

Unbreathable

Although the conceptualization and creation of most of the content included in the present issue of *Faktur: Documents and Architecture* were already well under way before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the final editing, design, and production have been heavily affected. Access to resources (and indeed spaces) we once took for granted—libraries, archives, institutions, even the offices we use on a normal basis—has been curtailed. But more importantly, the center of gravity of public discussion has shifted towards more essential territories, affecting our awareness of space and its significance, both physically and metaphorically. The new pathogen distorts how we perceive the space between one another, making us quite aware—perhaps more so than ever before—of how entangled our immune systems are, how truly collective the question of health is. Early in the crisis, when the virus was still circulating unchecked through nations and across political borders, it quickly became clear that, for lack of any proper treatment, the most effective tool at our disposal to slow the spread of the infection was, and indeed continues to be, *distance*. Our perception of space—of the distinction between public and private space, of individual and collective space, and of how we circulate and behave in each—has been radically altered, perhaps irreversibly so. Unless secured, filtered, or mediated, the very air around us is increasingly perceived as, in a word, unbreathable.

To describe the present crisis as merely a question of health would be to miss the forest for the trees: urgent structural questions surrounding ecology, surveillance, economics, and civil rights—already crucial axes of our present political discourse—have become all the more pronounced during the pandemic. In much of the world, the previous century's

drive towards modernization has given way to unbridled, seemingly insatiable patterns of overdevelopment. This change has blurred the line between “civilization and nature,” disrupting ecosystems and migratory movements for other species, producing a potentially disastrous biological proximity. The continued plundering of spaces and territories from other species around the planet has resulted in a suffocating continuity of life. As a result, viruses, bacteria, and other microbial life are being exchanged—and are mutating—at a heretofore unprecedented rate, rendering obsolete long standing immunities, not only for humans but for other forms of life. Making matters worse, modern societies have only just (perhaps too late) begun to grapple with what has long been plain to see: that the exacerbation of climate change, propelled by capitalism, is an issue of global health. We are only now moving from the era of presumed *independence* to a necessary and collective acknowledgment of the *interdependence* of nations, peoples, and indeed species on the planet. If the current situation results in some measure from the hegemony of outdated political definitions of space at the end of the millennium—that is to say, the modern nation-state, and its accompanying misrepresentation of space as a mere legal framework with all its cultural associations—this situation also demonstrates the ongoing struggle of different species for habitats, environments, and resources that humans are rapidly exhausting, or else rendering extinct. Overpopulation and the frivolous agenda of consumption prevalent in developed nations, grounded in an economically deterministic idea of progress, are depleting the planet's resources and ensuring a bleak future for generations to come. Not that everyone had access to those resources in the past: poverty and inequality persist the world over and are becoming more pronounced in ostensibly developed countries, as the economic

policies of the past half-century yield an ever more dizzying stratification of wealth. World governance still presents uncertainties that will inevitably manifest themselves in geopolitical and social tensions affecting democracies worldwide, the possible frustration of the economic prospects of future generations being among the most anxiety-creating ones. Needless to say, a new consensus—about resources, about technology, about what we consume and how we consume it—is imperative.

With so much information directed at the public—much of it incoherent, incorrect, or intentionally misleading—we must resist the dangerous notion that the political and the factual are somehow antagonistic to one another, as some governments are increasingly insisting. In contrast to previous health-related crises, media—and social media in particular—have played a significant role in creating a minute-by-minute awareness of the fragility of life via graphics, statistics, reports, etc., as well as educating and re-educating the world-wide population about standards of hygiene, molecular biology, and the political management of pandemics. Ideals of speed, acceleration, and mobility from previous centuries will be revised in the near future—indeed this process is already well underway. Although, in many developed countries and in some industries worldwide, the economic and even psychological impacts of isolation have been somewhat minimized by modern technology—facilitated by remote labor, automation, and social connectivity—these same technologies have perpetuated (and even intensified) a disturbing agenda of bypassing individual privacy during the crisis. Our growing daily reliance on technology, amplified by the directive to “shelter in place,” amounts to a collective surrender to big data of access to, as well as control of, our digital fingerprints. Technological capitalism is breaking the social contracts of the past.

It promotes subjects’ isolation as a resource for the mining of intimate data while democracies demand precisely the opposite: the expression of freedom in the public sphere and protection of the individual one. Confinement has presented tech companies with a golden opportunity to field test a dangerous “Big Brother” version of the future that will inevitably need to be addressed politically. Nothing less than the definition of private space is at stake.

Even as the political struggles of the technological future take shape, longstanding injustices inscribed in the apparatus of the modern state were thrust into the fore with visceral urgency by the brutal murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. His infamous last words, “I can’t breathe,” speak loudly and clearly about unresolved racial conflicts and class suffocation by a nation whose police culture has become increasingly militarized over the course of decades. Floyd’s words, spoken both before and since by other victims of this repressive system, resonate throughout history, underscoring the state of asphyxia within which the African-American community has long struggled, as well as the poorly understood, continuous impact that the organizational aspects of slavery still have in modern societies. Capitalism perpetuates some of these practices by, for instance, failing to provide for a system of universal healthcare. The message is blunt: unless you are productive, your health—your right to exist—is not to be taken for granted. If anything, the present pandemic has made it plain that African-Americans are suffocated thrice over: by history, by racism, and by capitalism.

Only time will tell whether or not the near future will deliver on the promise of a Green New Deal (or, for that matter, a Screen New Deal). What must not occur is a collective relapse into the willful glibness and mass flippancy upon which the most predatory aspects

of global capitalism rely, and which social media often intensifies in spite of its ostensibly democratizing potential. Architecture will have to consider changing ideals of space, providing new responses through our ongoing, increasingly multidisciplinary “expanded field.” It is within such a context of indeterminacy that the work of architecture in relation to local, specific narratives can be of the utmost relevance. This journal was conceived to offer a platform for such narratives. If the possibility of an architecture extending beyond the constraints of a mere service industry still retains some measure of cultural value, then it is in the drafting of new territories and spatial relations that we will find the seeds of a reinvigorated agency. The present issue presents a few successful examples where such agency in our field can be glimpsed: the deployment of the Norwegian army on a mission of environmental preservation; the reevaluation of the relationship between African-American patronage and canonical modernism; the complicity of the global sand trade in the redefinition of geographies and environments; the contribution of hitherto invisible layers of infrastructures to the culture of the city of London; and a manifesto for design via the recovery and reuse of construction materials—these narratives, brought to the fore by our contributors in the following pages, offer a tantalizing glimpse of this expanded field in a historic moment of reckoning. More than anything, these essays and contributions are intended as a forceful response to the ongoing forms of extraction and displacement—whether material, cultural, or ecological—so pervasive in our economies.