BACK TO THE FUTURE

"The urgent task of the critic, today, instead, is that of, beyond the mirror, observing and clarifying not only the materials of the design but also the system of connections in which they are utilized. This system of connections has to do, for example, with the plurality of the subjects involved in the organization of a project, a condition which is absolutely specific to the world of architecture. … This complexity can be seen not only in the dialectic with economic, technical and institutional subjects, but also in the internal discussion of a group of designers. … Is all of this just pure hypothetical backtracking, useless exercise in project sociology or group psychology? Perhaps, but it also serves to institute a precise language of exchange within the specific design/project and its sphere. An acquaintance with such a language might be useful for criticism, in order to understand the instruments involved and their specific results."

Vittorio Gregotti, Tasks for Criticism, 1993[1]

At the beginning of this editorial project, we stated our intention to use *TAKE 5* as a kind of Trojan horse, and rely on its scaffold to introduce elements that affect the markets of the architectural profession but are not often explicitly discussed from a disciplinary perspective. Our interest was stimulated by the sense that architectural practice in Australia could be at a critical junction in its history and mode of operation, and that the dynamics of the market in which architecture operates could either foreshadow a reduction of the independent architect's involvement with building activity, or be instrumental to the definition of a renewed role for the profession. For these reasons, it seemed appropriate to define a platform for common discussion, a discussion that could help architects examine various dimensions of the current situation, and eventually design responses to it. At the end of this exercise, we should reflect on the validity of our initial proposition and the lessons we learnt in the process.

To start with, the data we compiled on the design and construction industry, combined with the specialist contributions and with the conversations we had with construction and policy interests parties, clarify one important point: that, although several issues are looming large in the horizon of the profession, their contribution to the universe of practice as we know it is not at all predetermined. Depending on how they will be dealt with, these issues could either hold the potential for professional development or define the grounds for professional retrenchment.

The first issue revolves around differences in regional dynamics. As we saw, the dimension, composition and expected growth of Australian building markets change vastly from state to state, in ways that surpass our subjective perceptions and anecdotal discussions about the prospects of the profession. In fact, building activity supports the economy of each state by fulfilling completely different roles. While this makes it difficult to talk about and plan a generic Australian profession, it also creates geographically specific development and restructuring opportunities. Institutional efforts could thus be directed at recognising the structural challenges inherent in each context, and equip the profession with strategic tools to take up a truly supportive, propositional role in the formulation of physical growth paths.

If we follow our own letter, and build upon the intelligence assembled in the volume to suggest a future map for professional growth, one of the areas where this call for action should be heeded is probably non-detached housing. While urban growth is occurring, or slated to occur, across most of metropolitan Australia, the planning schemes that have been put in place to harness it do not legislate on the shape or the specific density of higher density housing, leaving it—as we have read—to the market to determine typological offerings and, consequently, urban quality. This creates an indirect architectural opportunity from an urban design point of view, in that the solutions offered thus far do not seem to conceptualise properly the idea of collective urban living or, as in some cases, environmental wellbeing. Serious typological innovation is critical to move beyond a large-scale market divided, as several of our contributors remarked, between project houses, simple decorated boxes and towers.

The potential to make a mark on urban form is increased by the recent wave of architecture-related appointments in various state governments. This has created the conditions for true intellectual partnership between practice and

policy steering institutions, for design collaboration between the profession and government, and for unprecedented public debate on urban and building strategies. In this context, regulatory initiatives aimed at raising average building quality should be regarded as a positive, and actively supported by the profession.

The issue of quality in building design is likely to stem also from the money side of the industry. With the growth of superannuation funds, the amount of financial resources looking for long-term yield investments has increased enormously against a market that, perhaps in light of the excesses produced by cheap borrowing and surges in small investors' demand, does not seem to have enough properties capable to satisfy the cash flow distribution needs of long-term investors. The relative scarcity of financially viable built stock, coupled with the surplus of wholesale investment capital available, is likely to increase the demand for new, long lifecycle, environmentally advanced and adaptable, non-speculative building structures offering appropriate guarantees of steady return over time. These are more likely to fall within the traditional domain of the profession. Public buildings and community infrastructure, in particular, could become a favoured alternative in this investment market and redress, almost by stealth and if properly planned, the historical trend in the reduction of public work funding. As it happens, fund management companies have already started to undertake capital work opportunities directly, hiring and controlling both architects and contractors.

