

unbuilt^{2.0}

architecture of future collectives

If any future rethink is required, it must widen its humanistic arc to include everyone in the city's participatory life. How hard will it be to activate the old city into a new direction? The questions we ask in Unbuilt 2.0 may sound ludicrous, even farcical at first, but the untested and often extreme view of some of these ideas becomes less radical when seen against the backdrop of the country's own extremes. The extreme state of poverty and a history of Western hand-me-downs itself encourages a radical position. The unimaginably wide disparities in living conditions must force imaginative Indian cultural solutions. Can then the city reciprocate with a changed order of architectural priorities, and seek valuable lessons of new discomforts rather than old familiarities. The opportunity to realign and rethink whole paradigms comes rarely.

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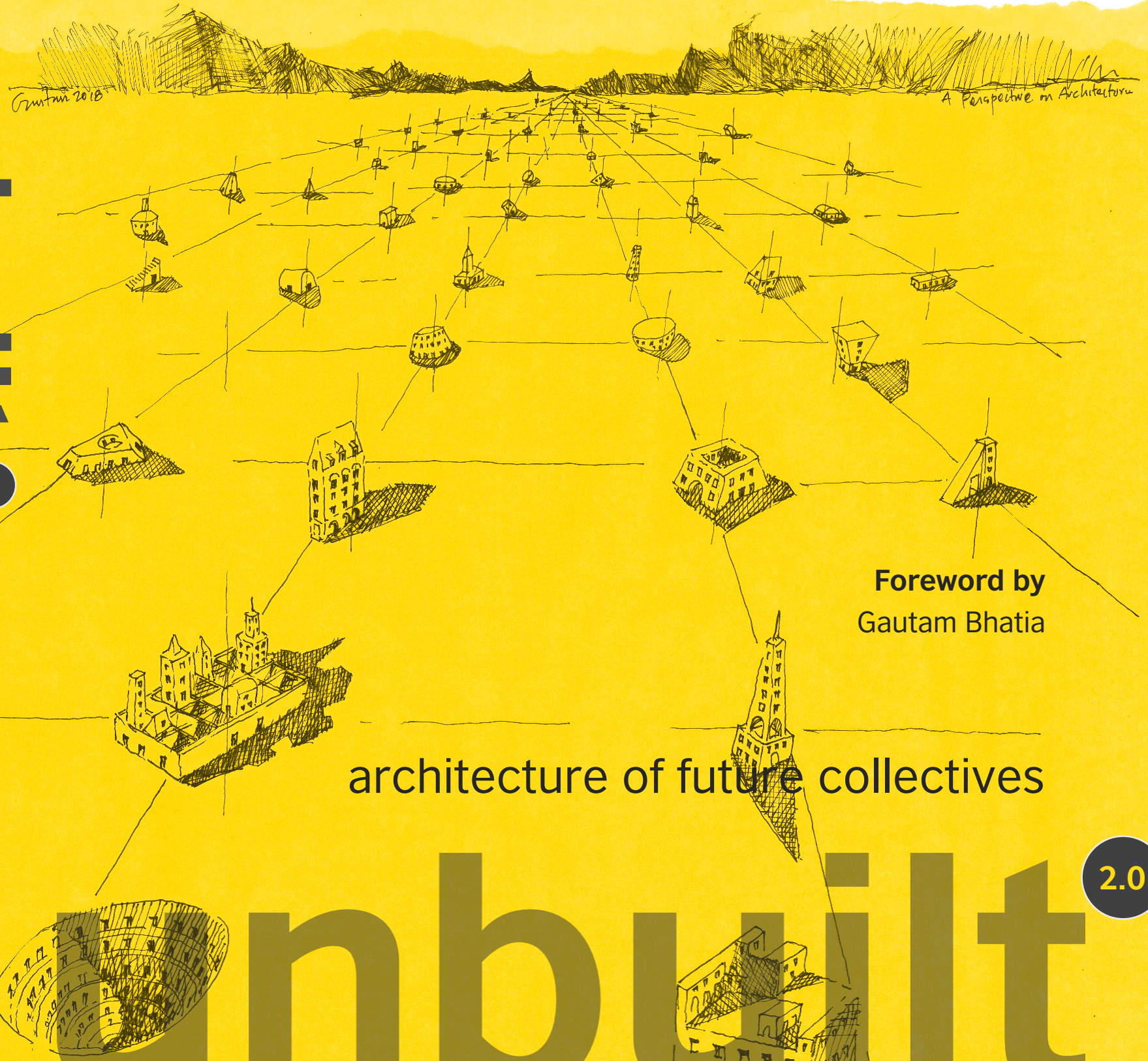
ArchitectureLive!

