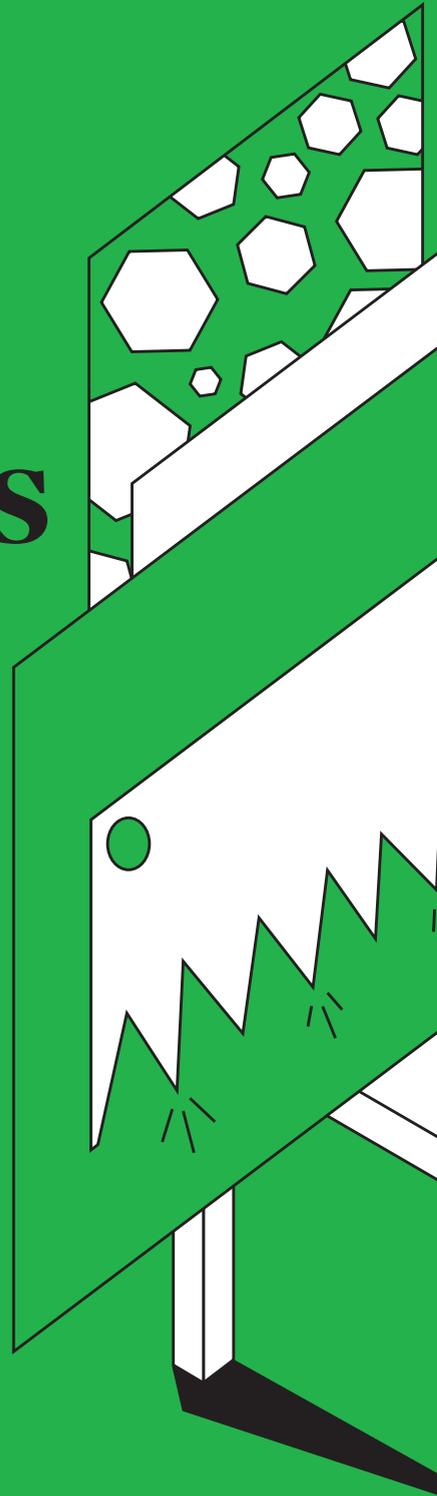


# Turning the Tables

Architecture  
after architecture





**By Marina Otero Verzier**  
**Illustrations by Janar Siniloo**

**Turning the Tables  
Architecture after architecture**

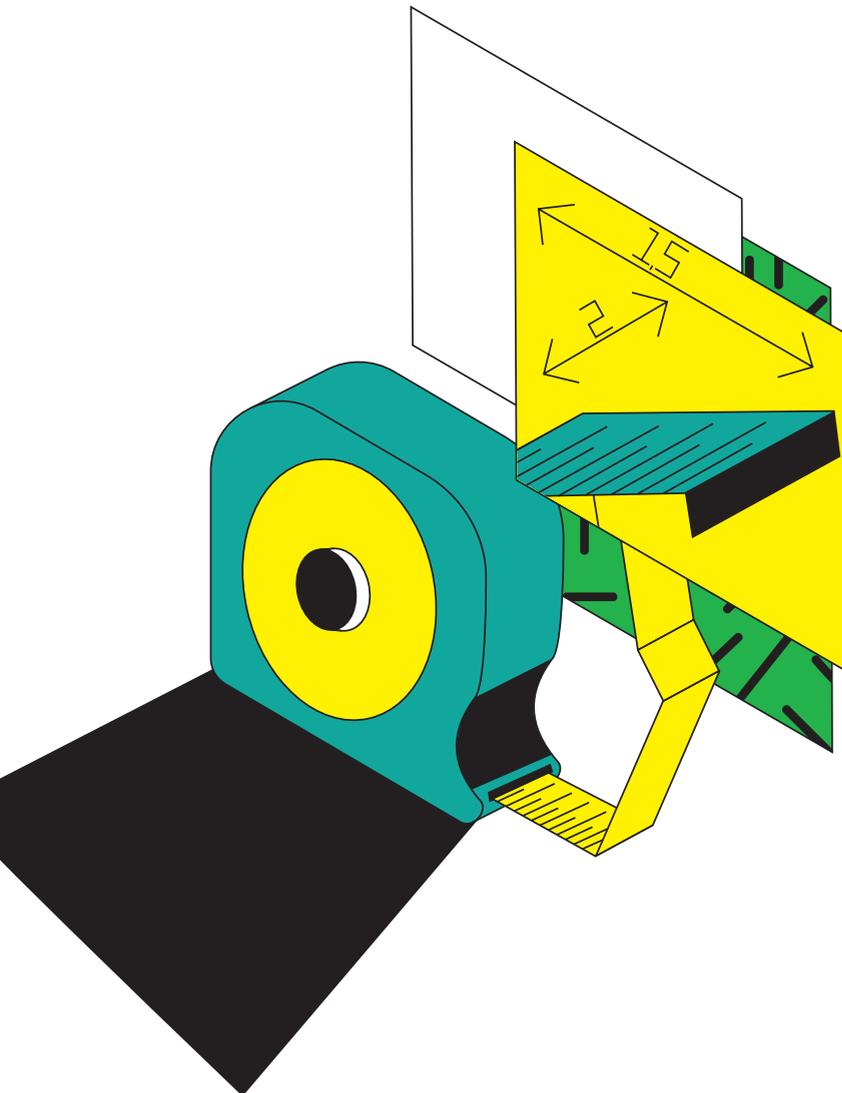
By Marina Otero Verzier

Turning the Tables

Tables (of power)

“Rather than aiming to sit at the tables we claim we are not being invited to, architects have the opportunity, and I would argue the responsibility, to render those tables obsolete.”

**Architect and curator Marina Otero Verzier questions the tables we sit at, the lines we follow and the afterlives of the structures we are building in the throes of the pandemic and climate emergency we find ourselves in. It is time, she says, for a shift in perspective and political position.**



## Marina Otero Verzier

Marina Otero Verzier is an architect based in Rotterdam, where she is Director of Research at Het Nieuwe Instituut. Previously, she was the curator of the Dutch Pavilion at the 16<sup>th</sup> Venice Architecture Biennale (2018), Chief Curator of the 2016 Oslo Architecture Triennale together with the After Belonging Agency, and director of Global Network Programming at Studio-X Columbia University GSAPP (New York). She teaches architecture at the RCA in London and from September 2020 will be Head of the Social Design Masters at Design Academy Eindhoven.

In February 2020, I was invited by the Future Architecture platform to deliver the Annual Reflection Summary at the 2020 Creative Exchange in Ljubljana. Giving my thoughts on the 433 projects submitted to this year's Open Call was an honour as well as a fantastic exercise to reflect on what the "future of architecture" might actually entail.

