
ARCHITECTURE, ETC.

By Olympia Kazi

Architecture is constantly challenged, criticized, praised, attacked, lobbied, used, consulted, marketed, provoked...

The role of architectural institutions is to confront and negotiate those challenges.

Set within social institutions, political institutions, and the most powerful institution of all, the market, architecture itself may be considered an institution, one that involves a broad spectrum of actors: architects and professional organizations, of course, but also schools, universities, research centers, real estate developers, consultants, marketing agents... In this array of people and institutions that collectively make architecture, the role of smaller organizations such as the Institute for Urban Design is precarious. This is both our greatest limit and our greatest asset: we're too small to wield actual influencing power, yet the independence of nonprofit groups like us is often crucial to operate freely and promote critical discourse.

The fact that everything a nonprofit does is not outcome-driven introduces a much needed element of diversity in a world full of benchmarks and efficiency standards. This is not to say that nonprofits are to be seen as ivory towers detached from the production circle; on the contrary,

our aim is to engage directly the system, from without and from within. It is our set of methods and critical tools that allows us a different freedom of action.

The Institute for Urban Design operates within an environment frayed with economic pressures, social and political conflicts, and ever-changing culture wars. As one of many small architectural institutions, the Institute responds daily to the provocations and challenges with which architecture is confronted. Our ambition is to be a place where information and ideas are not just simply gathered but sorted out and thought through.

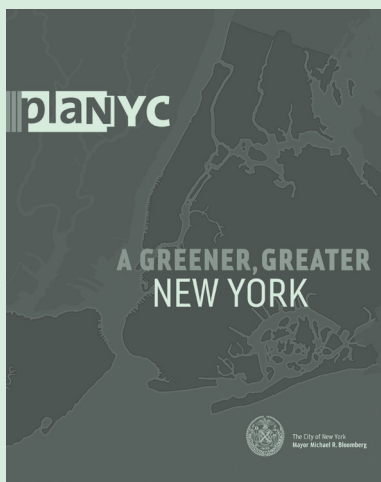
One example: In 2007 we decided to take up the challenge launched by Mayor Bloomberg with PlaNYC, an ambitious agenda to transform New York into a sustainable city by the year 2030. The plan would likely change New York's face radically, yet the conversations around it tended to be very narrow: public opinion was mostly focused on a couple of the plan's features (congestion pricing and the million-trees initiative); the majority of the plan's 127 initiatives, and the overall scope of PlaNYC, were left aside. The Institute decided to initiate a critical discussion on the plan by bringing together various individual and institutional voices: architects, planners, policy-makers, developers, academics, activists. We convened these many voices at The Cooper Union in New York for a day of critical debate, and eventually produced THE NEW YORK 2030 NOTEBOOK, the first critical response to PlaNYC and, we hope, a useful tool to envision the future of New York City.

When common room asked us to host a discussion on institutions we decided to compile a short list of events and texts that, in the past year, have been significant for us. Each text (be it a speech, an article, an essay) opens a window onto the complex world of architecture; together, they offer a picture of the strange workings of architecture as an institution.



Detail from poster for the NEW YORK/2030 – NEW YORK'S GREEN AND JUST FUTURE SYMPOSIUM.

Cover of 2007 Report: PlaNYC: A GREENER, GREATER NEW YORK.



9 SEPTEMBER 2007

In the "City" section of THE NEW YORK TIMES appears a visual essay where the photographer Danny Lyon illustrates his strategies for designing a city. The essay is titled "First, We Kill the Architects." (In January, PIDGIN, a student magazine of the Princeton School of Architecture, had published an open letter by the writer Annie Choi with the title "Dear Architects, I Am Sick of Your Shit.")

17 NOVEMBER 2007

The sociologist Richard Sennett, speaking at The Cooper Union's Great Hall during NEW YORK 2030, a conference organized by the Institute for Urban Design to discuss PlaNYC, says, "If our strategy is to keep \$50 million-a-year Wall Street fat cats here because somehow everyone else is going to benefit, that is, statistically speaking, an illusion."

6 FEBRUARY 2008

In a speech delivered at a real estate and planning event in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the architect Daniel Libeskind declares, "I won't work for totalitarian regimes."

16 MARCH 2008

The investment bank Bear Stearns, one of the largest underwriters of mortgage bonds, is bought in a fire sale by JPMorgan Chase. The day after, on its front page, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL writes that the sale marks the latest turn in what has become "the most pervasive financial crisis in a generation."

