

THE POWER OF SPECULATION.

EDITORS

Several weeks ago the governor of the Bank of England, Sir Mervyn King, announced that it was no longer possible to produce economic forecasts with any degree of certainty. The next six months, he said, were totally unpredictable. After five years of intense political and economic turmoil, this statement seemed a perverse admission that we were entering yet another new phase of crisis. One in which quantitative models designed to bring a modicum of objectivity to the recovery process were breaking down.

King seemed to say that we were fast approaching the event horizon of this politico-fiscal black hole, and even the laws of physics were failing; time, space and the future contorted into logical absurdities...

Meanwhile, just across the Thames, workers were putting the final touches on Europe's tallest tower, *The Schadenfreude*. At 310m, and with a spec of just 65 years, this faceted glass splinter was the product of controversial planning decisions, in which codes regulating height and floorplate ratios were bent and/or ignored.

Financed by the Qatari royals, and designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano, the planning exception for *The Shard* was provided on a quid pro quo basis, where the developer was obliged to pay for the renovation of one of the capital's busiest railway stations, London Bridge. In other terms, money buys changes to the planning law. Crudely: wealth evades democracy.

This type of mega-project showcases the awesome machinery of late-neoliberal economic theory, and the incredible power of speculative development to transform the urban landscape.

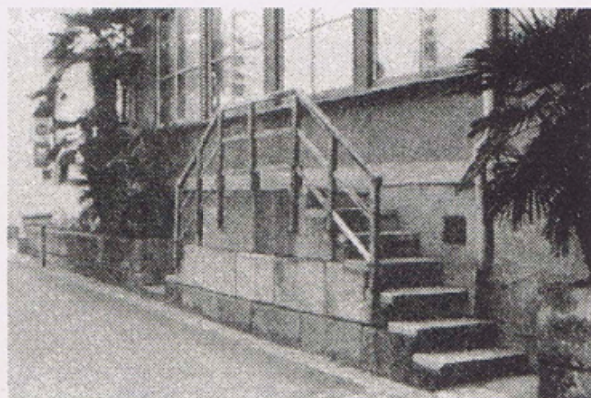
It is hard to know where to begin when deconstructing the warped premises of this theory: perhaps with the moral justification of social inequality, which says it is fairer to give incentives to the wealthy than assistance to the poor (the so-called "trickle-down" effect). Or, one might cite its jealousy over intellectual property; its obsession with deregulation; or, its drive towards a castrated, "flexible" workforce.

The underpinnings of the theory are simple but sinister: it is a system that socialises losses and privatises gains; co-opts the political process to transfer corporate debt onto citizens; benefits the elite and penalises the worker. In spatial terms, it weakens the public realm and creates corporate zones restricting freedom within the city.

The role of architecture and property speculation in the last boom has been well documented — from the stillborn desert skyscrapers of Dubai, to the armies of windowless villas in Spain; from the evicted families living in the forests of North America, to the ghost cities of northern China — and the role of architects as agents of a deeply flawed and immoral model has been comprehensively mapped. There seems little need to dwell or rebuke.

In Western architectural tradition there is a certain Oedipal tendency in which the younger generation (and this is a student publication) accuse those before them of being somehow guilty, or at least complicit, in the maintenance of some corrupt ideology. But we're not teenage rebels, we are each of us, as citizens, complicit.

Nonetheless, the dominant ideology discussed here is indeed immoral, and accordingly we must all assume the responsibility of enacting change. In this light, chaos is not an end, but a beginning.



It's clear occidental society is experiencing a period of paradigmatic instability — out of which it is likely will emerge a radically different social model.

The significance of this transitional phase, one in which the internal mechanisms of our social institutions are reduced to incoherent contradictions, is that it proffers unbounded potential.

There is a power of speculation that is not commercial: it is propositional, projective, and positive. Speculative architecture captures the promise of the near-future and attempts to convincingly construct it in the present.

It redeploys the latent and the overlooked, and turns them into the nearly-new — the recognisably novel but incrementally improved.

Speculative architecture requires both scepticism and imagination. Most of all it necessitates the deprecation of formal, technological and historical debates under the sociopolitical and cultural roles of architecture.

Jack Self edits the free weekly publication *Fulcrum* at the AA in London. Graphics by Graham Baldwin.

GOING NOWHERE.

AMELIA GROOM

"Everybody knows the useful is useful, but nobody knows that the useless is useful too." Zhuangzi, 4th century BCE.

In the early 1980s, Genpei Akasegawa and some of his friends stumbled upon a staircase in Yotsuya, Tokyo [below, left]. Having somehow survived the building's successive renovations, these stairs had outlasted their function and been rendered perfectly pointless. It appeared to this group of artists and students to be a mistake, since capitalism shouldn't allow for such uselessness. They decided that a staircase leading nowhere was in fact no longer a staircase; it was, by virtue of its acquired obsolescence, art. From here they formulated the notion of *chogeijutsu* or 'hyperart': art beyond Art, made without any artistic intent. This was art that could be made by the city, wherever planned utility had given way to accidental futility.

modernist credo that form follows function. He was absolute form, and therefore functionless.