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ArchitectureLive!



Foreword by
Gautam Bhatia

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Is it possible for us to collectively imagine writing that is architectural, and what would be the objective of this writing practice? Would it be critical, political, or poetic, or all of these? How or why would we sustain it?

Notes on Literary Futures in Architecture

anuradha chatterjee

While *Unbuilt 1.0* makes the case for the unbuilt as a pristine archive of core intent “unsullied by the pragmatic forces of construction” (Parikh as cited in Advani and Parikh 2020, 299); a building’s purest moment before subsequent contamination”, and a “photograph of an architects’ introspection” (Chandavarkar as cited in Advani and Parikh 2019, 13); as rife with possibilities and useful as a “powerful tool to navigate continually transforming paradigms (Ballal 2019, 78); and “most precious” as they retain the possibility of the “yet to be (Bhattacharjee as cited in Advani and Parikh 2019, 16),” my essay interrogates a blind spot in these debates—the exclusion of writing, and the literary, from the debates on built and/or unbuilt, because architecture is defined narrowly as the drawing, modelling, and making of buildings. I cast doubt over the transformative power of these unbuilt projects that appear invested so completely in the representational space of the drawing and that preclude the possibility of a literary space. I am not referring to manuals, treatises, manifestoes and theories of architecture: writing as architecture cannot be conflated with writing about architecture. My essay tries to recuperate a place for writing (of a certain kind, and not as a representation of architecture) *as a practice of architecture*, and in order to do that I need to dwell on the conservative values that the discipline of architecture attempts to uphold.

I have argued elsewhere that the discipline of architecture dislikes crisis, and questions around its “disciplinary ontology”, on what is or is not architecture, or architectural (Chatterjee 2018, 2). Nathaniel Coleman also notes this in *Utopias and Architecture* (2005), when he calls architecture a “‘weak discipline,’” because of the absence of “absolute architectural truth,” wherein attempts to define truth in architecture in fact “ends up revealing just how indefinable the disciplinary parameters of architecture actually are,” compounding the “uncertainty about what architecture is or does (236).” The need to mitigate this ‘weakness’ is seen in the very narrow definition of ‘building’ that we have come to defend and accept, and equally narrow definitions of the profession, professional, and professional purpose. This is also in line with my ongoing interrogation of disciplinary limits of architectural profession and practice, as I have argued for the rebadging and expansion of the definition of architectural practice, such that it is seen as consisting of academic practice along with industry practice, and the practice of research, and criticism, which together constitutes the profession of architecture (Chatterjee 2019). It is in this context of an ‘expanded field’ that I am imagining *writing as architecture, and writing an alternative form of architectural practice*, a point that has been brought to light by Nasrine Seraji in the Writing and Critical Thinking in Architecture Symposium, 25 March 2011 at the Architectural Association.

The unbuilt, which is now sanctified through the awards given by professional bodies of architecture, has a longer, troubled history that can be understood through the lens of ‘paper architecture,’ a term for visions that remained unrealized. The terms “paper architecture,” “paper city,” and “paper art” were applied to the body of utopian or dystopian urban and/or architectural imaginaries (Antonio Sant’Elia, Le Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller, and others), which were produced in response to cultural, economic, and political change as part of modernity (Collins 1979). The term really gains traction in 1984 in Russia, when architects Alexander Brodsky, Ilya Utkin, Michael Belov, Mikhail Flippov, Nadia Bronzova, and Yuri Avvakumov exhibit their work under the banner of ‘Paper Architects,’ as an act of dissidence and resistance to decades of Cold War and standardized forms of architecture in state-sponsored projects. The paper architecture phenomenon gave rise to many visionary projects, which were not restricted by state, client, or builder, thus liberating the architect’s freedom of expression (Avvakumov as cited in Andreychenko; Spatial Agency).” The idea of resistance also permeated the work of American architect Lebbeus Woods (1940-2012), who started his practice in 1976, but did not build anything until early 2012. Woods’s refusal to build was an act of resistance to being absorbed into the capitalist economy and social order, and while a lot of what he exhibited was never intended to be built, it was drawn to affect (Fletcher 2014). His architectural renderings were compelling visions of an urban and political sublime, where freedom and political resistance were enacted by unconventional, sometimes uninhabitable architectural forms that were engaged in movement, ascension, and collision (Mucci 2016).