As I write this a few weeks later, the world has changed, and with that any futures of architecture that we had anticipated. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic governments all over the world requested of their citizens that, in order to protect themselves, they have to radically reorganise their lives. Practices of social distancing, self-isolation and quarantine have since profoundly altered conceptions of public and private spaces, reshaped existing infrastructures, and given rise to new platforms for communication and production. The world grieves the sudden and tragic loss of thousands of people, but also the lost routines and jobs, sense of security, social connections and family structures.

Yet, even if the current state of affairs seemed unimaginable, the signs that heralded them were clear and pervasive. Some of the most dramatic changes that the pandemic enforced and enhanced shouldn't be considered exceptions, but the results of larger and structural conditions. Conditions of exploitation of individual and planetary bodies; systems of racism and inequality; forms of control, surveillance and xenophobia, fuelled by increasing nationalism.

It would be unfair not to acknowledge how the response to the coronavirus has also precipitated changes that were long awaited, such as raising taxes for corporations, the unquestionable support of health systems and caretakers,

the protection of populations at risk from poverty and exclusion. Transformations which, hopefully, won't be just temporary measures but become a new paradigm for how power and wealth are redistributed.

In this context, current generations have the duty to design alternative futures and forms of existence that are not based on extractive technologies and economies. For the architectural community that entails the re-evaluation of the relationships between architecture and the structures of power that it serves, as well as the spaces in which these entanglements materialise. It also means the conception of spaces for collective organisation and to find common grounds for action. I propose to start with *tables, lines, and ruins*.