Thomassons soon developed a nation-wide cult following as Akasegawa ran a monthly column in the underground photo magazine *Shashin Jidai*, chronicling the group's documented finds and encouraging reader submissions. This was the mid-1980s: with the bubble economy blowing up, Tokyo was in a prolonged hyperactive phase of redevelopment, expansion and flux. Thomassons pointed to the irrationality that exists within rational order — the regression that comes with progress, destruction in construction, collapse in growth, decay in regeneration, and the inadvertency concomitant with the planned.

As with Gordon Matta-Clark's *Fake Estates* (1973-74), where the artist purchased from the City of New York a series of uselessly tiny plots of land inadvertently remaining between buildings/ development zones, Thomassons remind us there are always forgotten leftovers to generate new meaning outside of the city's prescribed use.



David Batchelor's *Found Monochromes* project also comes to mind here: since 1997 the UK artist has photographed several hundred two-dimensional rectilinear blocks of whiteness (mostly signs that are painted over, faded off or facing the other way) he has encountered walking the streets of London. His role is simply to seek out and document these situated empty images — the city itself is the one making them.

By relying on what already exists, these sorts of 'urban unplanning' practices are concerned with the possibility of *creating something without adding to the stuff of the world*.

The same impulse has carried over to digital space in online projects. Jon Rafman's *Nine Eyes* compiles screen grabs of the surprising sites and sights he encounters while trawling Google Maps StreetView. These found glitches in the planned digital cartography are like virtual Thomassons, where Google's utilitarian value gives way to accidental instances of occasionally beautiful/ amusing/ disturbing images that have been made without an author.

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SOMETHING IN THE AIR.

AMELIA STEIN

Richard Prince: What kind of sex do you like?

Vito Acconci: The kind in which two people use every part of their bodies and every secretion of those bodies and every level of pressure those bodies can exert.

Here is the truth: people smell. Here is another truth: no one likes to talk about it. The smell of sex is a unique, definitive characteristic of the act — yet even Vito Acconci, the great transgressor, leaves it out. "Secretion" edges towards it, but scent is conspicuously absent in his description of fucking.

Sometime in the month after Occupy Wall Street grew roots in New York, I met a friend for a drink. "Poor residents of the streets that border Zuccotti Park," he said. "They have to deal with that terrible smell."

To raze the Occupiers in this way was not original. Around that time, Libertarian and

Smell, as opposed to *scent* (which suggests something perfumed or otherwise pleasant) traditionally implies a certain lowliness. The Kantian hierarchy of sense ranks "subjective" smell below sight, hearing and touch, which serve to connect us to the objective world. To be guided by one's sense of smell is almost as bad as being smelly. Dogs rely on smell, and dogs give off smell. It's primal and, depending on context, offensive. But dogs also demonstrate another crucial capacity of smell that moves the sense from a personal to a spatial dimension: marking territory. Dogs claim space in a powerful, guttural and collectively recognised way. They can demonstrate presence in multiple places simultaneously. They piss, and it means something.

Smell's capacity to function as a mobile signal in space is compelling. Its invisibility, its lack of immediate materiality, is key: eyes can close and ears can be plugged, but smell is pervasive and potentially unstoppable. Odour, according to Michel Serres, is always composite. It is the manifestation of multitudes; a literal symbol of chaotic union: "The smallest point of a rare apex, a highly complex compound, a blend of a thousand proximities, unstable knot of capricious currents, an aroma comes about like an intersection, or confusion, we do not smell simple, pure odours... The sense, therefore, of the confusion of encounters; the rare sense of singularities: our sense of smell slides from knowledge to memory and from space to time — no doubt from things to beings."

