

RE- IMAGINING THE AVANT- GARDE

GUEST-EDITED BY
MATTHEW BUTCHER AND
LUKE CASPAR PEARSON

Revisiting the
Architecture of the
1960s and 1970s





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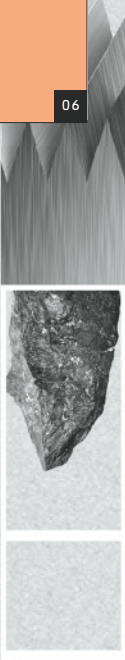
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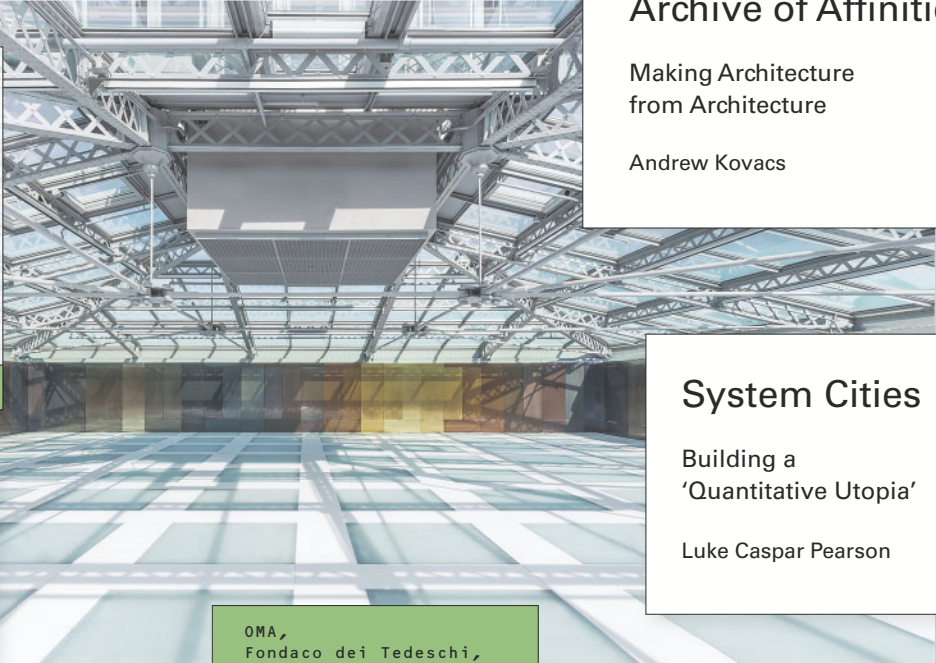
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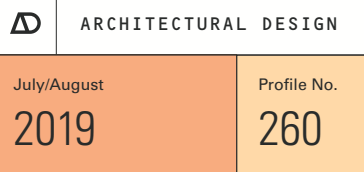
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Inside front cover: Perry Kulper, *Aerial Diptych Folly, v.02: Oculus*, 2018. © Perry Kulper

Page 1: NEMESTUDIO, Plastic Pacific Hall, Middle Earth: Dioramas for the Planet, 2017. Courtesy of NEMESTUDIO

04 / 2019



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ABOUT THE
GUEST-EDITORS

MATTHEW BUTCHER
AND LUKE CASPAR PEARSON



Over the last decade, Matthew Butcher and Luke Pearson have been investigating the relevance of the architecture of the 1960s and 1970s within 21st-century architectural discourse, and ways of re-imagining this avant-garde work in contemporary design practices. This has underpinned both their research and teaching practice at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London (UCL), where Butcher is an Associate Professor of Architecture and Pearson a Lecturer in Architecture and Director of the Undergraduate Architecture Programme.

Butcher's research investigates how the innovative practices of the architectural avant-garde – incorporating art, land art and performance – might be re-enacted to address current environmental concerns. He explores how architects can develop a greater political, empathetic and physical relationship with the environments we inhabit, over one that is augmented by technology. His work has been exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London; Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York; The Architecture Foundation, London; and the Prague Quadrennial. Recent projects and exhibitions include 2EmmaToc/Wrattle Calling, a temporary radio station in Essex; Flood House, a floating architecture developed in collaboration with Jes Fernie and Focal Point Gallery in Southend; and Mansio, a retreat for writers and poets that visited sites along Hadrian's Wall in the summer of 2016. He is also the founder and Editor of the architectural newspaper *P.E.A.R.: Paper for Emerging Architectural Research*, and has contributed articles and papers for journals including *Architecture Research Quarterly (ARQ)*, the *RIBA Journal* and *Architecture Today*. He currently holds a visiting lectureship at Umeå School of Architecture, Sweden, and a visiting professorship at Genoa Technical University in Italy.

