

**The imaginary of urgency has taken over architectural discourse at a speed consistent with the promptness of the answers it supposes. The very nature of the concept, still, has made it impossible to analyze more closely. That is why in this issue of ARQ we take the time for asking: is the urgent so urgent? Are we facing a new social consciousness or is it just a rhetorical change? Does it reflect an actual need or is it simply a new imaginary?**

KEYWORDS · contemporary architecture, society, architect, power, influence

## The unpostponable

### Overcoming indulgent architecture

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World population is about 7.5 billion people. Approximately 3 billion live in cities and around 1 billion live below poverty line. Recently, in Habitat 111 in Quito, it was argued that within the next 20 years our cities will absorb an additional 2,000 million inhabitants. When this happens, 2 billion people will be living below poverty line.

For an oblivious, indulgent discipline – obsessed with designing second homes and corporate buildings to be published on *couché* paper magazines – this data may seem irrelevant. However, for a discipline conscious of the power that architecture and urban design have in order to build poverty, increase inequality and materialize social divisions, such information cannot be but a ground-shaker, a call for action.

For a long time, design has operated from a reflective imaginary built on aesthetics. In recent decades, this process has developed a repertoire of impressive morphological rhetoric and spatial sophistications, but has restricted our domain to a framework only understood and – many times – only valued by architects.

It is urgent to expand our domain of concerns, not because architects ought to do things other than those we are trained for, but because by expanding our area of interest we can regain the ability to influence and better contribute with the skills and features that only synthetic thinking can bring on certain topics. For instance, worldwide, the crisis condition is no longer an exception. We attend every day to repetitive economic oscillations where levels of inequality and social division increase, or how due to extreme situations of political uncertainty or climate change, millions of people are banished from their places of origin – as it occurs with the more than forty million refugees living in camps all over the world.

Locally, we see the increasing unequal distribution of urban attributes as a result of freedom relinquished to an impatient capitalism, deployed in highly privileged urban areas opposed



## **Imaginaries of shock**

### **Symptoms of a displaced discipline**

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Natural disasters, humanitarian catastrophes, economic crises, cities plagued by serious environmental and social problems, the dreaded energy blackout, or an endemic housing deficit are just a few of the issues that currently fall under the category of the 'urgent': that which cannot wait, which has to be remedied as soon as possible, which is 'truly important,' and against which architecture cannot stand idly by.

Seminars, exhibitions, biennials, publications and a wide range of lecturers and scholars quickly put us on guard against a contemporary world in which architecture must respond speedily, separating between what is superfluous and what is necessary, between what can wait and the urgent thing. A scenario where the architect emerges as a fundamental actor when it comes to ending so much suffering.

The difficulty lies not only in the unawareness that the times of architecture are not precisely those of urgency, but also in the reasoning according to which the discipline and the architect seem to have real power to change the problems that are today described as critical. Does the architect have today the power needed to take on this task?

The question is usually answered by arguing the 'urgent' need for a radical change in the approach and orientation of our praxis, in order to reach the actual decision-making spheres. That is, the problem is reduced to increasing the architect's share of power. The question is then, to do what?

It is never truly specified. Tacitly, it is understood as whatever the architect deems appropriate. Through this idea, the modernist myth of the architect as a demiurge, as a specialist who answers without hesitation the call of duty, resurfaces. Nevertheless, the last century is plagued by nightmares justified by the same disciplinary hunger.

Rather than the emergence of a new social consciousness, what appears today as urgent would be the return to an old modernist rhetoric, which – as it is well known – made of

to extremely precarious and deprived ones. This condition – along many other unacceptable situations – should empower us to take action, to reimagine a discipline that contributes to the development of a more ethical environment. This cannot be done if not from an imaginary of the unpostponable, agreeing that the times when our discussions were only about ‘tensioned spaces’ and ‘material tectonics’ are over.

It is true that what is yet to come is unclear, that our solutions will probably be those of amateurs and that an architecture of ‘the ugly’ may be just around the corner. However, we will not be able to move towards the future without recognizing that the history of architecture and the city has been mostly written by the privileged ones. This is the price for not committing with providing solutions to all of those who were not traditionally our patrons, those who feel that the city and the existing architectural repertoire neither considers nor represents them.

In recent years, design has claimed in favor of certain struggles for inclusion, addressing urgent situations that seek to answer the citizens’ deep frustration. We hope to see, therefore, more designers in the rush to develop strategies for a more diverse urban environment, providing visibility and recognition – for instance – to gender equality, to the migrant society, to the physically challenged and, in general, to all of those who somehow represent a minority.

To reiterate, the challenge of the imaginary of the unpostponable is that of expanding the nature of our concerns in order to increase our domains of influence, answering with this to design’s responsibility to overcome indulgence through a more ethical, competent praxis in face of the scale of contemporary challenges, able to create a city open and for all. **ARQ**

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the staging of all kinds of catastrophic and urgent scenarios one of the tools for installing a new architecture. A form of legitimation where the urgent appeared as a simplified version of reality, and where all the complexity inherent to the real was reduced to a few variables that, with some logic, the architect could modify.

Thus, the resurgence of a need to justify the architect's work from an imaginary of urgency is but a symptom of a discipline that sees itself displaced from those issues of public interest. Such a displacement had already been noticed by 18<sup>th</sup>-century architects faced with the emergence of the first engineering schools, professionals who took charge of 'public' works relegating the architect to the private sector. A displacement also experienced by architects in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries given the development and consolidation of industrial capitalism and its technocratic approach to reality.

Therefore, the rhetoric of urgency would not be so much a reflection of a present necessity or a new projective imaginary, but rather the response of a discipline stripped of effective power to transform the real, at least according to the modernist dream.

If there is something that should be urgent today, it is the discussion about the role played by architecture in the midst of a society profoundly modified by the late-capitalist system. An urgent debate that should redefine the real power that architecture has today and with a result, I fear, that would not be as comforting as the feeling that 'everything will be alright, everything will be solved' often distilled by discourses derived from the imaginary of urgency. **ARQ**

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