

Inequality, environmental emergencies and technological renovation: a call

Juan Herreros

Hello everyone,

Let me begin by congratulating MUSAC and Kristine Guzmán for this much-needed initiative.

I am recording this audio in the midst of the umpteenth political discussion about the establishment of a state of alarm that seems to last for months this time, and that would allow us to discern that we are consciously or unconsciously building a future that can no longer be sustained by correction, not even by a nostalgic refounding of the one we lived in just a year ago with its wonders and contradictions. The task is another.

By now, we know that the world has relied too heavily on continued growth as the only way to progress. Cities, museums or companies have seen no other form of success in decades than an increase in size. However, for 50 years now we have known that this race has an ending, a bad ending that we had always imagined far away, but we now discover that we are already inhabiting it and that humans are part of the problem. And the problem is the suspension of the future. First there were threats that we were irresponsibly compromising it—and for that we invented the concept of "resilience"—but now the most devastating problem of COVID-19 is the suspension of the immediate future, and with it, the suspension of personal, professional and creative projects of all kinds. Architecture suffers this circumstance in a painful way because it is in itself a discipline based on the idea of the project, on the projection of a certain light on the future, on the design of what does not yet exist, and therefore, it has a lot say in these troubled times.

In recent months, we have witnessed an overwhelming profusion of efforts to understand the present as a time of transition between two worlds, two eras or two different cultures—"two normalities"?—of humans on earth. On the one hand, we are witnessing a consoling insistence that reveals to us that what we are experiencing is not new, reminding us of the role of past pandemics to reconfigure the city and how humanity and its cities have already overcome equally traumatic situations and made use of them to access certain advances in their quality of life. Symmetrically, there has been an obsessive need to predict the uncertain future based on the suspicion that we have not reacted in time to a latent threat and on the concern about not knowing all the equations of what is coming.



I would like to display an exercise on the role that architecture could play in the construction of the future avoiding both drifts, that is: to renounce the perverse game of guessing predictions with which to console the anxiety that this uncertainty generates; and to equally renounce the tranquility of the idea that this has not been the first nor will it be the only pandemic that we will experience on earth. Therefore, I would like to focus on what we can do, with dedication and solidarity, making the best use of our experience, but embracing inevitable commitments that give our work the meaning it deserves.

As an architect, the question I ask myself is what does the world—human and non-human—expect from us in this situation? It is important to banish the fantasy that architecture can change the world by itself, but it is undoubtedly one of the most powerful instruments society has that can improve its quality of life. But if architecture, and architects, can shape the desires of society, the question is how and who has the ability to formulate them. In this panorama, what seems most important is that architecture has the opportunity and freedom to be proactive in the face of the novelties that we imagine will come. That is why we insist that those who have the power to change things—politicians, developers, policy writers...—must do so, and architecture will be the first to shape that new world. In schools, those wonderfully speculative places about the possibilities of the subject, students show everyday that many things can be done, it only takes someone to consider it desirable.

Meanwhile, it is necessary to insist (not only from architecture because the construction of a new world is a collective and multidisciplinary task, but without doubt, counts on it) that we have to start talking seriously about how we want to live, and most especially how we want to live together, all of us, because if there is a fog that dissipates at full speed, it is the one that establishes and classifies humans into races, genders, economies or the capacity to be functional to the system.

The house, to which we have had to return, turning it into a place of coexistence, work and leisure, has in recent months become a life stage extended to the limit of its load capacity. The most shameful component of the lack of solidarity has also fallen like a slab that was always there in our system, when we discovered that too many homes do not meet the minimum conditions for a satisfactory living. That is why I say that housing has suddenly regained a leading role in the architectural debate that it had not had since the 70s when it gave up its role as a laboratory of new ideas to the work space, transformed into the repository of technical advances that culminate the ideals of modernity—artificial climate, fluorescent light, glass curtain wall facades... —. Then came the large facilities—museums, auditoriums, airports...—and research on housing was relegated to an inconsequential area. However, today, we can say that housing has become a crucial issue, revealing itself as the great setting of the quality of daily life of people that in their confinement experiences, has shown shameful deficiencies



even in apartments of certain dimensions. And it is because those homes founded on the prejudices of a representative spatiality and the accumulation of belongings derive in an outdated quality model where, to top it off, it turns out that teleworking or coexistence is not possible when the simultaneity of schedules is disrupted. For this reason, having overcome the primitive stage of architecture understood exclusively as a defense against the inclemencies—of all kinds—of the external world, it is important to remember that architecture is an instrument of mediation with the world, a transitional medium, and that this world with the one we relate to is nothing other than a superposition of ecologies that are “our ecologies”. There is no useful or necessary architecture that does not seek a good relationship with nature, with the climate, that does not want itself to be part of that nature contributing and participating in the ecology that it inhabits. For years we have seen how the terraces of flats that, it must be said, we have not known how to use, were enclosed to expand the living room. Today we know of the importance of these fragments of a domestic nature—which, by the way, municipal ordinances systematically penalize them considering them as built floor areas—, we have also learned of the importance of good cross ventilation, of the need for a healthy mix of collectivity and intimacy between the cohabitants, and many other things that will allow us without great effort to make better homes from now on with the help of the administrations that should encourage these changes.