Pearson's work explores the relationship between pop culture, technology and architectural design with reference to avant-garde projects of the past. He uses video-game technologies as new forms of architectural representation and generators of utopic environments, often adopting the analytical approaches of historical figures such as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown to explore the formal composition of game spaces, for example in his doctoral research project *Learning from Los Santos*. He is co-founder (with Sandra Youkhana) of the design practice You+Pea, which works at the intersection of architecture, video games and experimental drawing. Recent commissions include *Projectives*, a video game based on Hans Vredeman de Vries's perspectival studies; the *Architecture (After Games)* installation at the V&A; and *Peep-Pop City*, an Archizoom-inspired game responding to London's urban morphology that was exhibited at Somerset House. He has lectured widely on this research, at the Strelka Institute, New York University Games Lab, the V&A and Asakusa Gallery Tokyo among others, and has been published in journals including the *Journal of Architectural Education*, *Thresholds* and *ARQ* alongside architecture and game-industry publications such as *CLOG: Sci-Fi, Architects' Sketchbooks*, *Heterotopias* and *EDGE* magazine. He is also the co-founder of 'Drawing Futures', an international conference and book series on drawing practices for art and architecture.

As guest-editors of this issue, Butcher and Pearson have worked together to frame the avant-garde not simply as a subject for historical enquiry, but as a catalyst for new forms of architectural practice and research. This has developed from their shared belief that work from this point in time, when the conceptual project of architectural modernity was being twisted and subverted, continues to resonate ever more strongly in the face of emerging technologies. ▽



INTRODUCTION

MATTHEW BUTCHER
AND LUKE CASPAR PEARSON

ENDURING EXPERIMENTS

How the Architectural
Avant-Garde Lives On

The 1960s and 1970s saw a significant increase in architectural projects seeking to redefine the discipline, many of which have gone on to become seminal works. Loosely grouped together under the term 'avant-garde', these projects and ideologies remain highly influential today. Like the historical avant-garde of the early part of the 20th century, this 'neo' or 'late' avant-garde¹ was not singular in its formal, conceptual or political ambitions. It encompassed divergent geographic and cultural situations, with a wide variety of aims, representational techniques and political views – differences that existed even among the protagonists of individual subsections such as the Italian Radical movement emerging from Florence or the Whites and Grays stationed on the East Coast of the US. Their common objective, however, was to assert architecture once again as an autonomous discipline, as a political provocateur and a means of social satire.

The conceptual and often contradictory nature of the projects lends them a timeless presence; as Pino Bruggellis and Manuel Orazi argue of the Italian Radicals, 'they are susceptible to different interpretations and meanings, without ever exhausting their explosive charge: a sort of architectural Big Bang that continues to expand today, while keeping alive the chaos of its origins'.² The period produced reflections on issues such as the looming ecological crisis, the Vietnam War, Modernism's increasing focus on market-driven ideals of efficiency and technology, and a shift in society to a condition of hyper-consumerism.³ For historian Marco De Michelis, this neo-avant-garde was an eclectic group of 'architects, philosophers, and historians, whose diverse ideas were connected only by a common determination to alter the obsolete tenets of modernist practice and to reevaluate architecture in terms of the new imperatives of the postwar world'.⁴

Perry Kulper,
El Dorado: Floating Bird Motel,
2017

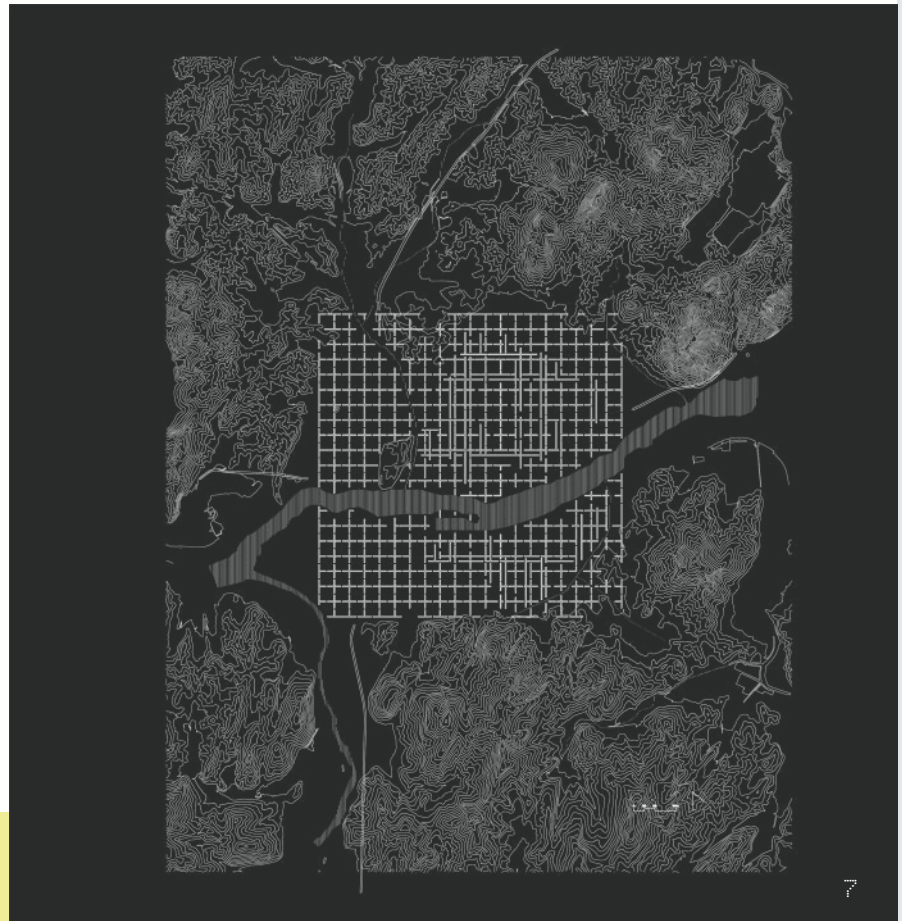
Kulper's speculative project (see also pp 68–9) establishes a familiar strangeness through the juxtaposition of distant realities in a metaphorical resort proposal for birds, employing tactical manipulations of the absurd and fantastical, rendered as richly graphic worlds. Drawing in collaboration with Saumon Oboudiyat.

