessary, world-changing transition. We cannot simply dismiss the optimism of the architect as a side-effect of designing or building, of the 'bringing into the world' of new proposals. It appears to be a driving force in the discipline, one that brings confidence and change to our built environment.

This edition of *OASE* wants to take a closer and more critical look at optimism in architecture and urbanism. Contributions can be contemplative, build an argument around a specific angle, or deal with projects and plans, with oeuvres, both contemporary and historical. They must, however, address one or more of the following themes:

- *Marks of Optimism.* Optimism is related to a utopian body of thought that architecture has extensively developed and analysed earlier. Yet optimism seems to occupy an alternative substantive and strategic position. Perhaps this position has something to do with a different, more direct relationship with reality. What marks the kind of optimism that accompanies architectural production and urban development? Can optimism be linked to social agendas or evolutions? Is it essentially about an intention, or about an effect?
- *Manifestations of Optimism.* Is optimism a visible trait of design practices or buildings, or does it only exist on paper or in the minds of designers? If you were to trace the process by which a design is created, are there specific places or moments in which optimism thrives most (on the drawing board, in the social context in which the project is created, or in the mind)? Are there aesthetic characteristics (forms, colours, materials) or building programmes that express or feed optimism in architecture?
- *Mechanisms of Optimism.* Optimism in architecture and urban design is often less spontaneous than it seems and is driven or provoked by specific mechanisms. How

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Happiness* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 76. Originally published as *Métaphysique du bonheur réel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2015).

⁶ 'Hoe de wereld te veranderen? Het antwoord is ronduit bemoedigend: door gelukkig te zijn', *ibid.*, 89.

does optimism as a pacesetter in architecture and urbanism work? Does it lose its value if it is used deliberately? How can optimism be kept in check and under what circumstances does it go off the rails?

Please submit your abstract (in Dutch or English) of 500 words at the most via info@oasejournal.nl, together with your name, email address, professional affiliation and a short bio (150 words at the most) by **27 February 2022**.

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