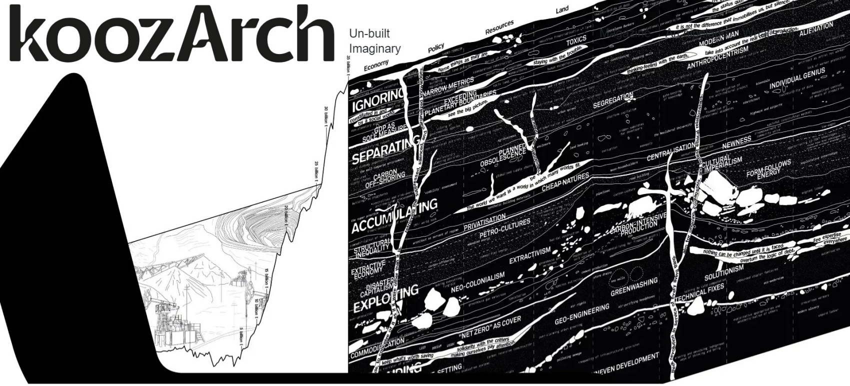
koozArch
Un-built
Imaginary


Economy
Policy
Resources
Land
35 billion t
30 billion t
25 billion t
20 billion t
15 billion t
10 billion t
5 billion t
IGNORING
SEPARATING
ACCUMULATING
EXPLOITING
NARROW METRICS
EXCEEDING PLANETARY BOUNDARIES
see the big picture
GDP AS SOLE MEASURE
CARBON OFF-SHORING
STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY
EXTRACTIVE ECONOMY
DISASTER CAPITALISM
COMMODIFICATION
TOXICS
staying with the trouble
MODERN MAN
ANTHROPOCENTRISM
ALIENATION
INDIVIDUAL GENIUS
SEGREGATION
PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE
CENTRALISATION
NEWNESS
CULTURAL IMPERIALISM
FORM FOLLOWS ENERGY
The world we want is a world in which many worlds fit
CHEAP NATURES
PRIVATISATION
PETRO-CULTURES
CARBON-INTENSIVE PRODUCTION
EXTRACTIVISM
NEO-COLONIALISM
GREENWASHING
SOLUTIONISM
TECHNICAL FIXES
GEO-ENGINEERING
"NET ZERO" AS COVER
solidarity with the critters
making ourselves pay attention
keep what's worth saving
UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT
nothing can be changed until it is faced
overturn the logic of debt
See expertise everywhere
It is not the difference that immobilises us, but silence.
the status quo

Essays

Provocation as Care

MOULD's take on the agency of architecture.

Author MOULD
Published 07 Jun 2023
Reading time 15 minutes
Share
Topics Research for Action
Ecology
Politics

For MOULD—a team of architects and academics working at the intersection between spatial practice and climate breakdown—the climate crisis demands a radical rethinking of architecture. Band-aid solutions won't cut it. Architecture IS climate, entangled as it is in the causes, conditions and futures of climate breakdown.

This essay is part of Issue #1 "Agents Provocateurs: agitate normality", a bimonthly series curated by KoozArch on the agency of architecture and the architect.

In a recent tweet, one of our members expressed their exasperation with being stereotyped as in some way provocative:

"I'm sooo fed up being introduced as 'provocative' when I give lectures on architecture & climate. I tell you what is provocative: just talking about form / style / technique when the world is burning."[1]

The exasperation came from the reaction to lectures that members of MOULD have given when talking about our project *Architecture is Climate*—reactions that have ranged from dismissive shrugs to barely-disguised fury—both of which seem to say that alternative perspectives on architecture and climate are in some way extreme and belong to the fringes.

Related Articles by topic Research for Action

Interviews 09 Jun 2023
Deep listening: a multispecies perspective

Interviews 05 Jun 2023
From room to home, from street to city

Interviews 25 May 2023
One half for the Biennale, one half for Venice

Essays 23 May 2023
An Architectural Botany:

redefining the agency (and scope) of the architectural archive

Someone who positions themselves critically in relation to the norms of the status quo is labelled as marginal.

It is common, across all disciplines and fields, that someone who positions themselves critically in relation to the norms of the status quo is labelled as marginal. With this comes the opportunity for the dismissal of the position. The history of the struggles of marginalised groups—in terms of race, gender, sexuality and class—is a history of shifting those margins so that they become acceptable to the centre. But with this acceptance often comes a degree of resentment that the core values of the centre are in some way being adjusted, a resentment clearly manifested in the current crop of culture wars.