This issue of Δ seeks to explore this ambition and energy in the context of contemporary architectural practice. It examines the work of the 1960s and 1970s as a historical precedent, a barometer of an experimental design ethos, framing its protagonists as instigators of new formal techniques. In doing so it illuminates the creativity inherent in methodologies that build reciprocity between this period and contemporary design cultures.

There have been many studies on the methods and motives of these historical projects. The intention of this issue is not to create a new history in the typical sense, but rather to represent how the influence of the historical avant-garde directly resonates with architectural practice some 50 years later. To understand its impact, the contributions are presented under four main themes: 'The Avant-Garde as Precedent', 'The Spirit of the Avant-Garde', 'Utopia' and 'Formal Repetition'.

Dogma with OFFICE Kersten Geers
David Van Severen,
City-Walls project for the New
Multifunctional Administrative City,
South Korea,
2005

Dogma, founded by Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara, and OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, are recognised as key protagonists of the renewed interest in avant-garde architects working in the 1960s and 1970s. The proposed project, reminiscent of Archizoom's *No-Stop City* (1969–1970), presents a city of external and habitable urban rooms formed from a superstructure of walls.



The Avant-Garde as Precedent

Today, references to Superstudio, Peter Eisenman, Archizoom and John Hejduk abound. By examining the reinterpretation and application of such avant-garde positions in current practices, the aim is to elucidate shared links between contemporary architects and those who serve as a historical vanguard. Given technological developments beyond anything the avant-gardes could have predicted, which have totally reshaped everything from the production of drawings to buildings and the notion of communication itself, why do architects continue to align their work with such a specific historical period and set of languages?

To start to investigate this idea, William Menking's article 'Superstudio as Super-Office' (pp 14–21) sheds light on the group's attempt to create a radical departure from the traditional architectural office. This was not only manifest in their drawn and theoretical work, but also in a desire to build buildings, which Menking sees as a means to subvert the discipline from within – a form of operation that resonates strongly with the work of contemporary practices such as raumlabor and Assemble.

Superstudio,
Saluti da Coketown,
1969

The work of radical architecture practice Superstudio and their ubiquitous gridded designs, ranging from tables and chairs to endless monuments, has become iconic of avant-garde work produced during the period. Their gridded world was a foreshadowing of our digital age, and their desire for architecture to act as artistic provocation towards the ongoing mobilisation of capital resonates just as strongly today.



raumlaborberlin,
Poster for the opening of Floating University,
Berlin,
2018

Presented as an anti-utopia, raumlaborberlin's work, while influenced by radical architects such as Superstudio, moves away from grand speculative statements to focus on the physical, environmental and political conditions of where the projects are sited. The Floating University, for example, was designed as a space for discourse on the future of urban living in Berlin.



In turn, Sarah Deyong (pp 22–9) emphasises how contemporary practice has drawn heavily from the avant-garde to develop an almost evangelical and ‘hardcore’ obsession with form. Expanding Postmodernism’s desire to detach form from function, she argues that current trends see form as fluid, allowing for multiple interpretations and manipulations divorced from concerns about context, site and process.

When looking at contemporary practices’ attempts at embodying the spirit of the avant-garde, it is important to register the influence of educational institutions, and none more so than the Architectural Association (AA) in London. During the 1970s and 1980s, the AA, headed by the enlightened Alvin Boyarsky, produced a new generation of experimental architects including Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid and Nigel Coates. In his article ‘Avant-Garde in the Age of Identity’ (pp 30–37), Igor Marjanović looks at the very particular culture and innovation present in the school at this time, addressing how the notions of identity being expressed there informed its design output and are still helping to define educational practice today.

