

# Populism, and a call for architects to reclaim our field

## Architecting, when everyone is architecting

### Looking Down

Neena Verma

Architecture in these times is an architecture at risk. I will argue here that the recent trajectory of the field has been a harbinger of the political populism that generated the Trump administration in the US, Brexit in the UK, the Swiss People's Party, Marine Le Pen's Front National, Germany's Alternative für Deutschland, Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and other such inverse majority movements.<sup>1</sup> What might be called an emerging architectural populism has led to a situation where our careful art is at risk of becoming its inverse: an architecture without architects. In response, I will argue that this is our moment – this is when we reclaim our field in the only way we can – this is when we create architecture.

#### Architecting

At its most fundamental, populism is – as Peter Wiles defines it – '[a]ny creed or movement based on the following major premise: virtue resides in the simple people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions.'<sup>2</sup> As applied to architecture, populism characterises architects – the relatively small and dedicated collection of people embedded in the field – as an elite. And architectural populism seeks to remove the elite – the architects – from architecture. Thus, as per Wiles's definition, virtue in American architecture, for example, might be seen to reside not with the country's 110,000 registered architects but rather with 300+ million 'simple people'.

In 2016, 'the year of the [political] populist revolt',<sup>3</sup> more than four million Americans chose regularly to spend their leisure time watching television shows about interior design, architectural renovation, and house buying.<sup>4</sup> At the helm of these shows are 'incredibly relatable'<sup>5</sup> individuals without architecture training, regularly (mis) representing the craft as a game of trends.<sup>6</sup> Arguably, no other profession's televisual counterpart holds such clout and empowers its audience to believe itself to be the authority. The American Institute of Architects simultaneously averred architects' growing irrelevance by forcing itself on the country with television advertisements asking audiences to 'Look Up', as if Americans never before noticed that they are surrounded by the work of architects.<sup>7</sup> If there is a pattern here, then American Lego sales also saw a decline.<sup>8</sup>

Not only is architecture misrepresented in the media, it seems increasingly under siege from its users. It is 'a well-recognised if unwelcome fact of architectural life [that] architects design only a small percentage

of what gets built in the United States'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Sarah Williams Goldhagen reflects that:

*Most of what we see from our window or in our surroundings has been constructed, but it was not really designed in any way by a rudimentary sense of the word. In the United States, 85% of new construction, whether it is a new bridge, an urban park, a housing development, or a school addition – is realised at the hands of a construction firm's collaborating with real estate developers or other private clients. Many of these builders bypass designers (a catch-all term for professionals involved in designing the built environment, including architects, landscape architects, interior architects, urban designers, city planners, civil engineers, and other sorts of civil servants) completely, or employ them only cursorily to review and stamp their approval on drawings – drawings that have been prepared by people who all too often lack even basic professional training in design. [...] In the United States and in most other parts of the world, many people believe that engaging a highly trained design professional is an unnecessary expense [...].<sup>10</sup>*

Focused on dollars per square foot, developers continue to build homogeneous strip malls and residential communities without sensitivity to local climate, custom, or culture.<sup>11</sup> And despite the architect's absence, in actuality or impression, buildings continue to get built.

Another common gripe of architects in these populist times is the appropriation of their title,

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## 'Stop using "architect" as a verb – that's not how you language!'

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namely the growing popularity of the verb 'to architect'. While 'architect' has been recognised as a verb since the sixteenth century,<sup>12</sup> its widespread contemporary non-architectural usage underscores the popularity of the idea of architecture – if not its professionals – in these populist times. In 2017, Ivanka Trump published a self-help book she describes as 'Your manual for architecting the life you want to live.'<sup>13</sup> Aside from substantive critical commentary, Trump's use of the term 'architecting' drew heightened attention. For example, satirist Samantha Bee pleaded to 1.25 million viewers:<sup>14</sup> 'Stop using "architect" as a verb – that's not how you language. Learn how to architect a sentence!'<sup>15</sup> Negatively connoting it as 'business jargon', dictionary Merriam-Webster joined the discussion about the reception of the term:

*As a verb, to architect [...] has referred to the design of buildings and more figurative uses, like 'the book is not well architected'. In business jargon, however, architect has come to mean something like 'to design' or 'to plan', carrying with it a vague and confused idea that 'to architect' is somehow more intentional, specialized, or expert. [...] It's probably true that the vocabulary of those working in innovative fields is itself innovative in many ways, but this jargon might surprise someone who doesn't spend much time architecting.*<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps populism in architecture is all very well. Let the people design! However, architects train in a specific way with a specific toolkit because design is not so easy. And, when architecture practice is in popular hands, it can become detrimental to the human spirit. In her new text, *Welcome to Your World: How the Built Environment Shapes Our Lives*, Sarah Williams Goldhagen argues with compelling detail that, besides the necessary considerations of safety and functionality, engaging a 'highly trained design professional' in the built environment benefits emotional stability and quality of life beyond the surface level. She catapults this involvement beyond a matter of 'personal taste'.

<sup>17</sup> Similar opinions about style and taste are what the populist movement has erroneously borrowed from the field and misappropriated as architecture. Architecture is so much more:

*Architecture is where we keep our feelings. Recall a personal, emotional moment and where it occurred. For you, this place will always be associated with a feeling. The place's tangible qualities – wall finishes, floor materials, fabric colours – merely markers; its intangible effect – warmth, suffocation, calm, ease – forever embedded in you. Contrary to the apparent, architects do not trade in finishes, materials, and colours. Architects instead employ a toolkit of intangibles – scale, proportion, hierarchy, light – to nurture feelings. These feelings become the architecture.*<sup>18</sup>

### Looking down

With blind faith in an inverse, political populism hijacked the United States presidency from politicians. An architectural populism is on its way to hijacking the built environment from architects. Like never before, this is when architects have to prove their value. This is when we unabashedly reclaim our field. We must produce architecture without an agenda – architecture driven by the undistracted intention to create architecture, and nothing else. We must look inward or, rather, we must look down and architect.