The challenges identified at urban and capital investment levels suggest that 'research' may have an important role to play in the architectural practice to come. If the ability to move away from conventional products is what can give the profession a competitive edge over non-professional counterparts, strategic investigation and ad-hoc training will have to be seriously considered and carried out. Many of the discussions we had with industry participants intimated that, by-and-large, general professional practice knowledge in the areas that are either more likely to create work opportunities or to amplify design constraints—that is, new building types, spatial environmental planning, and occupational health and safety, is unsatisfactory and needs to be improved. Yet we have seen how minuscule the average training expenditure within the architectural office is. Even if we put 'training cost' together with the 'other expenses' item featured in the RAIA 2003 *Architectural Office Profile and Financial Benchmarking Report*—5.2 per cent of revenues on average, all

architectural practices spend less than $1,000 per month in activities possibly related to research and development. This fictional investment goes down to less than $400 per month in rural and regional areas, and to $160 per month with firms employing less than five people, over 50 per cent of the total number. And, since, according to the federal government, the national average weekly earning of employed architects is $925, statistical research expenditure per architect's capita could barely reach $50 per week.

With most architectural firms not being able to afford to carry out proper research & development activity in-house, it is plausible that the pressure to engage in research will determine a more structured relationship between academia and practice. By establishing collaborative ties with university, even on a mutual pro-bono basis, practitioners would be liaising with groups of ostensibly design-receptive individuals at ease in technologically advanced and information-dense environments. If well mastered, these links could provide full access to a world of structured and unstructured data, experimental methods and processes, normally too remote from the average firm but with the ability to add high value to it. Universities, in other words, could be used as efficient laboratories for the production of applied or applicable research at the service of the built environment and in response to the needs of specific professional realities.

Within this context, the connection with the various construction components of the sector should be made stronger rather than weaker. This is firstly because, as some of *TAKE 5* contributors noted, the profession has been largely bypassed by the industrial debate on building value and productivity, and needs to reaffirm its own view and stakes in it; and, secondly, because architects are normally compelled to formulate design responses to the conditions in place in the industry. In this case, the current high cost and increasing scarcity of skilled construction labour has been generating calls for deeper component standardisation and prefabrication in many sub-building markets and regions. This creates a difficult situation, for, on one side, the oversimplification of building systems and components can easily result in the dumbing down of the product designed; on the other, the application of more sophisticated advanced technologies directly linking design and manufacturing is likely to produce major dislocations in the conventional structure of building and site labour, thus generating resistance to it. For these difficulties to be resolved, the debate on design and construction technology should leave

architectural schools, architectural offices and trade specialist workshops, and engage with institutional bodies and labour representative organisations. In short, professional practice may have to set aside its 'corporative' approach to architecture and adopt a more 'federative' stance about the work ahead.

The one element where the profession should uphold, if not reinforce, its traditional charter is in the policing of its members' behaviour and the assessment of their production. In the course of our discussions, several instances of underbidding and market dumping emerged, as well as a general propensity not to criticise examples of sub-standard practice and built work in public or at all. While the lack of industrial cohesion undermines intellectual leverage and bargaining power, the apparent absence of critical introspection weakens the moral position of the profession in the eyes of the community. As was recently suggested, the major problem of architectural practice today could be its reluctance to acknowledge sometimes inevitable but possibly useful shortcomings.[2]

In the end, however, no list of lessons can be exhaustive enough or respectful enough of the text, because our interpretation of the data and the positions presented is inevitably based on our personal professional experiences and undeclared agendas. Yet *TAKE 5* can still stand as a methodological beacon, reminding those interested that the problems related to the transformation of practice coincide not only with the problems of designing buildings, using computers, exchanging information and getting properly paid, but also with the socio-economic complexity of the world we live in, which is what makes practising architecture frustrating but also interesting and, at times, extremely gratifying.