Encapsulating both the stylistic and theoretical framework of this neo avant-garde is San Francisco-based NEMESTUDIO. In his interview with partner Neyran Turan (pp 38–45), architect and historian Stylianos Giamarelos reveals the importance of this period in the studio’s work, and how it has helped them to establish critical methodologies to address geographical and environmental issues in their own research and to explore new forms of architectural practice.

As a counterpoint to the celebration of, and reference to, groups such as Superstudio, architectural writer and commentator Mimi Zeiger warns of the dangers of historic reverence and reinvention without a critical

purpose (pp 46–53). Architecture must be wary of retreating to an endless ‘Groundhog Day’ of historical loops that the discipline might currently be accused of engaging with. Instead, she argues, architecture must challenge its references from within, and against other forms of practice and distinct political and social contexts.

The Spirit of the Avant-Garde

The spirit of the neo avant-gardes, like their forebears the Surrealists and Dadaists, was driven by a desire to develop polemics through and against existing cultural hegemonies, in their case the discipline of architecture. Their work took many forms, manifesting as drawings and texts, luscious graphic illustrations, self-published magazines, performances and small-scale installations and structures. The Information Age, however, has done much to change both how and in what context architectural imagery is now created and disseminated.

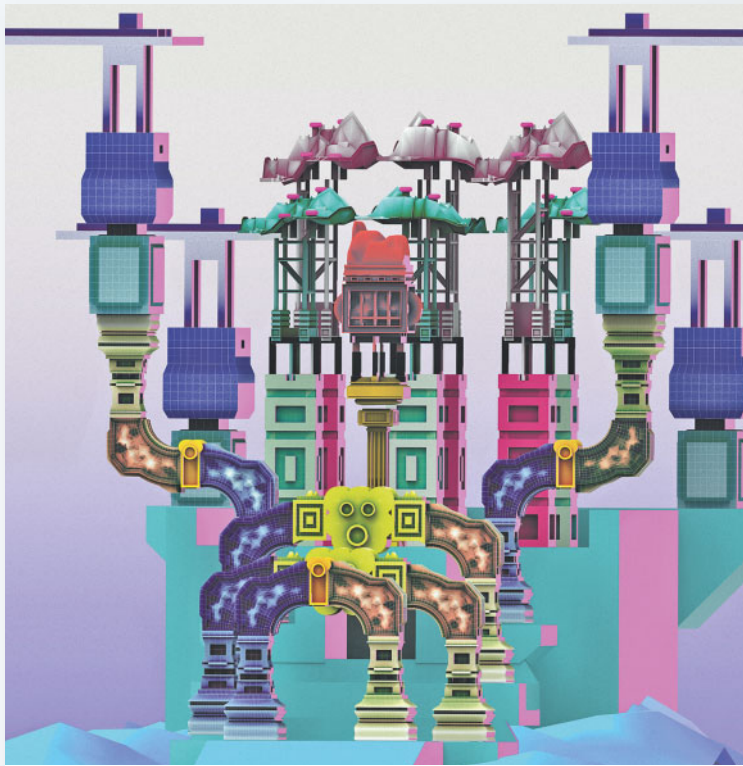
Andrew Kovacs (pp 54–61) explains how his constantly updated Archive of Affinities project, a collection of scanned and recorded images shared online, explores the meaning and purpose of contemporary relationships with historical architectural imagery within the context of social media platforms and the Internet, and how the construction of this digital archive has informed his development of new propositions and ways of working as a designer.

Perry Kulper’s work exudes the spirit of the speculative, the critical and the wonderful through an expansive set of detailed drawings and collages. In his contribution to this issue (pp 62–9) he sets out to trace the historical and neo avant-garde influences behind his work, and discusses how the adoption of digital tools has allowed him to work free from concerns for such fundamentals as time and gravity.

Ant Farm,
Dolphin Embassy,
1974

A key avant-garde reference point for several of the contributors to this issue of *D* is the seminal group Ant Farm. Producing work across installations, performance and media events, they stretched the parameters of what was considered architecture in the late 1960s and 1970s. The drawing shows a floating boat-like structure that was designed to foster greater communication and interaction between dolphins and humans.





Surveying the avant-garde's fascination with technology, Luke Pearson (pp 70–77) demonstrates a correlation between the negative utopias of avant-garde radicals such as Archizoom, and the spatial, temporal and formal possibilities of contemporary computer games and their manifestations of virtual space. For him, this link to Archizoom's conception of the city as an isotropic grid could open up new worlds that bridge the gap between the actual and the theoretical, logic and representation, philosophies he investigates with reference to several of his game-based architectural environments.