7 APRIL 2008

The deadline set by the Federal Government for receiving funds towards traffic reduction projects is about to expire.

The New York State Legislature delays a vote on congestion pricing, one of the key initiatives of Mayor Bloomberg's PlaNYC. The non-vote effectively kills the initiative.

This seemingly random list captures the strange layering of issues with which we at the Institute have to grapple daily – from architects' moral dilemmas to the subprime mortgage crisis to the intricacies of Federal, State, and Municipal politics. The list is an invitation to think the complexity of architecture.

- December – Institutions, Olympia Kazi (Executive Director, Institute for Urban Design).

EXCERPT FROM: CIAM IV – CAN
OUR CITIES SURVIVE? AN ABC OF
URBAN PROBLEMS, THEIR ANALYSIS,
THEIR SOLUTIONS

WHY OUR CITIES SHOULD BE SAVED

By José Luis Sert
Selected by Guido Hartray

Chaotic as they are today, our cities are products of our civilization.

In spite of their baser elements, many are still the citadels of our culture. Their roots reach far into the past. Even today **THEIR SITES ARE SIGNIFICANT NOT ONLY IN A FUNCTIONAL SENSE BUT IN A SPIRITUAL SENSE AS WELL.** To replace them would involve a colossal undertaking. Occupying strategic geographic sites, they are the focal points of tremendous networks of communication and transportation, which modern technics constantly extends. Even though they are emptying and overflowing into the country, all roads still converge upon them.

Past concentrations of population have produced such an unprecedented state of chaos that this decentralization, or dispersion into the country, is both natural and logical. But it does not necessarily mean the death of the city. The scale of our cities may change; they may break up into pieces, in the sense that vast suburban zones, developed in these last few decades like parasites, may be segregated from the city proper, giving place to open areas or green bands. Such a reduction of the area of the city or its limitation to essential elements does not constitute a disappearance of the city. It is rather something like the process of eliminating surplus fat in the human body, with consequent gains in health. With these changes, the city would be reduced to its essential elements united by a system of networks (streets and highways, telephone and lighting services, and others) to form a vital nucleus corresponding to the vital needs of the country and region.

UNDOUBTEDLY THE CHANGES REQUIRED IN OUR URBAN STRUCTURES INVOLVE GREAT DIFFICULTIES, BUT THEY ARE NECESSARY. And, fortunately, we have never before in history possessed so many possibilities for their achievement, from the technical standpoint, as we do today. The surgical operation is a delicate one, but clean instruments are at hand.

A number of those who champion the idea of the ultimate disappearance of cities envisage vast expanses of the



Bird's eye view of Washington Square Park, NYC.

The skyline of Cologne which has preserved its medieval silhouette; the well-known skyline of Manhattan where high buildings mean high land values.



countryside with a low density of population, somewhat resembling a spread-out garden city. A labyrinthian and interminable network of roads would link widely separated farms, among which would be found stores, theaters, schools, and other buildings. Such an arrangement, however, would sacrifice the rural atmosphere without reproducing the city itself, and would result in a neither-city-nor-country formula (see pp. 60–62)¹. And civic dignity, the expression of the human will throughout all the ages of history, would exist nowhere.

No, the lesson of the past tells us that Troy was rebuilt on Troy, Rome on Rome, Paris on Paris. So New York can and should be rebuilt on New York. Manhattan returned to the Indians, its skyscrapers in ruins?² (CONT'D ON PAGE 1/8)

1. H. G. Wells wrote on this subject in **ANTICIPATIONS**. Since then the drawbacks of such a plan have become very evident.

2. An American architect once asked Mr. H.G. Wells, "What do you think of the architecture of New York?" Mr. Wells replied, "It will make a magnificent ruin."

For the duration of the exhibition the common room installation will serve as a forum for the exploration of four main themes. These themes will be investigated through a series of informal talks by guests, invited by common room, and printed matter using the installation as point of distribution:

September – Local context, 'Center for Architecture,' Guido Hartray (Rogers Marvel Architects)

October – Local context, 'common room,' Anthony Schuman (New Jersey Institute of Technology, School of Architecture)

November – Publishing, David Reinfurt (Dexter Sinister)

December – Institutions, Olympia Kazi (Institute for Urban Design)

To receive more information about the events visit: [http://www/commonroom.net/mailling_list](http://www.commonroom.net/mailling_list)

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common room + Geoff Han