

# **A Critical View**

**Five years  
of Future Architecture platform**



**Interview with Matevž Čelik**  
**By Sophie Lovell**

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Reflection

“Architects should figure out what the real problems of today are and then they should understand that almost no problem can be solved by architecture alone.”

**When it launched its first open call in 2015, the Future Architecture (FA) platform brought together 14 institutions and dozens of young practitioners from across Europe for the first time, in order to facilitate exchange, raise awareness and build commitment within the discipline. The platform has since grown in scope and ambition, while developing an ever-increasing network of new collaborators across the globe. Now, five years later, Sophie Lovell asks Matevž Čelik, Director of Ljubljana's Museum of Architecture and Design (MAO) and initiator and Director of the FA platform to reflect on his brainchild, whose collective mission has shifted and sharpened towards one of greater critical production with an even greater sense of urgency towards instigating change.**

At the moment, we live and work in conditions that have changed dramatically overnight. My perception of the world may be distorted at the moment, but it seems to me that the world has been intensively and rapidly becoming a less harmonious living environment over the last five years. And the pandemic that has shaken our lives is just the result of what humans have been doing with nature for decades. The years since the launch of the platform have been marked by events and tragedies leading to growing social inequality and worrying political disintegration of the world community. In parallel, we are witnessing a climate breakdown to which most countries are barely responding. Of course, all this cannot be solved with architecture, but it

Back in 2015, you founded the Future Architecture platform as a place for emerging practitioners to use their knowledge “to shape a more harmonious development of our living environment”. Do you still stand by that goal or have your priorities shifted over the past five years?

## Matevž Čelik

Matevž Čelik is an architect, writer, researcher and cultural producer in architecture and design. He is director of the Museum of Architecture and Design (MAO) in Ljubljana and is responsible for the transformation of BIO, the world's oldest design biennial, from a standard design exhibition into a live experiment exploring the potentials of design. He is also the founder and leader of Future Architecture, a pan-European platform for exchange between architectural institutions and emerging talents.

*Previous spread: Matevž Čelik at the 2020 Creative Exchange, in Ljubljana. Image: MAO*

is important for us as architects to be aware of the context in which we operate and the consequences of projects that we support with our knowledge and work. A critical view of the future of our own practice in a planetary context is the minimum we need to start with if we are to contribute to shaping a more harmonious development of our living environment. It has never been so urgent that we understand the backgrounds and implications of every project we embark on. What consequences will it have for the environment? Whom do we empower by working on a project? Does it contribute to social justice or will it further exacerbate inequalities and conflicts?

**In the very first volume of this Archifutures publication series, which accompanies the FA platform, you stated that “architecture requires continuous questioning, criticism, commitment, self-assessment and research, as well as poetic reflection.” In that sense, I understand you to see the role of the platform as a microcosm of the roles the arts and sciences serve for society: taking time to reflect, critically examine and test current practices. Do you feel the platform is succeeding in this respect? In other words: do you think the platform is holding wider society, as well as architects, to account?**

I hope the platform has opened up space and offered support to a young generation of architecture professionals and creators who base their practices on critical reflection and demand greater accountability of the profession to society. The role of the platform is to strengthen their voice and bring their ideas to the fore. The role of the platform is also to act as an aggregator for architecture and to help guide future EU policies. It does that by bringing

together powerful voices for change across Europe and beyond. Global injustice, the climate, energy and economic crises cannot be fought alone. We can only fight them together. Architects must recognise and take their share of the task in this struggle. At the outset of the platform, I also said that architecture can only be relevant if we turn the

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discussion within it towards the critical production of ideas and projects that will dictate the future. I think it is extremely important to try to make the architectural discourse more productive, to think about how our practice is developing and how architects should change their ways of working to respond to the climate emergency and to increasing



Future Architecture platform  
Creative Exchange 2020,  
Ljubljana. Image: Iztok Dimic

inequalities in the world. At one of our conferences, the philosopher, author and activist Srečko Horvat summarised this beautifully, when he said that architects have the power and responsibility to build a different future. Because if there is no future, there is no architecture.

When I started my practice fifteen years ago, I soon realised that the role of architecture in society was declining, mainly because of its passivity. It was the blind and uncritical fulfillment of any, even harmful, orders that pushed the profession into the margins. In monitoring the most notorious development pressures in Slovenia,

**Looking back, would you say that architecture as a problem-solving discipline has done enough, is doing enough? How much of a responsibility does it have to get involved in global problems and search for solutions?**

I realised how urgent it is to redirect architects to the critical production of ideas and projects that will dictate the development of architecture in the future. Of course, architecture in the past undoubtedly solved many problems. But whose problems? At whose expense? And at what cost in terms of generating new problems? Firstly, architects should figure out what the real problems of today are and then they should understand that almost no problem can be solved by architecture alone, be it the smallest house or public housing policy. Therefore, architecture must, first and foremost, understand its role and collaborate for the common good.