We hope that what we wrote and edited made it clear that such a practice needs a discourse, or a theory, which is different from architectural theory as a theory of architectural communication or fabrication, different from professional practice theory as a theory of office administration, contractual relations and data management, and different from planning theory as a theory of territorial needs and resources allocation; and yet it is a theory that encompasses them all. Its strengthening entails the collaboration of institutional frameworks, profession, and academia.

The first must create an environment that facilitates professional exchange, data collection and knowledge dissemination, while outlining policies

that show proper understanding of the true multiple agency function of a profession, irrespective of the protection of its title and the liberalisation of its markets. The second has the responsibility to distinguish between the problems that are intrinsic to the contemporary procurement of design and building work, as well as urban quality, and the problems that are specific to its membership. From this perspective, the formulation of public, 'expert' and possibly well articulated positions on critical issues, developed in collaboration with allied professions but also with vocational organisations and other industry or community partners, could be more useful to building community presence than industrial alignments reflecting traditional allegiances and suggesting vested interests.

Yet it is up to the third component—academia—to facilitate the adoption and dissemination of a cultural paradigm where architects may find themselves engaged in a discussion about not only buildings but also industrial systems, about not only spatial semantics but also procurement strategies, about not only materials but also industrial relations and training programs, about not only project budgets but also building priorities.

As we have written elsewhere, implementing this agenda requires adjusting curricula, devising teaching strategies that can expand the idea of design, revise its myths, instil a better understanding of what design means and what it is made of, and explain its changing geography across the land of building. This might involve rediscussing its epistemology vis-à-vis the domains it intersects rather than treating its architectural or even technological components with blind reverence; it might involve revealing design's social heterogeneity and examining how this evolved throughout history; and it could require presenting construction, management, real estate or other non-strictly architectural enterprises as legitimate concerns of one's professional dimension as an architect.

As in all work that tries to connect different areas, many of our insights were inspired by the work of others. Robert Gutman's *Architectural Practice: A Critical View* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), was the natural model to look at when the project came up. But, as the quote at the beginning of *TAKE 5* is there to suggest, the writings of Manfredo Tafuri have also been an important reference point, and provide the conceptual cornerstones of this volume. One overarching idea seems important to highlight: that, even as a cultural practice, architecture must rely on the available means of production

for its implementation; thus, the result cannot help but be a reflection of the system in which the process takes place and that enables it. While intellectual pursuits can be autonomous by definition, the promotion and production of artefacts and spaces cannot be disconnected from reality. As Lewis Mumford wrote at the very end of *Stick and Stones* (1924), 'Buildings can never be better or worse than the institutions that have shaped them'.

Vittorio Gregotti has been instrumental in transferring this idea onto the specifics of architectural practice, by providing important indications of how to repair the schism between the two sides of the design process: art and métier, work and labour, intellectual construction and industrial processes. The idea that building activity has a multiplicity of dimensions, and that architectural design needs to interact with all of them, is a legacy of his writings.

Yet it is to someone closer to us, both in time and age, we want to turn at the end of *TAKE 5* to provide a form of closure for the book but also a virtual agenda for action. For many years, Michael Benedikt has been a guiding force behind the type of debate we are trying to engender. At the end of his 'opus magnum', *Toward a General Theory of Value*, he has inserted a detailed program for the revaluation of architecture, which is defined by utopian thinking as much as it is by a pragmatic view of the world. We asked him to outline it again for us, and for all the readers interested in the idea of stepping out of Flatland.

[1] Vittorio Gregotti, 'Tasks for Criticism', *Casabella*, 599 (March 1993): p. 71.

[2] Thomas Spector, 'Does Enforcement of Architects' Regulations Protect the Public Welfare? Not Enough', *Harvard Design Magazine*, 23 (Fall 2005/Winter 2006): pp. 1-4.

MICHAEL BENEDIKT Eighteen proposals for revaluing architecture

Ninety-eight percent of the buildings in the United States—desultory in design, hasty in execution, and unlovely to look at—are built either without an architect or with an architect interested only in meeting his or her client's short-run investment goals and minimum legal and engineering standards. At the same time, census data shows that the portion of the country's gross domestic product currently accounted for by civilian building construction has diminished by 25 per cent since 1945, this even though the number of square feet built per year has gone up sixfold. To some, this indicates a laudable gain in the productivity of the construction industry. Rather, I suggest it indicates the diminished value of the built environment as a 'product' towards which it is worth directing time and money. In the larger picture, that is, architecture is an inferior good.

