EDITORIAL

Culture of Crisis

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Editorial to the special issue on crisis

Almost two years ago, when the editorial board of *Architectural Histories* proposed its first thematic issue of the journal, the topic of 'crisis' seemed timely. It alluded to the mounting bankruptcies of financial systems in America, the deterioration of economies in Europe, the perpetual failures of G20 summits on climate change, the rapid overthrow of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and the new geopolitical reconfigurations all this caused. It called to mind the disparate but constant rise of religious fundamentalisms and the reincarnation of forms of militarism, within and without national boundaries. In the world that came after Lehman Brothers, Fukushima, Mubarak, and Greece's near default, historical contemplations on 'crisis' promised to give important perspectives on current culture and architecture. In addition, architecture has not only been infused with the realities of crisis, but sustained by them. Crises that arise in the world have forced practitioners to reconceptualize their stances towards social or political turmoil, their responses to scientific and technological breakthroughs, their attitudes to economic adversity or their relationships with other modes of cultural production. The theme of 'crisis' also resonated, as indeed it still does, with the internal crises of architecture. The quest for legitimate historical models or modes of production; the competing definitions of the profession; or the historiographic critiques that repeatedly reconceptualized the relationships between history, theory and design: all these underline the constructive possibilities of crisis and give a worthy purpose to *Architectural Histories'* thematic call. From global events to the discipline's own history, it was obvious that 'crisis' was certain to preoccupy architectural history, theory and practice for the next several years. The discipline was already faced with serious dilemmas. What would be the role of architectural production in saturated built environments in need of less (not more) building? What can historic cities be if heritage is a 'business'? How might architecture's environmental responsibilities be contemplated if ecology became a brand? Simultaneously, new questions were

emerging: What does architectural production mean in the midst of changing public spaces, either due to neoliberal policies or to the riots reacting to those policies? How could architectural pedagogy constructively react to the ups-and-downs of the construction industry? What are architecture's and urbanism's subversive possibilities in the midst of all the expositions of state or institutional corruption? And what of architectural history?

As this thematic issue began to take shape, the threat of national defaults in Europe became a repeated reality. The anti-dictatorial promises of 'Arab Spring' waned into bloody conflicts. The environmental calamity of Fukushima exposed the social failures of corporations, just as Katrina exposed state inadequacies. Income disparities increased, not only between the global north and south, but also within the social strata of states, in both their north and south. In the midst of all this, 'crisis' began to take a firm hold in global society's imagination, and its urgent, life-threatening sense has become intertwined with the sense of transition and necessary change. The connotations of fear, anxiety and opportunity are often all bounded up in the term simultaneously. The term quickly became overused, inflated or compromised, a buzzword evoked by disparate lines of cultural production. 'Crisis' has been incorporated into the political vocabulary as much as it has been internalized by market forces and business ethics, to the point where 'crisis' and its emergencies are instigators of a multitude of interventions, from state reforms to grass-roots mobilization.

To speak of a 'crisis' at this moment is to speak of an ubiquity of crisis. Any working distinction between 'economic' and 'political' crises or between 'personal' and 'collective' crises has become meaningless. In addition, 'crisis' either *exists* or *is evoked* in every realm of cultural practice. One may speak of a 'culture of crisis' not only in the sense of a 'way of life' (per the ethnographic or anthropological definition of culture), but also in the sense of 'cultural production' and 'cultural consumption', whereby crisis has its own politics of social antagonisms, local and global. A key characteristic of this culture is the ethical force with which responses to crises are rendered, as these responses are tied to noble causes related to social needs, human tragedies or national emergencies. The emphasis on the ethical dimensions of crisis promised the strengthening of local social networks and civil society, and indeed the

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mounting appearance of food kitchens in urban centers of south of Europe, or the generous offerings of emergency aid to nuclear-struck Japan demonstrate this. The ethical aura also allowed 'crisis' to be incorporated into the mainstream mechanisms of the state as well as dominant corporate practices. State authorities, such as in Greece, Spain, Portugal and Cyprus, have been able to implement severely unpopular economic and social measures in the name of crisis. Similarly, 'crisis' has also been appropriated by the practices of corporations in search of an image of social responsibility. Shopping bargains, for example, are swiftly pushed at consumers as if such bargains were sensitive gestures to the economic hardships of households.

