

AIXOPLUC ARCHITECTURES

SEARCH QUESTIONS

Arché

Endless Beginnings

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Which material, energy and information sources should we transform when building?.

How can we do it without degrading it and causing entropy? How can we borrow from the sources and not consume resources?

SEARCH QUESTIONS

As a consequence of our search as architects, we also produce knowledge made of words -written and spoken. Words are very different from wood or clay, sunlight or rain, or the bodies and skills of builders. They demand their own abilities, techniques and care. They help us to organise, formulate and share this knowledge. Our own search revolves around twelve constant themes, things we don't have a definitive answer to yet, which we present here as questions. This knowledge is not just a by-product of our activity, but rather an instrumental part that develops simultaneously and is imbricated in building.

Endless Beginnings

Congratulations to all the new architects in this big building. We are gathered here today to celebrate your new beginnings. We wish you good fortune and gratifying sleepless nights, because they will eventually come. My only advice for you: be of good heart.

You embarked in this journey at least five years ago, and today you renew the double responsibility towards society and to your own dignity. As you depart the school, you're somehow given license to build, but quite literally also license to kill.

So today I will talk a little bit about the kind of killing that architects do.

As you know, the term 'architect' has its origin in the greek word 'arkhitekton'. Archi- and Arché- can be translated as master, but also as beginning, origin or source. Therefore when someone pronounces or writes 'architect' it invokes the ancient, and increasingly diminishing, tradition of the master builder. But the word also refers to those trained in the different kinds of techniques for beginning, for the preparation of a future construction, and the skills to reach and come back from a source. To access the wild, original fountain of knowing, the untamed spring of foresight, but also the limited and fragile material and energy sources from which we build. And in doing that, realising that all we can do is borrow, transform, be grateful and give back. What is precious about a well is that it will dry.

And I argue here today that architects have forgotten about this other meaning, this arkane craft of working on the sources endless path and finite life. We have Life cycle Assessment and Indoor Environmental Quality, both quite useful approaches, but we are not fully aware yet of what our decisions, choices and ambitions provoke, what are its biological costs, and what actually makes a place inhabitable and for whom.

Instead, we all can make amends with the fact that human architecture shelters our species with the cost of massacring other forms of life and primeval mineral formations. There's no way around it. Violence and creation have been related since time immemorial. Hestia, the goddess of the hearth, was eaten by her father. In the Iliad, Apollo, god of music and arts, the bringer of harmony, is portrayed as being even more cruel than Ares, the god of war. Kali, the Hindu destroyer of evil forces, is an architect in a good day.

Today we are celebrating, so my words are not meant to be dull. On the contrary, it is rather an acceptance of what life does, and a wish to find in architecture seeds of what it could maybe become. It is important to be aware of the consequences of what we are doing.

With construction comes destruction. We haven't found a way of building, a way of inhabiting, that doesn't bring havoc to bacteria and other prokaryotic beings. To fungi, bugs, fish. Hummingbirds. Lemurs. Felled trees and torn wild flowers. We are predators, and life involves a whole lot of cruel or mindless killing.

But I'm thinking of a much more avoidable annihilation. One that is actually quite easy to imagine, and that we do indirectly. There is a Father John Misty song in which he carefully describes all the polluting and destructive consequences of such beautiful activities as making a record or painting a portrait. If a musician can do this exercise, then us architects can take the challenge as well. So I will paraphrase three verses from that song to illustrate my point. It goes like this:

This is the transcript from the speech addressed at the students and faculty during the Graduation Ceremony for the Spring 2020 cohort at the Aarhus Arkitektskolen. DOKK1, September 4, 2020. Aarhus, Denmark.

Try not to think so much about
The truly staggering amount of oil that it takes to make a building
All the shipping, the vinyl floor, the cellophane wrapping
The cables
The pipes and the sewage

Try not to become too consumed
With what's a criminal volume of life that it takes to build a new town
The forest, its animals
Aluminium windows sealed with polyurethane
The solvents and detergents

Lets just call this what it is
The constructive side of mankind's death wish
When it's my time to go
Gonna leave behind structures that won't decompose

Through this lens, architecture can be perceived not as bringing order to Nature, but rather as an ultimate mechanism of entropy, of degrading living, sentient things into non-living assemblies. But how to give up the feelings we get when building a humble shelter in the cosmic immensity, an abode for making the anxiety of survival disappear. From our designer's watchtower, we get to foresee inhabitants lives, anticipating their joys and fears, empathising with their despair and their hopes. And while doing it, letting go of time, becoming more us and freeing us from ourselves. Triumphant in moving along doubt, facing our insecurities and ignorance. Daily conversations through which new ideas arise. A vehicle for interbreeding calculations with emotion. Being here and there, now, yesterday and tomorrow at once. An estranged sense of purpose, alone or in company. Absent, miles away to fabricate a here. Building not only human habitats but also hope.

Most of us were not born with these abilities, we learn as we go, and we welcome all of you to this tiring duty, both your greatest joy and your biggest burden from now on. Enjoy the ride. I really hope you make it worthwhile. The defeats will outnumber the victories. Countless disappointments, big and small. A daily routine of extreme uncertainty. A rough, beautiful trade.

So please, as you join us in the perpetual struggle, the rigged fight to make this planet inhabitable, and the sometimes hopeless effort of doing it fairly and with kindness, don't kill the feeling of being beginners. Each new start is a departure, a letting go. Celebrate and embrace the feeling of being unexperienced, of not totally being able to anticipate where your wishful decisions will take you, but be aware and ready to face, whenever you start designing and building, all the killing that will be involved. If not to eliminate it, at least to minimise and make some sense of it.

Tak.