‘Paper architecture’ (political, or apolitical) survives as a recognized genre of architectural practice because it is mediated through the historiographic lens of conceptual and experimental architecture, and architecture of resistance. But that is not all: it is also mediated through the historiographic category of graphic representation in architecture. The extent to which disciplinary ‘revolutions’ continue to be invested in the visual/graphic dimension is evidenced in recent scholarship like *Architectural Design’s* special issue titled “Drawing Architecture” (edited by Neil Spiller, 2013), and *Drawing Futures: Speculations in Contemporary Drawing for Art and Architecture* (edited by Laura Allen and Luke Caspar Pearson, 2016). However, writing (published or unpublished) is not always accorded the same status as graphic representation, and therefore paper architecture is recognized as unbuilt, but writing (in architecture) is not seen as built or unbuilt. This is because the modern genealogy of writing in/as architecture is extremely limited,

as is its presence as a form of praxis in/as architecture. Such a genealogy would include Gautam Bhatia's ficto-critical writings (and art works); Busride Design Studio's recent manifestoes of contextual utopias (Ballal referred to the unbuilt works of Bhatia and Busride in *India: unbuilt architecture*, vol.1); Jennifer Bloomer's construction of feminist, non-linear texts; Bernard Tschumi's note on writing as a 'substitute' for architecture (1993); Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York* (1978), and his notion of architecture as an "intellectual discipline," defined primarily in literary terms (1993, 43); Jane Rendell's site-writing, and many others.

I am asking you to consider writing as material, spatial, tectonic, and inhabitable. There are deep affinities between writing and building, and between reading and inhabiting. Notwithstanding the structuralists' claim that buildings and cities are like text, which have signs that constitute meaning, I argue that text is architecture. I am arguing that writing is a practice of architecture, in a different modality, and that language is not a 'flat' representation of what is otherwise experienced as built space, but that language and text is also always textured and spatial. Consider that when we read texts, we are also simultaneously imagining depth, surface, thickness, layers, structure, foundations, and sequence. And when we talk about writing, we are also 'building' an argument, or using the theoretical 'scaffold' or 'framework' of certain ideas. These ideas are pursued further by feminist architectural theorist Jennifer Bloomer in *Architecture and the Text: the (S)cripts of Joyce and Piranesi* (1993), where she notes: "[w]hen I use the word writing in this text (and I use it a lot), I do not refer simply to that concept of writing as a mirror or documentation of speech, but to writing as a constructing, nonlinear enterprise that works across culture in networks of signification (6 as cited in Kendall 2013)." She also says: "The text is less a narrative to be apprehended than an object to be entered, less narrated than constructed (15 as cited in Kendall 2013)."

Anne Ryan asks very similar questions of the discipline as she notes that while literary works feature architectural worlds made up of words, hardly ever is writing considered intrinsic to the thinking and making of architecture. She beautifully describes why writing is an architectural act:

"My writing practice follows the very same motivations. I manipulate words to express an idea. Selecting brick as the sole material with which to define the thresholds, direct the light, texture the ground, sculpt the courtyards, and vault the ceilings of, for example, a domestic house – pushing the use of brick to its very limits – operates in an analogous way to shifting word order, varying sentence length, developing fluid yet coherent movement between paragraphs, and intensifying vocabulary. One practice constructs and manipulates three-dimensional space. One practice constructs and manipulates one-dimensional words. But both volumetric enclosure and written text can work through and define spatial ideas. What links both processes of spatial understanding is the person (author-architect) and their negotiation of their surroundings (Ryan 2012, 345)."

Ryan is right when she argues that "architecture is a way of thinking about the world" and therefore "making physical buildings—building architecture—is the most obvious and most accepted mode of practising architecture (Ryan 2012, 345-346)." She asks whether the notion of "writing architecture," and "writing as architecture" is hard to imagine because we have not yet considered "writing as a mode of representation within the process of constructing architecture (346)." This is something I have already alluded to above when I talked about the limited genealogy of writing in/as architecture.

However, writing (published or unpublished) is not accorded the same status as graphic representation, and therefore paper architecture is recognized as unbuilt, but writing (in architecture) is not seen as built or unbuilt. This is because the modern genealogy of writing in/as architecture is extremely limited, as is its presence as a form of praxis in/as architecture.

I wonder if at this point it might help to change perspective and look at the concept of space and spatiality in literature as well. It is now an established fact “that spatial form is no casual metaphor but an essential feature of the interpretation and experience of literature (Mitchell 1980, 546).” WJT Mitchell has already alluded to the inevitability of “literary spatiality” in his 1980 essay titled “Spatial Form in Literature,” wherein he argued for the inextricability of the real and the literary space, which is not static, but “enveloped in temporality (551).” Mitchell explained that this spatiality is not just a setting, but it is whatever “our reading leads us to ‘see’ not simply in the visual sense but in the entire field of perception [which] is part of the field of descriptive space in literary experience.” He also highlights that our habit of imposing a mental ‘map’ or any kind of “spatial patterns on the temporal flow of literature is a central aspect of reading,” even if this pattern is constantly disrupted and frustrated by the text (553).