In such appropriations of the theme, 'crisis' might be said to be celebrated for its constructive possibilities (as a dissolution of outdated orders); perhaps it can also be instrumentalized and appropriated, to advance—ironically—a status quo, or co-opted to serve dominant forms of production and consumption; or perhaps it might tolerate emergency measures (economic or other) that erode citizen rights. Just as Manfredo Tafuri taught us that history, as a project of crisis, had productive possibilities, bringing critique, reform and change, David Harvey also warns us that 'crisis' can mean, for example, war on the weaker social groups (Birangi 2013; Harvey 2013). Current theorists of architecture convincingly call for a rethinking of the premises of the profession of architecture, while cultural critics warn of the 'tyrannies of emergency' if reform methods are myopic and singular (Bindé 2000: 52). As we contemplate the productive possibilities of crisis, let us also be reminded of Wolfgang Sachs's account of the historical trajectory of ecology, which itself faced a crisis after the 1960s. What emerged as a form of social critique with a vigorous ethical force was later 'sanitized of its radical content and reshaped as expert neutral knowledge' to become a 'knowledge of domination' (Sachs 1995: xv). Therefore, just as one embraces the opportunities of each 'crisis' (of any of the sorts accounted above), one needs to be aware of how crises can also trigger managerial interventions in local economies, the lives of citizen or built and natural environments.

Since the initial call for papers, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the types of 'crisis' in the world have multiplied, full of potential that can be both vivid and dangerous. The task of the themed issue, then, has become even more challenging, and timely, than initially imagined. Perhaps 'crisis', to the historian, at least, can be seen as a call to *vigilance* in identifying the uses and abuses of the concept, through rigorous analysis and dissection. For such vigilant positioning, making a careful reflection on ideas and operations that guards against agendas of appropriation is more important than any type of claim about the truth of what is and isn't 'crisis', or of what it can or cannot do. What is at stake is not simply a matter of applying historical insights about 'crisis' to current predicaments, but rather a matter of uncovering the complexities of crises beyond the definitive and the objective, of contemplating 'crisis' as a cultural reality, with productive critiques and co-options, failures

and compromises, manipulations and resistances—and also considering possibilities of agency among individuals or groups. In the domain of architecture, might challenges of the canon turn canonical? When do searches of humane totalities become totalizing? Under what circumstances might ethical imperatives lose their critical force? When might calls for responsible action be subsumed by managerial appropriations?

History's capacity for analysis—the rigorous attention to the hidden and the obscure, and its provisional, incomplete and critical searches—can be used quite effectively to steer clear of what Tafuri might have rejected as 'pretentious truths'. The papers in this volume historicize 'crisis' in relation to architecture, precisely to uncover the complexity of the stakes in moments of crisis. Through the papers, we contemplate the social role of architecture in advancing or challenging social priorities and biases; or the role of architectural education in the ups-and-downs of the construction industry; or the subversive potentials of art, architecture and urbanism.

By their impressive number and variety, the proposals we received for this volume demonstrate the multiplicity and ubiquity of the concept of 'crisis,' and the ways within which architectural histories might be interpreted in the light of crises, or as crises themselves. Histories of crisis pertain to anything from the moderate problems of health and hygiene in domestic environments to large-scale natural disasters. Sometimes they are related to the very definition of the discipline of architecture in different geographical and historical contexts. Sometimes they pertain to the personal calamities of individual historians. Yet as some proposals suggested, the discourses of crisis, both historical and historiographical, i.e., both in the past and also in the writing about the past, have their own allure. A firmly established, dominating perception of a crisis might at the same time hide from purview the accompanying and perfectly 'functioning' architecture.

One group of essays in this first special issue of *Architectural Histories* anatomizes the often unexpected architectural consequences of different crises, to different effect. War and scarcity, urban, political and global crises, and post-colonial territorialization are among the types of turmoil that have an effect on architecture and the built environment. From these specific cases we learn that dire conditions may actually lead to architectural innovation, to the contestation and negotiation of authority over urban space and post-colonial territories. Architecture clearly has the potential to succumb to the general global problems as well.

Another group of authors tackle the much overlooked problem of technological failure in architecture, a very material reason for social and human disaster. By doing so they add a long overdue chapter to architectural historiography. Other papers fill further lacunae in architectural historiography, such as the hitherto unknown and crisis-prone pre-history of some iconic architectural designs. These papers point to, and arguably undermine, what we tend to define as 'historiographical crises'. Some other papers, on the other hand, show that the current

appropriation of crises, mentioned earlier, also has a history. These authors convincingly argue that a culture of crisis existed in the past as well. Discourses of crisis were sometimes disseminated with unforeseen implications, as in the case of the nineteenth-century debate on 'style', which, ironically, may have paved the way for the emergence of modern architecture. Hence these essays remind us that we historians need to see history through this filter as well.

Taken together, the papers show that processes of crisis and radical change in the profession of architecture, in architectural history and in theory have a historicity (and a politics) of their own that needs to be carefully considered. True to the nature of open-access publishing, this special issue should be seen as a collection in the process of evolving. It establishes the beginning for a longer-term debate on the question of crisis. As this issue of *Architectural Histories* reconfigures itself with the addition of new essays in the coming months, our understanding of the intertwinement of 'crisis' with power, representation and agency will expand, and the nuances of 'crisis' in relation to space, culture and politics will be exposed.

References

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