Utopia

The creation of utopias was fundamental to many of the most seminal projects of the period, mirroring society and underpinning architectural critiques. Utopia persists in architecture today, and as Jimenez Lai suggests (pp 78–85), is a mechanism for architects to operate as 'journalists', using the design of spaces to communicate and narrate the world back to us through new lenses. Lai's own drawing directly tackles the representational structures architects use, and as such the ways in which architecture continues to frame Utopia.

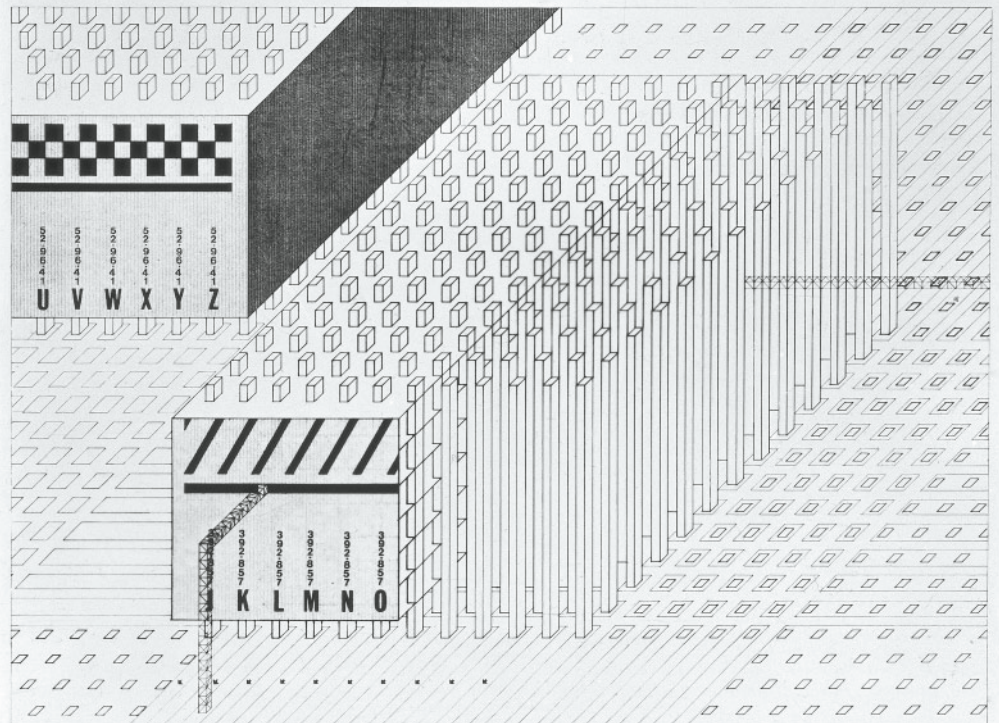
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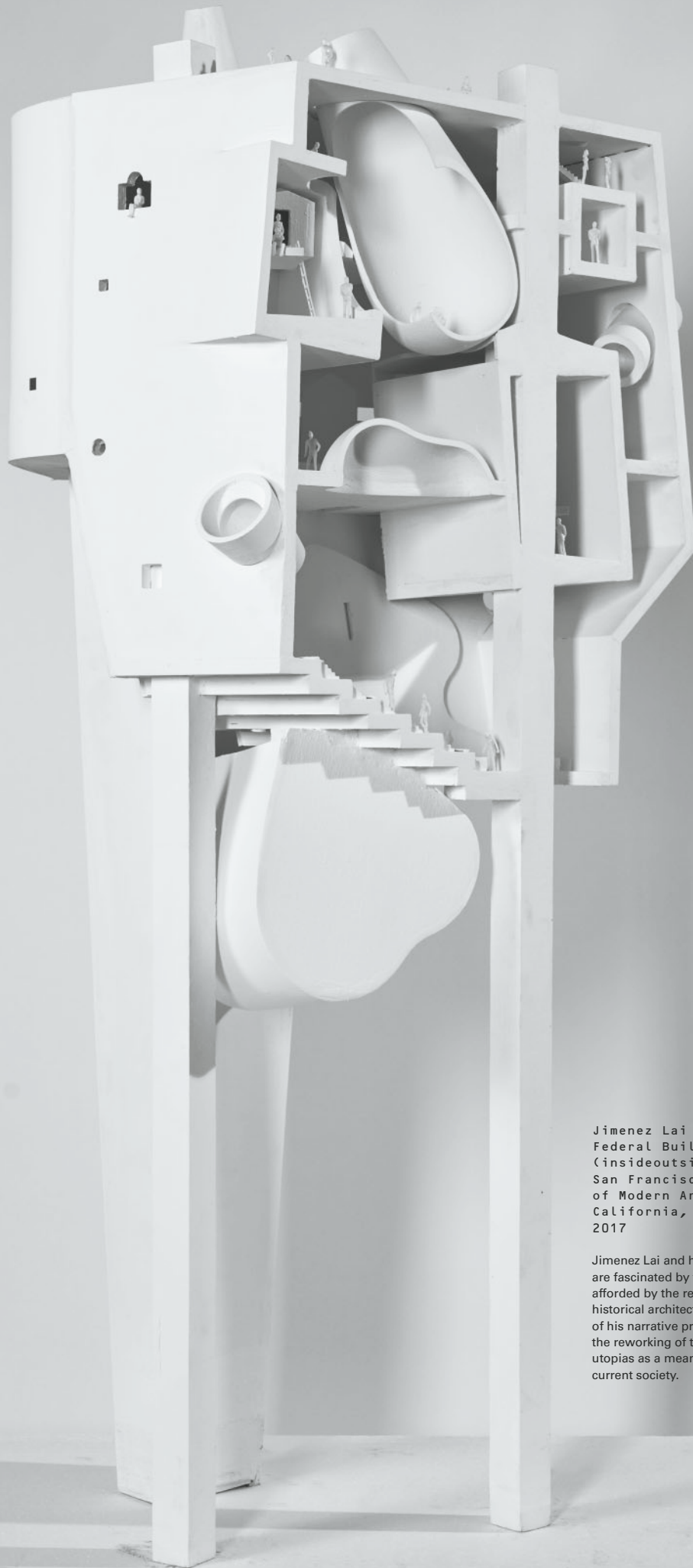
Luke Caspar Pearson,
Inflection,
2015

