

Fulcrum

ISSUE 73 - OCTOBER 14, 2013 - THE NEXT GENERATION

after the avant-gardes.

e.blake

Only those content with banality would idolise youth for the virtue of youthfulness. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that in the field of architecture youth goes practically unmentioned when compared with other artistic pursuits. Those in their twenties are not in a position to mould current practice or even take up a predominant role within the discourse. And yet the unswerving truth is that by the end of this decade our generation will, to a large extent, be in a position of power, while those calling the shots now may well be on the wane.

Our generation is so varied and so obviously pluralist that to mount a critique of it as a whole seems churlish. Generations are hard to pin down. However, there is a certain comfort in being part of a larger whole and called a generation. This is something that is perhaps not done enough in architecture criticism right now. The critics are too honest to do it, because, after all, who would lump say David Kohn with FAT or, indeed, Feilden Fowles with Assemble? That said there are a handful of contemporary tendencies that can be pin-pointed and bracketed, and maybe through these we could talk about a generation.

The avant-garde has become a deplorable term used to market contemporary artistic practices, rather than a term for a small cadre of committed practitioners testing the boundaries of the field with a goal; with a real attempt made to work towards a plausible architectural future. The idea of a group of young people writing a manifesto today seems archaic. The pronouncement of the avant-garde is its own demise; the declaration of its arrival is simultaneously a funeral procession. The speed of communication technology has assisted this. In order for the avant-garde to flourish there has to be a public sphere. A variety of factors are resulting in the decay of the public sphere; what had started with the growth of a mass media (which turned a critical public into a passive consumer public) is continuing with

the splintering of media outputs. Another expression of this individualism can be seen in contemporary dance and theatre, where immersion is being used to give the consumer a unique experience. Immersive theatre does not allow any communal experience. In fact, it attempts to avoid it, the apogee being a moment where the consumer is one-on-one with the artist. On-demand television is the mass-media version of this same trend.

The idea of the individual heroic architect, the singular genius, has been around for centuries, but in our neoliberal age the power of these brand-name architects has been magnified. This is something our generation is changing. If you look at the most important practices under 30, no-one has their name above the door – that is an expression of a different attitude towards individual genius, perhaps a shift towards acknowledging collaborative effort.

One can see from the last couple of years of architecture degree shows in the UK that there is a growing cadre of politicised students.

Perhaps we are seeing the seeds of a counter-counter revolution. Instead of thesis projects focusing on "speculative butterfly museums", we are seeing earnest young people talk about the "civic" responsibilities of architecture and organising collectives that actually build in a way that tests and expands the public sphere.

If we are going to change anything we must learn to harness the apparatuses of neoliberalism, in order to radically subvert the status quo. Capital: we are surrounded by it, and it absolutely runs our world, but we never see it at the heart of our profession. We so rarely use it within design conversations. Perhaps this is where our generation can change things. This time, this time, things will be different.

Eddie Blake is an artist and designer, currently working with Studio Weave. He studied architecture at UWestminster, where he continues to be a visiting critic.

building a narrative.

a.labarca

In early 2006 Chilean high school students organised demonstrations throughout the streets of Santiago. Within months, around 600,000 protesters across the country had either brought their schools to a total standstill or, in some cases, taken over the institutions altogether. The year of demonstrations that followed became known as the "penguin revolution" (alluding to the blue and white uniform typical of all Chilean students). The aim of the protesters was the repeal of educational laws imposed under military regime.

The neoliberal reforms promoted by Pinochet have in some cases been reinforced, rather than weakened, by the last 25 years of democracy – certainly this is the case with those concerning secondary and tertiary education. After a period, the protests started up again, but this time it was university students demanding greater state support for education. Almost every Thursday in 2011, over 100,000 students took to Santiago's streets. Garnering high levels of popular support, the students' agenda was extended to other fields of social discontent. In each case the problem was always more or less the same: neoliberal models imposed by the dictatorship had produced inequality and injustice, and there had not been any substantial change under new democratic rule after 1990.

The negotiations with the government that stemmed the protests in 2006 and 2011 failed to produce any important changes. However, through this enormous manifestation of common will, a generation took shape. One of the causes of the second revolt was simply that the high school students of 2006 became the college students of 2011. The significance of this phenomenon remains a much-debated subject, although there is one thing everyone agrees on about this age group: they had no experience of the dictatorship that ruled the country between 1973 and 1990.