Being labelled as provocative, as agents provocateurs, can sometimes be worn as a badge of honour, allowing a degree of freedom in picking off and escaping from the structures of the centre. However, in the case of climate breakdown and its implications for the status quo, the characterisation of someone as provocative is of real concern because it comes tantamount to a form of climate denial. The dismissal of the critic is at the same time a dismissal of the object of critique. Overt climate denial is not accepted in most architectural circles, but forms of disavowal lurk based on "finding ways to remain blind to reality" by dismissing certain forms of critique and action as unrealistic.[2] It is an attitude that Sally Weintrobe characterises as a "culture of uncare."

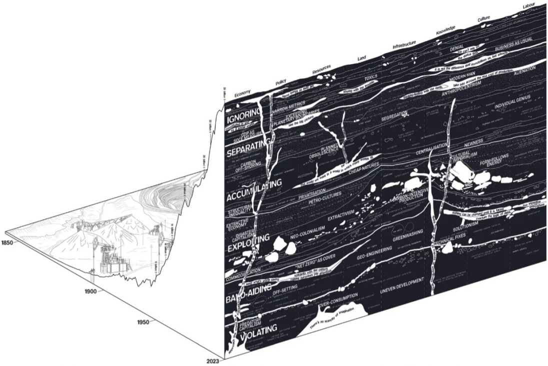
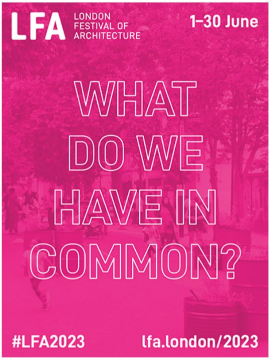

Economy
Policy
Resources
Land
Infrastructure
Knowledge
Culture
Labour
IGNORING
SEPARATING
ACCUMULATING
EXPLOITING
BAND-AIDING
VIOLATING
NARROW METRICS
EXCEEDING PLANETARY BOUNDARIES
GDP AS SOLE MEASURE
CARBON OFF-SHORING
STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY
EXTRACTIVE ECONOMY
DISASTER CAPITALISM
COMMODIFICATION
PREDATORY CAPITALISM
TOXICS
PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE
CHEAP NATURES
PRIVATISATION
PETRO-CULTURES
EXTRACTIVISM
NEO-COLONIALISM
"NET ZERO" AS COVER
OFF-SETTING
OVER-CONSUMPTION
There's no scarcity of imagination
SEGREGATION
CARBON-INTENSIVE PRODUCTION
GREENWASHING
GEO-ENGINEERING
UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT
DENIAL
BUSINESS AS USUAL
MODERN MAN
ANTHROPOCENTRISM
ALIENATION
INDIVIDUAL GENIUS
CENTRALISATION
NEWNESS
CULTURAL IMPERIALISM
FORM FOLLOWS ENERGY
SOLUTIONISM
TECHNICAL FIXES
1850
1900
1950
2023

Fig. 1 - MOULD, Architecture is Climate. Diagram drawn by Sarah Bovelett. Comissioned by e-flux and the Jencks Foundation as part of their Chronograms series. 2023

Architecture, as we know it, is bound to the modern project as both handmaiden and


LFA LONDON FESTIVAL OF ARCHITECTURE
1–30 June
WHAT DO WE HAVE IN COMMON?
#LFA2023
lfa.london/2023

Subscribe to the Newsletter

Craving a bit of KoozArch in your inbox? Sign up to our newsletters and we'll keep you posted with everything great going on in the realm of the un-built.

Name Lastname
Profession
E-mail address

☐ I have read and agreed to the Privacy Policy

Subscribe

symbol.

The argument that MOULD makes is straightforward; its very directness is maybe what leads to any expressions of ire from others. First, climate breakdown presents a fundamental threat to the tenets and operations of the modern project. The project's reliance on notions of progress, growth, reason and order, and in its separation of humans from nature, are all irrevocably challenged by ecological collapse. Second, that architecture, as we know it, is bound to the modern project as both handmaiden and symbol, in that it is an endless treadmill of materialising and celebrating those very tenets. So, if climate breakdown threatens the modern project, at the same time it threatens architecture in its extractivist and exploitative modes.

If climate breakdown threatens the modern project, at the same time it threatens architecture in its extractivist and exploitative modes.