One could find fault in some architects' forced or cultural acquiescence to impoverished 'engineering' definitions of functionality and efficiency. But I think that fault can also be found at the other extreme of the spectrum, with some architects' unwise and unwarranted belief in the redemptive power of their own creativity.

Many books and articles are published each year addressing how society and values are changing due to market globalisation, demographic shifts, new technologies, natural resource depletion and the like. Conspicuously absent from the discussion among public intellectuals is the effect on, and of, architecture, except indirectly in occasional broadsides against sprawl. I take this as another sign of how little understood and how little valued architecture is, even though, everywhere, our lives depend on it, and even though much of the pleasure we derive from life is inside of, and from, places that have been designed for that purpose. The problem seems to be that what architecture does, and how it has value, remains a mystery.

For this reason I think it is important to address, from within, how the revaluation of architecture might proceed, first by coming to a better understanding of how architecture satisfies human needs, and then through adopting some new strategies for competing with other goods in the marketplace and the political arena. The notes that follow are meant to address not only fellow architects, planners, designers, urbanists, and writers on such subjects, but everyone who has an interest in making a healthier, more just, more prosperous, and more beautiful world by acting upon the physical environment.

My proposals, presented below in the briefest of brief outlines, fall into four groups and are by no means exclusive. In fact, they make sense, if at all, in relation to the others rather than in isolation:

Group I: Proposals that would help persuade more people to value the quality of the built environment more highly.

Group II: Proposals that would reform certain of the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of architects.

Group III: Proposals that would amend some of the contractual and market relationships that presently obtain between architects and others.

Group IV: Proposals for new legislation and/or financing methods that would help bring about better buildings and environs for all.

Group I: Proposals that would help persuade more people to value the quality of the built environment more highly.

Proposal 1 – Addressing more needs in thought and deed

People's everyday surroundings form the stable background of their lives, and are thus largely ignored. To see the environment as a figure, one must have intentions that it obstructs, allows, or promotes; one must feel needs that it frustrates, serves, or awakens. Although university courses in architecture have some value in directing attention towards the finer points of design, they still do not convey the multidimensional subtlety of the ways in which all buildings affect us. And if professional training courses don't do it, what should we expect of the lay world? If people are to value architecture more highly, then a way of talking about architecture must be developed that is not art-historical, museographic or commercial, but rather engaging of all human needs and

possibilities as directly as possible. This mode of discourse—this way of talking—might use the satisfaction of six panhuman basic needs as a taking off point: the need for *survival*, the need for *security*, the need for *legitimacy,* the need for *approval*, for *confidence,* and for *freedom.* As Abraham Maslow pointed out, basic needs like this form a hierarchy—I prefer to see them arranged in a 'stratigraphy'—making substantial if not complete satisfaction of the earlier-named 'lower' needs prerequisite to addressing the later-named 'higher' needs. This much is certain: buildings do a great number of things that address each need.

Proposal 2 – Raising the standards of necessary and sufficient satisfaction

Having made some progress in conveying how richly architecture satisfies needs, the task becomes persuading people to want more from architecture in just these terms, and to want more from architects, who in turn must ask more from themselves. At this level, strategies of public persuasion, possibly employing different combinations of examples, encouragement and flattery, are needed, but they are not enough. Architecture must also be seen as an economic good that defies the law of diminishing marginal utility—a good, that is, which unlike others, keeps producing effective returns over time. From this point of view, good architecture could be construed at least in two ways: as a gift that keeps giving by lasting so long and continually providing access to other goods, or as a goal that keeps receding: the more we experience it, the greater are our expectations of it, thus creating a cycle that induces connoisseurship.

Proposal 3 – Combating 'place machismo'

There is a persistent strain in some cultures, certainly in the United States, that judges sensitivity to place to be a weakness. And since this weakness is often associated with femininity, I call *in*sensitivity to place 'place machismo'. To me, the origins of much place machismo are to be found in the institutional environments we experience, particularly those used for secondary education, specifically in the US, high schools. Efficient to a fault, most feel like minimum security prisons, and desensitise a whole population to the value of place. An immediate strategy to reverse the situation would be to wage a public campaign on school design that directed the same energy that was invested in it until the 1970s, but using the opportunity to apply the lessons learnt. This could be integrated by attempts, in both popular and technical press, to turn sensitivity to place into something cool.