Drawing from architecture theory and precedent, Pearson's work explores virtual game worlds as new vehicles for utopic architecture. In *Inflection*, inspired by Robert Venturi's definition of fragmentary ordering logics in architectural form, player interactions cause inflected elements to grow and reveal their true formal continuity over time in a virtual architecture.

Archizoom,
No-Stop City,
1969–70

Archizoom co-opted and critiqued the spaces of the hyper-capitalist reality they saw emerging with imperialist precision in the 1960s, a condition that is even more pervasive today. Utilising the infinite gridded spaces and organisational forms of the supermarket and office building, they proposed an endless architecture that would free us from the burdens of work into a realm of endless play.





Jimenez Lai / Bureau Spectacular,
Federal Building
(insideoutsidebetweenbeyond),
San Francisco Museum
of Modern Art (SFMOMA),
California,
2017

Jimenez Lai and his studio Bureau Spectacular are fascinated by the endless possibilities afforded by the reuse and recontextualisation of historical architectural forms. Within the context of his narrative projects (see pp 78–85), Lai sees the reworking of the rich history of architectural utopias as a means to critique and comment on current society.

The utopian can also be seen not simply as a vision of the future, but as an organising structure that binds the logic of a world together. As Neil Spiller argues (pp 86–93), his work is not ‘utopian’ in the conventional sense (or perhaps in any sense). Yet within his 20-year Communicating Vessels project, which circumvents myths, impossible spaces and the looming presence of new technologies, we find links once again to those ‘negative utopias’ of the avant-garde in worlds where the protocols of architectural representation, technology and fantasy could be energised as a political vehicle.

Utopias and negative utopias of the avant-garde were also notable for addressing the environmental context of the day. In fact, as Sarah Dunn and Martin Felsen of UrbanLab show us (pp 94–9), the relationship between utopia and ecological systems is a long one. From Charles Darwin to Kenzo Tange and their own proposals for Lake Michigan, the cultivation of landscape is a recurring theme in utopic architecture. This is made even more relevant when such endeavours involve the creation of utopias as systems allowing for change rather than fixed proposals, reflecting its importance as a design mechanism, and one that keenly corresponds to developments in computational technologies.

Formal Repetition

One of the key implications of looking back at the avant-garde is to understand the significance of formal tropes at risk of losing their agency due to the fluidity of modern