The threat presented by climate is so profound that it demands a complete reconsideration of all systems and institutions, including how architecture might operate in the face of the crisis. The standard response has relied on principles of sustainability. However, this very word is problematic, since it suggests that, with various fixes, it is possible to sustain current structures, values and lifestyles. Sustainability thus goes hand in hand with so-called green capitalism, a contradiction in terms in that capitalism remains founded on principles of growth and exploitation. Greening capitalism can only marginally adjust its trajectory—it cannot introduce the fundamental economic rethinking that is required.[3] In this sense, sustainability effectively becomes a tool of capitalism rather than a disruption of it.

Sustainability effectively becomes a tool of capitalism rather than a disruption of it.

In architecture, sustainability is played out through a series of technical fixes, focussing on carbon reduction in terms of embodied energy and emissions in use. Such fixes are of course necessary as long as buildings continue to be built, and need to go much further than they presently do, but they are little more than band-aids on the gaping wounds inflicted by climate breakdown. Sustainability positions architecture as outside of the crisis, applying salves to the symptoms but not disturbing the underlying causes, allowing architects to salve their consciences but not to acknowledge any complicity in the crisis. As Barnabas Calder has so brilliantly shown, the trajectory of architecture in the twentieth century was driven by a reliance on cheap and abundant fossil-fuelled energy.[4] This addiction continues today, only partially mollified by the wash of sustainability.

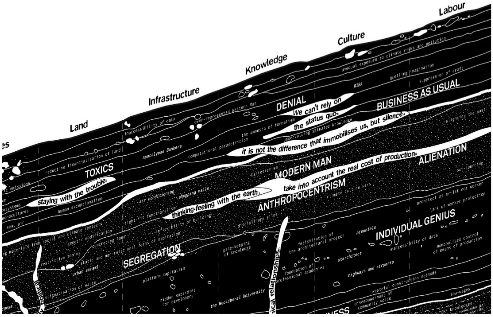
Sustainability positions architecture as outside of the crisis, applying salves to the symptoms but not disturbing the underlying causes

What if, instead of asking what architecture can do for climate breakdown, one reverses the question and asks: what does climate breakdown do to architecture? MOULD's response is to argue that Architecture IS Climate, a formulation that shifts architecture away from an external relationship with climate to one in which the two are inevitably entangled, in such a way that climate breakdown is accompanied by a breakdown in architecture. This is a challenging proposition but one that is necessary if architecture is to have any agency in facing the crisis.

What does climate breakdown do to architecture? MOULD's response is to argue that Architecture IS Climate.

The starting point is to move from skimming off the symptoms to understanding the causes, as described in the diagram *Architecture is Climate* (Fig. 1). This depicts on the left a mountain formed by the inexorable rise in greenhouse gas emissions, and on the right a slice through the mountain. The sediments of the mountain are constructed through a set of verbs (ignoring – separating – accumulating – exploiting – band-aiding – violating) that describe the various ways in which the operations of the modern project have contributed to climate breakdown. It is only through taking a critical stance towards these verbs that one can effectively intervene and so disturb the structures that have caused ecological collapse. The current work of MOULD is operating in the white gaps, in the sediments of the mountain of emissions, finding openings for possible futures. The speculations here are not ungrounded fantasies but a joining of hands with pioneers who have in their own way, and with hope, confronted the causes of climate breakdown, leveraging apart the stultifying weight of the sediments.

A provocation should not be seen as an irritant but as a necessary form of awakening.


Land
Infrastructure
Knowledge
Culture
Labour
DENIAL
We can't rely on the status quo.
BUSINESS AS USUAL
it is not the difference that immobilises us, but silence.
TOXICS
staying with the trouble.
MODERN MAN
take into account the real cost of production.
ALIENATION
ANTHROPOCENTRISM
thinking-feeling with the earth.
INDIVIDUAL GENIUS
SEGREGATION
Apocalypse Bunkers
air conditioning
shopping malls
human exceptionalism
urban sprawl
platform capitalism
hidden subsidies for developers
the Neoliberal University
starchitect
biennials
highways and airports
RIBA
quelling imagination
suppression of craft
unequal exposure to climate risks and pollution
silencing the past
out-sourcing
architect as artist not worker
lack of worker protection
monopolised control of means of production
inaccessibility of data
wasteful construction methods
low-wages
disempowerment of community voice
fetishisation of the architectural project
foundation of professional academies
gate-keeping of knowledge
disciplinary silos
cartesianism
climate culture wars
computational parametricism
over-represented Western Man
the amnesia of formalism
undervaluing situated knowledge
restrictive zoning
genetic modification
stigmatisation of waste
sea, air
monocultures