And finally, Mitchell argues for a more elevated sense of “spatial apprehension”, which lies in the experience of the literature, and reader being able to have a “vision” and an “insight” into the meaning of the literary work, which is less about seeing the entirety of the work, and more about being able to visualize what the work is about, which may change with subsequent re-reading (553). More recently, Nedra Reynolds advances writing as a spatial practice that involves navigating terrain; situating oneself in one’s environment; establishing and/or transgressing boundaries, which is not an enactment in the “stable, always-the-same places but within shifting senses of space, in the between, in thirdspace (Reynolds 2004, 5).” The lenses of cultural geography make it possible to imagine writing as “movement and dwelling, and as “spatial practices informed by everyday negotiations of space (Reynolds 2004, p. 6).” I can offer two examples of what it might mean to consider writing as architecture.

The first is *Invisible Cities* 1974 (first published as *Le Città Invisibili* 1972) by Italo Calvino (1923-1985)—an example of literary architecture(s), a series of fictional conversations between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan about cities that do not exist. In Italo Calvino’s *Architecture of Lightness* (2011), Letizia Modena explains how this work of fiction was an outcome of Calvino’s concern with the future of urbanism (megapolis), and the homogenized approach to urban reform in the 1960s. To this end, these dialogues are presented not as cities one can travel to, but ones that can be constructed through the mind’s eye, such that “Khan and the work’s readers... become architects of their own invisible cities (3).” Modena notes that one of the key literary tropes of *Invisible Cities* was “dematerialized, gravity defying,” “detached, and “elevated” images of the city, which were used in order to emancipate the reader from the weight of conventional representations and possibilities, and as a warning against ossification of imagination and resignation to the status quo (4, 23, 24). Libby Perold (2016) adds to this interpretation as she brings focus to the novel’s optimism. Calvino, says Perold, offered neither utopia nor dystopia, and instead suggested that we find unseen possibilities embedded within the ruins of the city (8). This is seen in many instances in the novel, particularly when Khan recalls Polo’s advice on all the “invisible reasons which make cities live, through which perhaps, once dead, they will come to life again (Calvino 1974, 136).”

The second example is the body of works by American architect John Hejduk (1929-2000), who was the founding Dean of the School of Architecture at Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, and an influential figure in architectural theory. Hejduk is celebrated for his speculative work, “theoretical projects” that consisted of built works, as well as unbuilt works, which included not only drawings (masques), collages, and models but also poems. In the

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foreword to Hejduk's *Such Places as Memory Poems 1953-1996*, David Shapiro says: "It is the tectonic in poetry that he celebrates.... Poetry and architecture are not just contingent analogues for Hejduk. They are both building arts (1998, xvii)." Shapiro explains how the sculptural and tectonic force of Hejduk's "prose poem" such as the *Sentences on the house and other sentences I and II* can be read alongside his Diamond Houses explorations. The connection between the graphic and the textual is reinforced further by Alberto Pérez-Gómez who argues that one cannot enter or inhabit Hejduk's work without the word, suggesting that the writing is what completes his architecture (Pérez-Gómez 1986, 28). But as Wilm van der Bergh explains, in his Foreword to Hejduk's *Berlin Night*, this is no ordinary language. While Hejduk "writes architecture," he is not using "linguistic" language, or language of/for communication (van der Bergh 1998, 4). Instead, he is creating a new language, a new way of writing. By releasing the "spatio-temporal language of architecture from its solid referential powers," he can play with it, and create a new language of (architecture) (5).

In closing, instead of ending with an all-knowing conclusion, let us close with a few searching questions: What is at stake (for architecture as a discipline, and a profession) in asking these questions, or not asking these questions, about writing? What is at stake in not writing, or not recognizing writing as architecture? If writing is or can be invested with intersecting spatialities and architectures that are non-representational, how might that alter how we look at the meaning of the built, and the unbuilt? Is writing built or unbuilt, or does it sit undecidedly in the liminal space between the two, disrupting convenient binaries? Does the written word have greater (or a different) agency in providing inroads into impossible or utopian worlds, as yet unimagined? Do we need to look more closely at the unpublished, and does the archive need to be examined with the same amount of seriousness with which we now consider the unbuilt projects of architects? What latent power could the archive possibly hold? Is it possible for us to collectively imagine writing that is architectural, and what would be the objective of this writing practice? Would it be critical, political, or poetic, or all of these? How or why would we sustain it?

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