While we cannot bow to populist demands under the guise of client involvement,<sup>19</sup> we also cannot sequester architecture from the popular world. That would be a dangerous exploit. As Steven Bingler and Martin C. Pedersen reflect:

*[P]ostmodernism, deconstructivism and a dozen other-isms [...] made for vibrant debate among the professionals but pushed everyone else further away. And we're more insulated today, with an archipelago of graduate schools, magazines and blogs that reinforce our own worldview, supported by a small number of wealthy public and private clients.*<sup>20</sup>

We must learn from the current popular appeal of architecture. Indeed, there 'is nothing inherently undemocratic about populism [...] In small doses, it can act as a political corrective: it can flag up discontent and serve as an antidote to voter fatigue.'<sup>21</sup>

Nor is this argument a critique of popular style and taste. Key to any architect's success is understanding

clients' *intent* with regard to their style and taste. The architect has much to learn from popular trends, as Douglas Haskell argued in his groundbreaking 1958 essay, 'Architecture and Popular Taste':

*It cannot be expected that the appearance in modern architecture of decorativeness, of symbolism, and of improvisation, will change the look of America overnight. Sensitive men [and women], for years to come, will still find their stomachs turning at many a stretch of 'Idiot's Delight and automobile graveyard', studded by poles, decked in hideous colours, and swathed in wire. Most people will remain visually untrained and they will often prefer the inferior to the superior. And yet, just as the great threat of 'the machine' was reduced in thirty years to more nearly manageable proportions by modern design, so with time and sympathetic feeling modern design may make some impact on the threat of the democratic wilderness. It will not happen any other way.*

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## 'the only communication tool architects have is architecture'

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Rather than reinforcing the well-critiqued 'failure of the profession to communicate with the public'<sup>22</sup> this is a loud call for architects to communicate more than ever before. *But 'the medium is the message':<sup>23</sup> the only communication tool architects have is architecture.*

### Scratching

*In modern thought, (if not in fact) Nothing is that doesn't act, So that is reckoned wisdom which Describes the scratch but not the itch.*

Shakespeare's 'Troilus and Cressida', as quoted by Marshall McLuhan<sup>24</sup>

As McLuhan famously set forth, 'the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs'.<sup>25</sup> In the same way that each piece of architecture is itself a medium, its message is its impact on users. Put another way, architecture is didactic. Consider the world's best-known architecture: it is universally revered by both architects and Wiles's 'simple people',<sup>26</sup> because its value is palpable across time and cultures.

The Seven Wonders of the World, while maybe a trite example, are universally appealing;<sup>27</sup> the architect's tools – scale, proportion, hierarchy, and light – create an appeal that is better felt than articulated. Such structures alone further the import of architecture more than any essay could.

So, we should set out to save architecture with the tool we know best (and a tool that, all too conveniently, is powerfully didactic): we save architecture with architecture. We stop diversifying our practices, we stop demystifying our art, we stop letting ourselves believe that we improve our designs by surrendering decision-making authority. We insist on architect-designed, architect-led, and architect-implemented architecture. We let contractors build, engineers analyse, consultants consult, and clients pay. And we, the architects, do the architecture. We will not shy away from our academic design currency, referential jargon, spatial thinking, radical ideas, and projective realities – the stuff of our gruelling training and absurd passions. We will not nod timidly at whoever is asking. When we stop rationalising our existence by being everything to everyone, we are able to focus on our peculiar competency: we will use our tools to create effective spaces that seamlessly blend beauty and utility. And through such insistent architecture, we will re-assert ourselves.

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*‘through such insistent architecture, we will re-assert ourselves’*

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#### Postscript: getting built

Ironically, architects may benefit from populism in architecture. Beyond being cocktail party fodder, a populist surge makes architecture ‘cool’. Politicians are latching on to the built environment, parasitically riding the trend. Almost too predictably, architecture is about to collide with populist politics.

In the United States, a one trillion dollar investment in infrastructure, however ill conceived, has been proposed on both sides of the American political spectrum; perhaps as

political pawn, perhaps as practical strategy.<sup>28</sup> This investment evokes President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, known for its tens of thousands of new architectural projects:

*Between 1935 and 1943, the WPA literally built the infrastructure of modern America, including 572,000 miles of rural roads, 67,000 miles of urban streets, 122,000 bridges, 1,000 tunnels, 1,050 fifty airfields, and 4,000 airport buildings. It also constructed 500 water treatment plants, 1,800 pumping stations, 19,700 miles of water mains, 1,500 sewage treatment plants, 24,000 miles of sewers and storm drains, 36,900 schools, 2,552 hospitals, 2,700 firehouses, and nearly 20,000 county, state, and local government buildings.*<sup>29</sup>

Politicians the world over are making similar proposals.<sup>30</sup> And the demand is global: ‘From 2016 through 2030, the world needs to invest about 3.8 percent of GDP, or an average of \$3.3 trillion a year, in economic infrastructure just to support expected rates of growth.’ This \$3.3 trillion represents a marginal portion of broader infrastructure investment needs.<sup>31</sup> The world is about to get built.

Our response now – in these populist times – will separate the opportunists from the architects. Opportunists will nod timidly at whoever is asking. Architects will look down and create architecture, answering to one.

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#### Notes

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