Proposal 4 – Seeing architecture as always a public good

Most buildings in advanced economies are privately owned and built on privately owned land. But the effects of buildings overflow the legal boundaries of their sites. All buildings, that is, are public goods to some degree: paid for by some but enjoyed, or suffered, by many. To serve as a theoretical framework for dealing with this fact, one could employ the idea that buildings create *information fields*, and so exist everywhere they can be seen and heard from. We can then examine the property rights people might have in those *fields*.

Proposal 5 – Seeing buildings in the 'experience economy' as the primary preservers and standard bearers of our sense of reality

Post-industrial economies are becoming increasingly involved in the production and consumption of experiences. Although architecture can join in this trend—and has a long history of creating special atmospheres and experiences—the one experience that architecture, along with nature, could specialise in offering as it becomes rarer is the direct aesthetic experience of the real. In our media soaked environment, the direct aesthetic experience of the real can be transformative, and hence of immense value. Architecture could conceptualise and celebrate its central quality of being real by having presence, retaining *significance*, exemplifying *materiality,* and making *emptiness* for example, in the senses of both space and rhetorical silence, palpable. Enlightened developers could easily capitalise on our desires for such experiences. Architects could provide.

Group II: Proposals that would reform certain of the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of architects.

Proposal 6 – Reclaiming the science of architectural phenomena

Throughout the 20th century, architects have ceded much of what was technical and quantifiable about architecture to the engineering professions. Yet this division of labour has in fact left large areas of knowledge about architecture's subtle effects untended, ultimately undermining architects' claims for the value of design. It would be in architects' interest to revive their interest in the science of architectural phenomena, not just in order to enrich their design palette but to revalue their art at a time when quantifiability is an important guarantor of economic value.

Proposal 7 – Using computers not to simplify design and streamline production but to complexify design and organise construction

Most architecture firms use computers as they are conventionally used in business and industry—that is, to increase labour productivity while eliminating what buyers don't notice or need from the product. This trend puts architecture's value in great danger. Architects should strive to take the higher road, one that so far only a few have taken, namely, to use the power of computing to create and manage greater complexity in their product—rather than only, and occasionally, its form—with stronger, more precise, and more fluid connections to the construction process.

Proposal 8 – Downplaying creativity

While creativity is essential to being an architect, professional *pride* in creativity is a distraction from more important issues and values. Indeed, pride in creativity, made public, is deleterious to the quality of the built environment since it weakens the bargaining power of architects when arguing for their designs with business people, civic officials and engineers. When architects are the self-advertised 'creative ones' at the table, it is they who will have to go back to the drawing board, they who will have to come up with something just as good for less.

Proposal 9 – Rethinking the role of 'environmental determinism'

Many things influence human feelings and behaviour, and the physical environment is one of them. But what proportion belongs to the physical environment, and how strong is its influence? In the 1970s, psychologists and sociologists interested in the topic quickly conceded that the influence was minor and hard to measure. They may have been too quick to concede. People are influenced by what they want to be influenced by, and can sensitise, or desensitise, themselves to almost anything. Why not to architecture? We need fear no loss of freedom by opening ourselves seriously to the idea that we are not only *who* we are, and *what* we look like, but also *where* we are and what we look *at*.

Proposal 10 – Expanding architectural education

Architecture, like literature, is a complex pleasure best appreciated by people who have tried to produce it. The case for it must be made anew with each

generation of architectural students, but it should also be presented to those who are not, and do not plan to become, architects. A part of architectural education may therefore have be reconceptualised as a form of civic or basic university education, offered by practitioners and academics within the collective domain and using every opportunity to set up studio-like experiences that help the public appreciate first-hand the alchemies of the architectural design process.

Proposal 11 – Inviting and tolerating more debate

For all the faults that one can find with architectural education, one of its strengths is its tradition of earnest critique and debate of current architecture. This dwindles in architectural practice, professional meetings and press notwithstanding. Schools could do more to keep the debate going once students leave school for practice, among other means by inviting their alumni to work on implementing the previous proposal.