I'm Chilean. I was born in 1989. That's my generation. Today, September the 11th 2013, it has been forty years since the military coup in Chile. For us, we've

only ever seen pictures of the government palace being bombed. Yet we still feel an important aspect of what we are as a generation is related with those images.

A generation is not simply a group of people of more or less the same age. A generation is something those people build together, manifesting themselves in the public sphere —

with an historical consciousness of their position that implies a critical (or at least a revisionist) view of the previous generations. There are two generations related with this image: one that was politically active before 1973, and one that grew up under the dictatorship. We feel they were not able to build an equitable, just and representative country. (Although they did get democracy back, even if it is incomplete, and without it we won't be able to stand up to the subjects of our criticism). This may be not fair towards them, but a generation doesn't have to be fair with the previous one.

We were able to communicate our conviction, and it is now shared by a wider section of the Chilean population. Although this position may be rooted in our own history, all around the world there are social crises manifest in the streets that share the same general issues: the failures of democracy and successes of neoliberalism.

From that perspective, this is really an exciting period to be young in Chile – although it is an excitement tinged with disappointment. I had expected, in 2011, that something incredible would happen in my faculty of architecture. Among the students there were two positions: those that remained disinterested and apathetic, and a group of students had become radically political, and they spoke about everything except architecture. Except in some rare cases, the idea that the discipline could be related to the incredible political and social period we're experiencing, or at least get some momentum from it, was completely absent.

Today, some Chilean professional studios are thinking about architecture as a political activity (and I understand politics as the management of power, not as

Continued overleaf...



September 11, 1973: Anti-state forces lay siege (and set fire) to the Chilean presidential palace during the military coup.

something regarding parties) although students appear to remain indifferent. That is what is so disappointing, especially if we remember the student manifestations in architecture schools that took place in the late-sixties and early seventies (and which remain important even now).

The interesting thing is that, if you put the few young actors that are appearing in the Chilean architectural scene in relation with what is happening elsewhere, something begins to take shape. Probably because today information travels faster, or — if we accept Koolhaas' thesis for the next Venice biennale, "national identity has seemingly been sacrificed to modernity" — putting ourselves in a wider context is easier. And though national social conflict remains about local concerns, the broader issues, as I said, are very much the same. There is a cultural and social common ground.

Obviously, I have not visited every architectural faculty in the world. But with

research, some common perspectives can be identified among the students and recent graduates. The first thing is what seems to be the recovery of the discipline. Hiding behind "sustainability", computer programs or "participation" is not seen as valid anymore. Architects should be responsible for what they produce, and the form of that production is crucial. The second thing is that an architect is a critical professional with some impact in the public world. That means that architecture, as a political activity, should not surf the wave of neoliberalism, but confront it — or at least deal with it using its own tools. The consequence is the rejection of the figure of the star architect, not in individual cases, but as a kind of institution that has steered the discussion about architecture in the last years. That is easier for an age group that, for obvious reasons, hasn't faced the market. The awareness of that freedom is an important factor, but at the same

time a constraint. Without the capacity to have a repertoire of built work, they have to search for other resources. So the third factor is the use of competitions, exhibitions, and especially publications, for developing their ideas. These shared points give the impression that they may be a new generation of architects.

Trying to characterise this generation is a speculative exercise. The first thing one tries to do is to define an age range. That is also the first mistake. Obviously, there is something about age, but the important thing is to relate that group of people with an historical fact or period that defines their position towards the other generations. That fact is chosen by them, consciously or unconsciously, and is reflected in the ideas they try to put forward in their public agenda. I use the Chilean example because it's strong and clear. The objective of that generation's criticism was Pinochet's legacy in contemporary Chilean democracy. With that

they were automatically saying that they did not experience the dictatorship and, consequently, are not responsible for the terms of the transit to democracy. The age limit is clear but not completely defined.

To build this generation of architects (because a generation is something that is built) we need not just a common ground, we need a common narrative. A generation, a real one, is an incredible punch for the discipline. Because of the amazing capacity that I see in my peers everywhere and the necessity architecture has today of that impulse, it would be a loss not to find something as clear and strong as the image of a building being burned. A narrative that I'm sure will emerge somehow, otherwise I would not be writing this.

Agustina Labarca is a student of architecture at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (and was previously at IUAV in Venice). She is also Fulcrum's principal ally in South America.