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Notes:

- [1] Carlin, George. Saving the Planet, Truth in Comedy. www.youtube.com. Published June 2, 2015. Web.
- [2] Pollard, Dave. Why We Cannot Save the World. www.howtosavetheworld.ca. Published September 12, 2012. Web.
- [3] Ramos, Viktor. The Continuous Enclave: Strategies in Bypass Urbanism. www.scholarship.rice.edu. Published May 2009. Web.
- [4] After September? Strategies in By-pass Urbanism. www.arenasofspeculation.org. Published October 2011. Web.
- [5] Graham, Wade. Are we greening our cities, or just greenwashing them? Op-Ed, Los Angeles Times. Published March 6, 2016. Web.
- [6] Modified and Adapted to context from Commander Agi. A Defeatist Manifesto. www.thedefeatists.typepad.com. Published December 19, 2005. Web.

Architecture Cannot Save the World

A Defeatist Manifesto

"We are so self-important. Everybody's going to save something now. "Save the trees, save the bees, save the whales, save those snails." And the greatest arrogance of all: "Save the planet". Save the planet? We don't even know how to take care of ourselves yet. I'm tired of this. I'm tired of these self-righteous environmentalists, these white, bourgeois liberals who think the only thing wrong with this country is that there aren't enough bicycle paths... The planet has been here four and a half billion years. We've been here, what, a hundred thousand? Maybe two hundred thousand? And we've only been engaged in heavy industry for a little over two hundred years. Two hundred years versus four and a half billion. And we have the CONCEIT to think that somehow we're a threat?... The planet has been through a lot worse than us - through earthquakes, volcanoes, plate tectonics, continental drift, solar flares, sun spots, magnetic storms, the magnetic reversal of the poles, hundreds of thousands of years of bombardment by comets and asteroids and meteors, worldwide floods, tidal waves, worldwide fires, erosion, cosmic rays, recurring ice ages... And we think some plastic bags and some aluminum cans are going to make a difference? The planet isn't going anywhere. WE are! The planet will shake us off like a bad case of fleas. It will be here for a long, long, LONG time after we're gone, and it will heal itself, it will cleanse itself, because that is what it does. It's a self-correcting system. The air and the water will recover, the earth will be renewed. The earth doesn't share our prejudice toward plastic. Plastic came out of the earth. The earth probably sees plastic as just another one of its children. Could be the only reason the earth allowed us to be spawned from it in the first place. It wanted plastic for itself. Didn't know how to make it; needed us. Could be the answer to our age-old egocentric philosophical question, Why are we here?.. Plastic!"^[1]

It is seldom that a day passes without a cry for us all to work together to accomplish a certain something, because if we do that, everything will change and the world will be saved. The variations proposed for this "something" are, more often than not, (a) comprehensively transforming some system or the other, (b) achieving some widespread behavioral change, or (c) bringing great minds together to bring about some innovation. In a more general context, Dave Pollard, proposes two laws, what he calls, one, Pollard's Law of Human Behavior: "We do what we must (our personal, unavoidable imperatives of the moment), then we do what is easy, and then we do what is fun. There is never time left for things that are merely important. And

two, Pollard's Law of Complexity: "Things are the way they are for a reason. If you want to change something, it helps to know that reason. If that reason is complex, success at changing it is unlikely, and adapting to it is probably a better strategy."^[2] As much as our profession would like us to believe, as much as our academia would demand us to imagine, the fact remains that architecture is bound by certain inescapable ground realities. It is meant to cater to a certain audience and it is required to respect certain conventions. Fantastic examples of architectural speculation, no doubt, can be stimulating, and can encourage creativity in an academic environment. In the past, they have been used as means of bold criticism by avant-garde groups - Archigram, Superstudio and Ant Farm. But, as the idea trickles down and dilutes, and the profession's ego is stroked beyond elastic limits, bold experimentation and defiant visions begin to conjure whimsical structures of an unreality, impossible to return from. An arrogant, over-confident God-complex takes over.

2009. A student at Rice University, Viktor Ramos proposes 'The Continuous Enclave: Strategies in Bypass Urbanism'^[3], a project that proposes an intervention in the cross-border situation between Israel and Palestine. One might think that the projection of such an "absurd vision of the future"^[4] would force the profession to engage critically and rethink the agency of the architect. Yet, the project is "taken at its aesthetic value, and heralded as a possible solution for Israeli-Palestinian conflict"^[4], the imagery quickly divorced from any technical plausibility. This is, de facto, a canary in the coal-mine. Why? Because it assumes the position that architecture can override geo-political tensions. It rejects severe ground realities and their implications. It exaggerates the role of the architect to that of the savior of the world, so much so that one begins to question its seriousness. Noble as the intentions may be, the project bases itself in highly a contested territory, that finds its roots in geo-politics, religious-conflict and mass-psychology. As it dwells uncompromisingly in obscure meanings, ambitious forms and utopian dreams, the immediate actuality is forgotten. A vicious cycle begins, wherein, the jurisdiction of the architect is encroached into by other disciplines - political agency, social activism or financial investment. The discipline loses credibility. As a rebound, the despairing architect takes to intoxication through even more fantastical visions, never to be realized, never to be taken seriously.

Today, Architecture is caught in a "green dream" - we believe that we can rectify the

faulty development patterns of the previous century, and deliver a "sustainable" future. Proposals of green buildings, futuristic eco-cities, and vertical farms, promise to redeem the sinful past. 2016 marks the completion of Bjarke Ingels' Via 57 West in New York, a luxury-apartment pyramid enfolding a garden, and Jean Nouvel's Louvre Abu Dhabi, a complex shielded from the harsh climate by an enormous white dome^[5] No doubt, these are great ideas. But, despite the rhetoric, one can see how the architectural landscape is becoming more about proposing technologically controlled resolutions and declaring the problem solved, rather than acknowledging deeper discontents, ones that reside far beyond the realm of architecture. Now, "green" is no new idea - Plato's Republic, Ancient Romans, Ebenezer Howard's Garden City, Frank Lloyd Wright's Broad-acre City, and Paolo Soleri's Acrosanti. These projects are, then, really only mimicking the "blue-sky dreams from the Dr. Strangelove era - where every space colony contained a domed conservatory, and keeping the plants in the greenhouse alive is all that stands between humans and disaster".^[5]

"Our planet today, is like an old person with Alzheimer's; it has its good days and its bad days, but on the whole the progress of the disease seems slow but relentless, and the prognosis does not look good."^[5] The real problem is of city infrastructure - that which is hidden, which has been neglected too long in the hope that it will somehow vanish, a consequence of decades of unhealthy behavior - now, possibly, beyond repair. It is of sensibility in design. It is of responsive spaces. It is very much within our expertise. And it is here that we can do our part, intervene and proliferate change.

We are everywhere and we are nowhere. We live in your houses and travel on your streets. We work in your firms and go to your schools. We consume what we want, discard as we like. The time has come. A new force is emerging. Defeatism will be the dawn of a new hopeless era. Say we're wrong or call us names, but that will not change the situation. We create our own reality - that belongs to an ultimate depth-defying defeat.^[6] We shed our names and relinquish the title of propagandists. We are simple student architects who refuse to be blind, who refuse to propose hollow promises or accept uncritical thought. Architecture cannot save the world! But, perhaps, this realization might just get us one step closer!..