Group III: Proposals that would amend some of the contractual and market relationships that presently obtain between architects and others.

Proposal 12 – Making the market for architecture more, or possibly less, 'ideal'

In theory, ideal markets are defined when full and free information is available to all parties, unambiguous property rights exist, and rules of fair exchange are enforceable. In reality no actual market is ideal because information is never complete and because exchanges can be unfair even if no coercion is involved. Architecture and real estate are no different. When we examine their markets both come up wanting, often frustrating the needs of the buyers or requiring misplaced investment. The non-idealness of actual markets is seized upon by market critics as a reason for more institutional control and by market enthusiasts as a reason for less. But is this a bad thing? Are buildings commodities? What is certain is that market forces have eroded architect's fees but left realtor-broker fees intact. Trust in professionalism and on market regulation by the state, could and should be minimised if, but only if, people's willingness and ability to exercise quality-discriminations in the market can at the same time be maximised. In order to do this, needs-based information —compare this with proposals 1 and 2 above—must be produced for and by the real estate market so that buyers could better understand their choices and true connoisseurship could flourish. Realtors would benefit by

approaching information disclosure as a form of customer education because this would expel the low players from the field. Online property listing and mortgage brokering could be used as a step in this direction, but much greater transparency in the auction system is also called for.

Proposal 13 – Making the architectural services more affordable

More affordable here does not mean cheaper. It means easier to pay for, and easier to see the reason for paying for. Bank lending practices often determine whether or not architecture pays. Certified appraisers operate at a critical juncture in the process, and could make a significant contribution to its evolution. In addition, the formula by which most architects are contractually paid—namely as a percentage of construction cost—has several drawbacks, both for the architect and the client. Imaginative alternatives such as risk-sharing and royalty-based systems could exist and should be given careful thought. But even simple strategic modifications of percentage-of-construction-cost contracts—applying to determinate parts of the building and following curves that also related to performance—could better align owner-client and architect's incentives.

Group IV: Proposals for new legislation and/or financing methods that would help bring about better buildings and environs for all.

Proposal 14 – A sprawl tax

As the name implies, this is a tax levied by the city on property owners, the aim of which is to discourage sprawl and encourage denser, more efficient use of land closer to the city's centres. The idea is to apply a multiplier to the typical, flat-rate property tax—which simply tracks the property market values. This multiplier might vary from the inner city to the outer fringe in relation to the differences in land value and the social/infrastructural/environmental costs produced by distance.

Proposal 15 – A ticky-tacky tax

Here the municipality keeps track of average per-square-foot construction costs for different building types, and their associated landscaping, in the city, reducing property taxes on those projects that exceed the average, and raising taxes on those that fall below the average.

Proposal 16. Dampening real-estate speculation.

Architecture should not be allowed to become a capital good only, to anyone. Specifically, one could prohibit owners from selling their property within x years of completing construction, or if they owe more than 33 per cent of its purchase price to a lender. Alternatively, or in addition, one might set a minimum time period of (first, second, third, etc.) ownership before resale is legal.

Proposal 17. Encouraging extended investment.

Extended investing means tying part of one's return on investment to what would normally be called that investment's externalities. In analogy with proposal 4, capital for architecture could be raised by taxing the negative impacts of any development for the neighbourhood, and be redistributed by rewarding schemes that increased its actual amenities. This would give rise to a market form that combined elements of the securities market with a neighbour based scheme of property rights co-ownership.

Proposal 18. Legislating historical continuity.

Statutes that prohibit demolition in general—except in certain cases—would go beyond those that already protect the demolition of historically significant structures and would encourage historical continuity, and thus complexity, in the environment through incorporation of the past into the present and future. This is a complexity-and-organisation-increasing strategy and follows the example of biological evolution and the evolution of common law. One sees that building codes are part of architecture's DNA. Just as increases in the length of DNA characterise evolution of higher forms of life, and just as the lengthening of the annals of common law testify to the progress of social life, so all methods of increasing the degree of balanced complexity and organisation in architecture would characterise its ascendance in value. Historical continuity in design—*having* to incorporate the old—is a prime strategy.