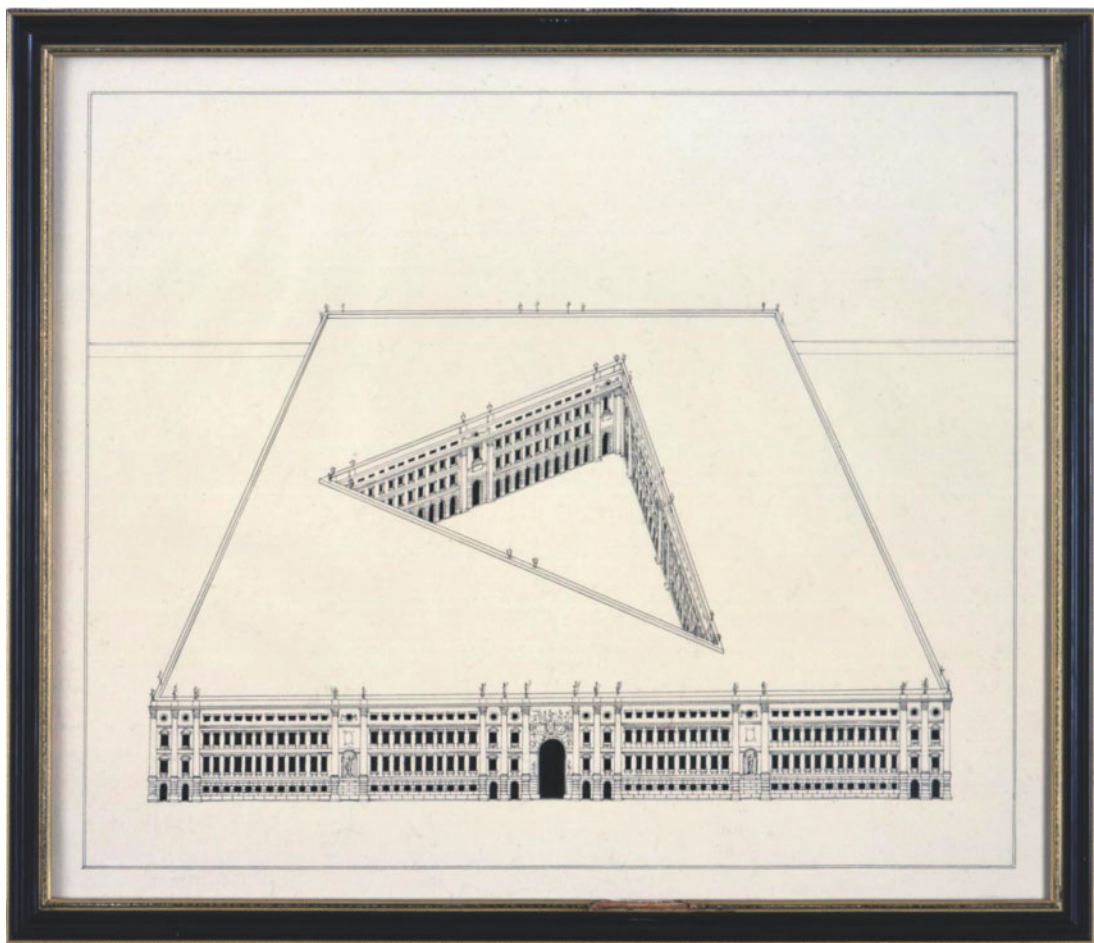
imagery. In a lively conversation with the Guest-Editors of this issue (pp 100–107), architect Sam Jacob and artist Pablo Bronstein show the acts of repetition and re-enactment as important ways of using architectural history in contemporary design practice. This could be the adoption of a particular character or working method, but also assuming a mindset, an ethic for approaching architecture and form.

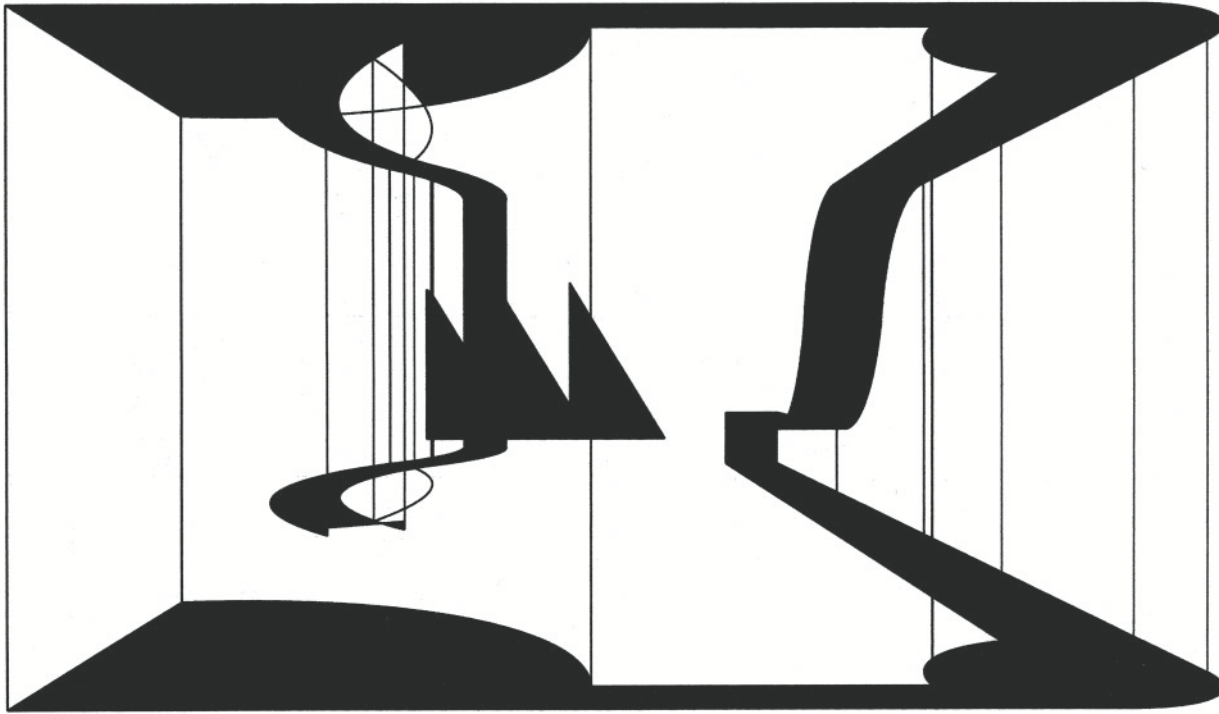
Avant-garde architects of the 1960s and 1970s challenged the discipline by expanding the media field through which architecture could be approached to clothing, furniture, inflatables and comic books. In a comic specially commissioned for this issue (pp 108–11), Luis Miguel Lus Arana and architectural cartoonist Klaus take us on a journey through this expanded field, tracing paths from the neo avant-gardes to contemporary practitioners who continue to push at the edges of what we might consider to be architecture. Klaus’s architectural caricatures reassemble the iconography of the avant-garde into a new formal history.