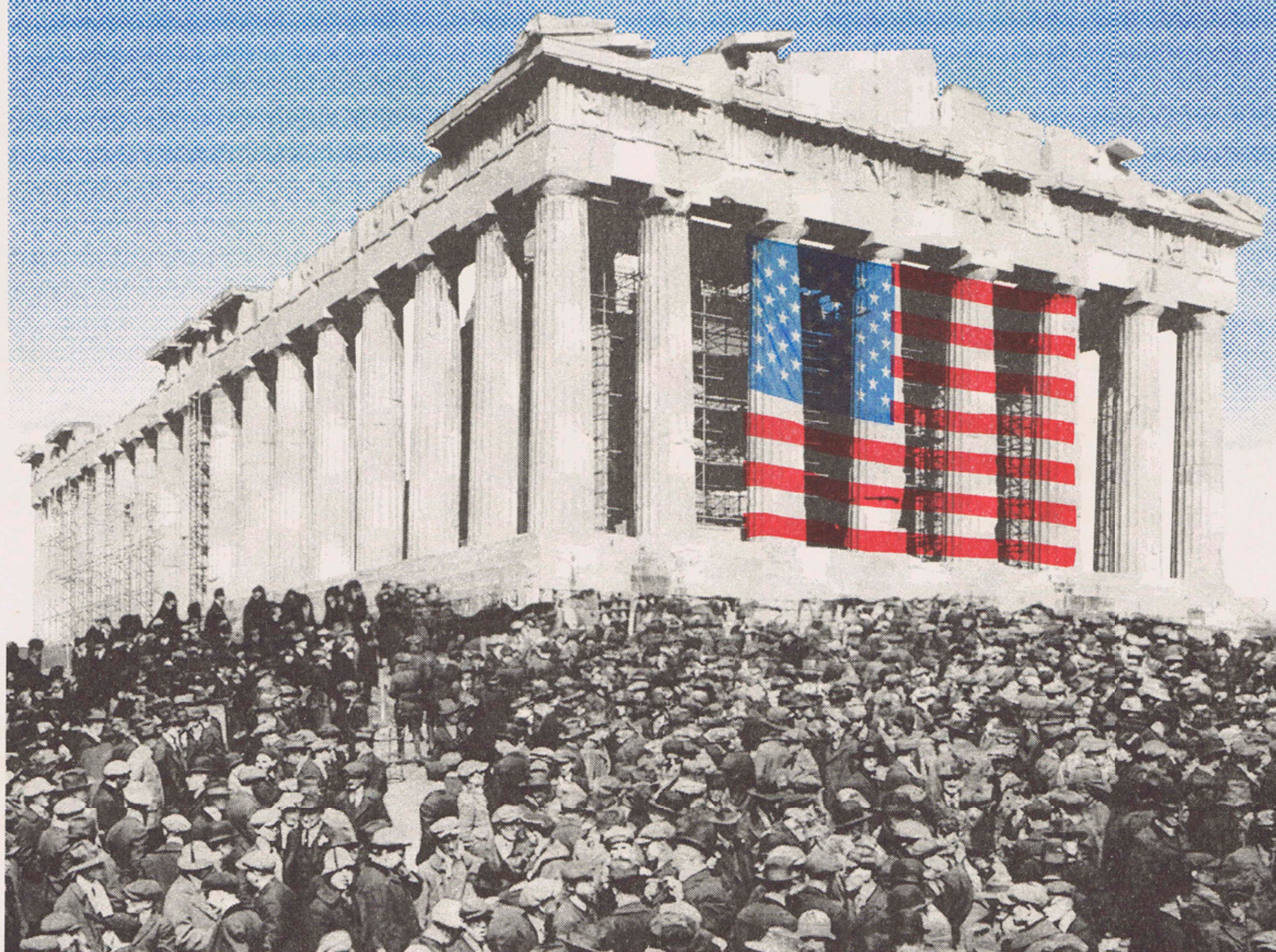
While it would seem obvious that protest benefits from streamlining, from refinement and certainty, these times continue to call for an alternative. Decentralised methods of organising, fluid and ever-evolving, are both valuable and relevant. The use of smell to take ownership of space, especially of sites of protest, is worth exploring — or at least worth acknowledging.

I am trying to point towards smell's insurgent possibilities. It knows no boundaries and is therefore a threat. It differs to the other "subjective" sense, taste, and also to touch and sight, as all three are contingent on the recipient's permission. It is different to sound, too, because it is a function of tangibility and must ultimately arise from, or lead back to a solid form.

The great hope for any protest is for it to spread in a manner that cannot be contained. Smell is always-already doing this. The smell of a protest, smell within space, is not to be disregarded or sneered at, but utilised. Defend it. Celebrate it. Inhale.

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too
big
to
fade?



The 2008 Wall Street crash, which ironically took place inside a building resembling a Doric temple draped in Stars and Stripes, led politicians to agree that some banks involved in the financial crisis were simply "too big to fail".

Our question is whether, for Western society, the problem of good architecture (represented in the image by one of the most iconic public buildings of all times) is important enough not to fade away from our thoughts.

This is relevant because, while in the past the most important buildings were representative of a society's cultural achievements, today the market (which even in a time of crisis is still the strongest social decision

maker) is not at all interested in constructing good architecture. In fact, the party still looks far from over.

Maybe architects should work in opposition to the logic of endless speculation (the construction of a

Common Ground is certainly not an economically appealing subject). So before replying to the question: "what architecture for a time of crisis?" we asked ourselves if society is even seeking answers from architecture.

The Ship is a weekly publication on architecture published at the University of Venice (IUAV).

It is edited by Benjamin Gallegos and Marco Provinciali.