1/4

MOULD, Architecture is Climate, detail. Diagram drawn by Sarah Bovelett. Comissioned by e-flux and the Jencks Foundation as part of their Chronograms series. 2023

To argue that architecture is complicit with climate breakdown is not to be wilfully annoying or to point a finger, it is to affirm a fact. This is consistent with the etymology of the word provoke as to “call forth”, or in Middle English to “summon up”. In this light, a provocation should not be seen as an irritant but as a necessary form of awakening. If climate breakdown entails systemic change, then it should bring with it new social and ecological relations, which in turn will be accompanied by new spatial conditions. Space is understood here not as a Cartesian construct formed by the fixed relationship between objects, but as a vibrant set of human and beyond human associations.

> If architecture IS climate, then architecture is shifted away from its obsession with objects and into a more productive territory which helps actualise these new spatial potentials.

If architecture IS climate, then architecture is shifted away from its obsession with objects and into a more productive territory which helps actualise these new spatial potentials. The production of objects perpetuates the systems of growth at precisely the moment that ecological collapse demands, a post-growth world which would shunt extractivist architecture into a cul-de-sac.[5]

In contrast, opportunities open up for architecture as a form of spatial practice to imagine and empower the spatial conditions of a post-growth scenario, which escapes the fiddling with form while the planet burns. Thinking speculatively about the "possible" can provoke "political and ethical imagination in the present.”[6] Architecture should become relational and interconnected; both planetarily bound and supported; inclusive beyond the human; caring, curious, and brave.

> Architecture should become

relational and interconnected; both planetarily bound and supported; inclusive beyond the human; caring, curious, and brave.

Such a provocation, a summoning, is a provocation of care. To provoke, openly and publicly, is thus an important part of contributing to a culture of care, in distinction to the more insidiously silent operations of the cultures of uncare.

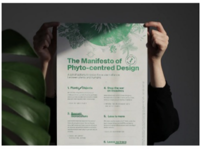
Bio

MOULD is a research collective of Sarah Bovelett, Anthony Powis, Tatjana Schneider, Christina Serifi, Jeremy Till, and Becca Voelcker.

Notes

1 [online]
2 Sally Weintrobe, ‘The New Imagination in a Culture of Uncare’, in *Architecture and Resilience: Interdisciplinary Dialogues*, ed. by Kim Trogal and others (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 158–67 (p. 161).
3 On green capitalism see: Adrienne Buller, *The Value of a Whale: On the Illusions of Green Capitalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).
4 Barnabas Calder, *Architecture: From Prehistory to Climate Emergency* (London: Penguin, 2021)
5 For post-growth and degrowth see: Jason Hickel, *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (Penguin Random House, 2020).
6 María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 7.

Related Articles by topic Ecology


The Manifesto of Phyto-centred Design

Interviews 09 Jun 2023

Deep listening: a multispecies perspective

With Studio d-o-t-s, Emma Bruschi, Fernando Laposse, Simone Kenyon, Passepartout Duo and ERBA

Research for Action
Re-use, Repair, and Regenerate
Ecology

Issue #01 Agents Provocateurs

Essays 23 May 2023

An Architectural Botany: redefining the agency (and scope) of the architectural archive

By Paulo Tavares

Research for Action
Ecology
Archive

Essays 15 May 2023

Venice and the Anthropocene: An ecocritical guide

By Lucio De Capitani, Francesco Luzzini, Marianna Tsionki, Shaul Bassi, Gina Caison and Léa Perraudin

Tool for Critical Thinking
Ecology
Heritage

SURVIVAL
Issue #01 Agents Provocateurs

Essays 10 May 2023

Perspectives on Survival: Nuclear risks, design and public action

By Malkit Shoshan & Gizem Sucuoglu

Research for Action
Politics
Ecology

Subscribe to the Newsletter

Craving a bit of KoozArch in your inbox? Sign up to our newsletters and we'll keep you posted with everything great going on in the realm of the un-built.

Name
Lastname
Profession
E-mail address

☐ I have read and agreed to the Privacy Policy

Subscribe

Support KoozArch

Your support is important to keep KoozArch open-access. We accept donations to our Paypal Account.

©2023
KoozArch