Given their iconic status, Matthew Butcher (pp 114–22) suggests we should develop more nuanced positions towards these historical avant-garde projects, eschewing blank reverence. His article examines his own design practice in relation to the works of Superstudio and Raimund Abraham, where the agency of both iconophilia and iconoclasm, the love and destruction of images can be developed into a holistic design practice. In his case, this relationship between form and history is carried through into the design of specific structures where distortions of avant-garde drawings become encoded into material forms. This iconoclasm is productive,

Pablo Bronstein,
*Large Building
with Courtyard*,
2005

Over the last 15 years, Bronstein’s work has been developed through methods of role play, a device employed to allow the artist to embody historical architectural styles and characterisations in his illusory architectural projections. His work (see also pp 100–107) references avant-garde design of the 1960s and 1970s as well as the 18th century, creating complex collages of history and time.





Matthew Butcher,
Movement Notation 004,
2008

Inspired by methodologies of performance practice associated with notions of re-enactment, Butcher's work seeks to reinvigorate questions around what might constitute a contemporary avant-garde. In his *Notations* series, he worked with a choreographer to create complex movement notations that were inspired by Bernard Tschumi's seminal *Manhattan Transcripts* (1976–81) project.

generating an ongoing memorialisation rather than a frozen and fixed history.

In many ways the work of avant-garde groups like Superstudio and Archizoom predicted the digital worlds we inhabit today. As Damjan Jovanovic points out (pp 122–5), Superstudio's expansive grid is now not only a visual feedback loop (as mentioned by Mimi Zeiger), but is also the organising principle of our digital world. His discussion of his Supersurface computer-game application as an extension of architectural media recalls William Menking's exploration of how the avant-garde imagination and working methods rupture the boundaries of the discipline.

Continuing Contradictions

In re-imagining the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, this Δ issue brings together contributors who establish resonance between this period and the cutting-edge design experiments we are seeing today. This historical moment continues to fascinate because, as Brugellis and Orazi continue, 'the strength of those works lies precisely in their unabashed staging of the contradictions of those years, which are unfortunately the conflicts and contradictions of the present time and perhaps of the near future.'⁵

The consumerist society in which the avant-garde emerged – and in many cases directly critiqued – has expanded; the ecological crisis is reaching a zenith and social unrest has grown with the rise in populist politics.

Within this context it is both relevant and pressing to readdress questions of how architecture can once more align itself with a period that established, in the words of K Michael Hays, 'a moment in history when certain ways of practicing architecture still had philosophical aspirations'.⁶ *Re-imagining the Avant-Garde* roots out the architects of today who hold on to this philosophical underpinning, whose work bounces back and forth between reference and reinvention, building the case that such practices define a significant moment in contemporary architectural discourse in which we can seek to cross temporal boundaries. Δ

Notes

1. The term 'neo avant-garde' as described by Peter Burger refers to cultural production that utilised forms from the historical avant-garde. The term 'late avant-garde' was developed by K Michael Hays in order to separate his understanding of this period of architectural production from others. See Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans Michael Shaw, University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis, MN), 1984, p 148, and K Michael Hays, *Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde*, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 2010, pp 4–12.
2. Pino Brugellis and Manuel Orazi, 'Radicals Forever', in Pino Brugellis, Gianni Pettena and Alberto Salvadori (eds), *Radical Utopias*, Quodlibet Habitat (Rome), 2017, p 38.
3. Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 1999, pp 4–5, 149–53.
4. Marco De Michelis, 'Aldo Rossi and Autonomous Architecture', in Terence Riley et al (eds), *The Changing of the Avant-Garde: Visionary Architectural Drawing from the Howard Gilman Collection*, Museum of Modern Art (New York), 2002, p 90.
5. Brugellis and Orazi, *op cit*.
6. Hays, *op cit*, p 1.