**Five years ago, you also stated: “We are increasingly convinced that the distinction between past, present and future is an outdated illusion.” I understand this to mean that we can no longer take a traditional, linear approach. How is this being expressed in concrete terms? Can you give examples?**

This is a sentence written by Albert Einstein on the occasion of the death of his good friend and colleague Michele Besso. I quoted it in relation to the museum and the importance of proactively questioning the mission and

role of the institution I run. When I began as Director, I was confronted with the interesting situation of running a museum that organises a biennial. An organisation that is normally considered to be a static guardian of history – our museum – was tasked with coordinating a dynamic laboratory of the future. The transformation of the Biennial of Design (BIO) was a key project and one of the biggest challenges. It is precisely the search for how to make sense of the double life of the museum and the biennial that has proved to be the main driver of thinking about the role of the modern museum. It brought us to all the important changes and new projects that have happened since – like Future Architecture. Now, after

10 years, the MAO has a broader role to play: it serves as a museum, platform and accelerator for promising professionals. I want to consolidate this role of the museum in the future and establish a culture within the MAO that will ensure the development of these various functions of the museum in the long term.

I think that today there is nothing more important than thinking about the future. But as the Director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Giovanna Borasi, noted at the 2019 Creative Exchange in Ljubljana, the future is no longer so different and distant from the present. We are

obsessed with the problems of the present, and it is very difficult to imagine a radically different future. Perhaps the reason for this is the dynamics of the new that we face on a daily basis. The context in which we live and work is changing rapidly and we need to constantly check that what we are doing is consistent with what is happening around us. Thinking about the future may, therefore, have become more down-to-earth, which perhaps also makes it more realistic. The coming generation sees architectural practice in a far broader sense than just conventional design and planning practice. For them, research, curation, publishing or advocacy for citizens are architectural production, just as much as the design of a new building. When we ask young professionals about the future of architecture in the call for ideas, their answers are projects that respond to the pressing problems of the present.

**Nevertheless, thinking about the future of architecture is the primary goal of the FA platform. In its annual Call for Ideas from young practitioners many hundreds of projects have been submitted. What are the main areas that seem to preoccupy young professionals in the field? Have you seen these priorities shift over the five years of its existence?**

And this may be the right answer to the question about the future of architecture: its first task is to discover what the real problems of today are, then act to help resolve them in order to improve life in the future.

**As we speak [May 2020], the world is in lockdown due to the COVID-19 crisis; a crisis that is threatening the very existence of all the platform member institutions, which rely on the ability of interested parties and communities to gather together in real time and space. An important mandate for the FA platform is to explore new fields in which to operate. How are the platform members responding to this crisis? Are you in close communication and sharing strategies or is each battling for survival in their own way?**

All the member institutions have been in a difficult situation since the COVID-19 crisis and some are on the verge of extinction. Two major festivals, the Copenhagen Architecture Festival and Belgrade International Architecture Week, were cancelled this year. But despite the difficult times, the mood is positive. Most of the events have been postponed to September and October and a

few will only happen online, since it is still not possible to say with certainty when travel and public gatherings will be possible again. The COVID-19 situation, however, has given us time to think and work more closely together. We meet regularly to redefine the programme. We talked intensively about how to respond to the situation. Even before the onset of the crisis, we decided that the annual programme, exhibitions, conferences and workshops of the platform would now follow a common theme. The theme we selected for the coming year is "Landscapes of Care". The discussion about having a common theme has been smouldering for a long time and has now been recognised by members as essential to the coordinated exploration and greater reach of the platform's activities.

Starting your career in such a crisis as we have now is without doubt very difficult. Even before, young architects were faced with the chasm that yawns between education and the real context in which they begin their practice. And now that gap has become even wider. Many young and very talented people are facing this void. What the platform can offer is a community, which may help these young practitioners to not feel so alone in this difficult situation.

What I would like to see grow is the number of opportunities for young professionals. The platform should be a shared system to which everyone can easily plug in with their respective architectural project. It should be a new model of collaboration within the culture of architecture. Currently, the platform still operates as a network of members and from the outside, it is seen as a foundation or charity. In general, the vision of the platform is torn between two tendencies: on the one hand, it strives to be a stable environment and facilitator with clear rules that allow easy meeting, networking and the connection of projects by members and young professionals. On the other hand, some of the members want to become an agency for solving the most pressing

**What about the young practitioners and fellows of the platform? The crisis has posed an existential threat to them as well. How can they learn from the activities of the platform to date and the current situation to forge new paths for themselves in the future?**

**When it started, the FA platform comprised 14 organisations from 12 countries. It has since grown to 26 organisations from 22 countries. Although it is an essentially European network, there is clear international interest and involvement too. Would you like to see it grow to become a global network or do you think staying “small” is a requirement for its capacity for agency? What are the dynamics between the platform members? How has that changed and grown over time?**

problems in Europe and the world. I see our job above all to function as an effective mechanism for connecting and establishing collaborations between organisations and promising professionals; to be a facilitator and supporter of all who want to become agents of change.

**What aspects of the FA platform so far are you most proud of or delight you most? Have there been unexpected results and developments since the initial concept?**

I'm happy that with Future Architecture, we've created a platform within which the coming generation of critically-minded architects can identify themselves, where they can find support and like-minded colleagues. I am pleased that participation in the platform has become one of the desirable steps in the careers of many young professionals. I am proud of our alumni, many of whom today occupy important positions in the architectural world. The platform has articulated a framework of values for future architecture that will focus on social and environmental impact. That this framework immediately garnered interest throughout Europe and beyond, fills me with optimism. The great interest in and number of projects submitted to our Open Calls each year reinforce my belief that there is a need for such an inter-institutional structure.

**Any regrets? Is there anything you wish you had done differently?**

I wish that many more emerging applicants could be involved in the activities of the platform. I would also like to make it easier for more organisations supporting young creators to join. I also hope that we will be able to develop the platform in a way that accommodates as many players as possible, in order to meet and trigger even more productive interactions. ■