However, we know that transforming one's home into a well-equipped fortress or self-sufficient place is a waste of energy and resources that could be shared while constituting fertile ground for a ridiculous individualism—the independent republic of my home? That is why it is so important to turn our gaze on the collective housing building as a crucial support of urban culture—undoubtedly the greatest exponent of the idea of living together—and ask ourselves why in so many centuries sharing stairs and landings, we have not been able to perfect the community model beyond sharing maintenance costs. The recent trend of common uses, of rooftops activated as leisure places, the proliferation of shared gardens, speak of a new generation of communities capable of organizing themselves and achieving notable improvements in their daily lives avoiding the anachronism that when it comes to one's own home, there is no other possible improvement than to gain access to, once again, a larger apartment. To mention an example, the countries that are activating experiments of mixing social and free-market housing in the same buildings, overcoming the model of social housing relegated to a poorly connected and clearly marginal periphery, have a lot of advantages in this common project that is to “live together”.

If we have moved from the house to the collective housing building, the next unavoidable step is the city, perhaps the only built utopia. With all its virtues, contradictions and broken promises, the city is the habitat of almost three quarters of humanity, at least in the developed areas of the planet. The most committed urban planning has been talking for decades about necessary balances, sustainable mobility,



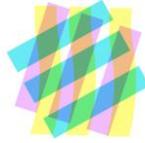
the necessary renaturalization, the importance of reducing travel times, the responsibility of cities in climate change and its consequent environmental injustice. If we want to, if the luckiest ones recognize their responsibilities and understand that without balance and coexistence, they too will suffer the consequences, our cities could make a significant leap towards what would undoubtedly be the most decisive achievement of the coming times, leaving a more habitable planet. to our grandchildren.

Moreover, there is no need to worry because the clean slate is not necessary. Much of the work is done. We just need a new generation of the aforementioned politicians, developers and policy makers working together to adapt our cities, buildings and homes to new needs. And I use the word "adapt", as I could use "correct" or "superimpose". Undoubtedly there will be many new things to build, but above all there is a very complex installation of humans on earth that must be updated by giving it a second chance. If we really believe in our commitment to be resilient, adapting what exists is the most responsible attitude and perhaps the most feasible and efficient.

I want to make a derivative in this manifesto about the institutions and especially about the cultural facilities in recognition of the fact that it is a museum that promotes these conversations, but also because at this time we need art and culture more than ever. Art tells us who we are and enlightens us on the dangers of empty plans. At this moment when artists are suffering the pandemic in a cruel way and cultural institutions suffer the aggression of strenuous cuts, neither have stopped working for a single moment to describe the present with their critical sense and to help us see ourselves in this context with all its consequences. Museums will change, it is evident, but we will know how to undertake that task, without doubt. In recent times, all the big museums have undertaken a major transformation, often a gigantic expansion to adapt them to the coordinates of their time, perhaps those that said that if you don't expand, you're dead. Now they will change again, but not to extend but to become true social hubs, to assume their role as meeting places, educational centers, discussion centers, as testing laboratories and places to ask questions. We will undoubtedly see a new generation of cultural institutions that will finally be considered as important urban infrastructures as transport lines or the network of outpatient clinics.

But how could we face the challenges of these transformations from a discipline like architecture that navigates between pragmatism and poetics? How can we harness our desire to answer the questions posed in a medium that you hardly get close to that displays a ruthless system of conventions and immovable truths that are very difficult to crush even if they are out of context and hinder the development of an innovative position?

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Perhaps the system of architecture, as it is structured around a series of large offices that barely cross their paths with the generality of medium and small ones, which are ultimately the ones that do the bulk of the work that really affects people's lives, is in crisis. The former are a minority and have in a way built up the reputation and disrepute of our profession while unfolding a relentless colonization of the developing world. The latter have not been valued in their importance for addressing primary issues such as local history, the restoration of a true dialogue with nature or the construction of a daily happiness away from consumption as the only form of global validation. Away from the big cities that accumulate opportunities and schools, this silent mass of professionals that accumulates in medium and small-sized studios, duly supported and stimulated, could be an engine of change with a capacity for capillary penetration, for democratization of universal access to quality architecture of colossal dimensions.

I want to finish by calling for the need to implement professional practices based on theory, research and the construction of critical thinking. Solidarity, commitment and acceptance of the other are part of the deontological code of this profession. We need a new generation of clients, advanced and experimental public programs, and collective and transversal forms of professional work that do not yet exist. Maintaining the current structure is only understood from fear or nostalgia. The new generations of architects face a tremendous challenge and it is everyone's responsibility to leave them a space in which architecture plays a decisive role in tackling inequality, environmental emergencies and technological renewal. Otherwise architecture will soon become superficial and its protagonists the characters of the "old normality".