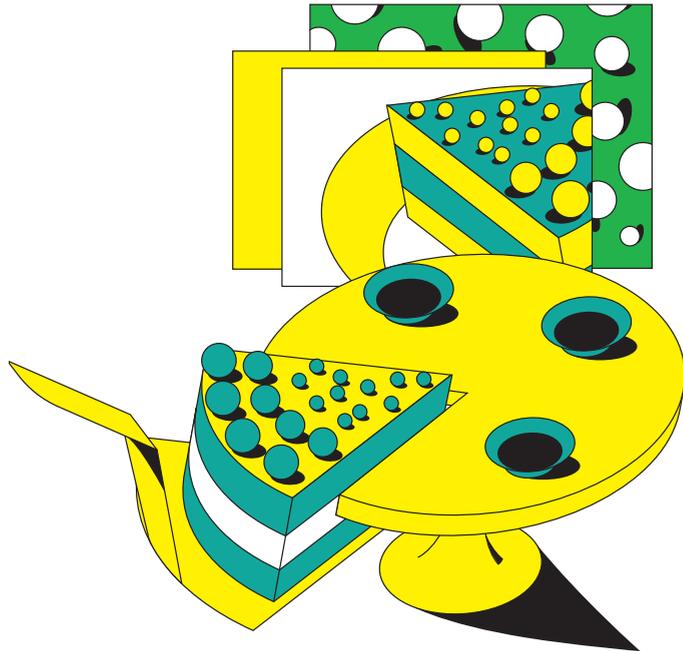
Across the call, a number of proposals exude nostalgia, a longing for having a position at *the table*. Yet, do we really want to sit at *that* table? And if so, how do we actually imagine the table we were previously seated at, and no longer are? Every time I think about it, what comes to mind is a table full of white men with cups of coffee, situated next to a window overlooking a city – a global city.

I assume that is the table where power is enacted and distributed, around which are gathered those who decide on how many luxury apartments and thin, tall and empty towers a city can handle. I might be exaggerating, but I believe *that* is the table we say we are no longer invited to. And, therefore, what does the fact that we want to be seated there actually say about us?

Even if we join that table with higher (ethical, social, environmental, political, aesthetic) ambitions, are we ready to represent all those who are not there, who are

## ***Tables***

not invited or allowed to be at the table? Are we ready to challenge the politics of the table? Or do we just want a piece of the cake that is being cut and eaten on top of it?



**“Are we ready to challenge the politics of the table? Or do we just want a piece of the cake that is being cut and eaten on top of it?”**

We are not seated at *that table*, a table that we used to aspire to, a site of encounter and a mediator between banqueters, eaters around the meal – the cake – about to be served. And yet, perhaps, the most pressing question here is not why we are not seated around *that table*, but rather *if*, as representatives of the profession and discipline of architecture, we have a table around which to be seated together; a common ground from where to stand up and strive for ethical and non-exploitative forms of practice.

Tables are important as sites for the distribution of power, resources, borders, and wealth. The table I have been referring to here is just one of many, many tables, from

the dining table of the patriarchal family structure, to that of the 1884–85 Berlin Conference for the so-called Scramble for Africa, to the more banal office meeting table where decisions are taken on a daily basis.

Tables have historically served as symbols of social and economic relations. Hannah Arendt reflected about a table in her book *The Human Condition*. “What makes mass society so difficult to bear,” she writes, “is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them”. “The weirdness of this situation,” Arendt continues, “resembles a spiritualistic seance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.”<sup>1</sup>

Do we have a table (or tables) that we do want to sit at?  
What is it that brings us together?

Karl Marx also brings into view a table. A weirdly animated wooden table. In *Das Kapital* the figure of the table is mobilised as an exemplification of commodity fetishism. Arguing that the mystical character of the commodity is not linked to its use-value, but to its exchange-value, Marx alludes to a dancing wooden table. The table serves as a demonstration of the dual nature of commodities – the dislocation between their utility as things, and their power or aura as agents of abstract value.

According to Marx, the table, as a commodity, “appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing”. However, “... as soon as it emerges as a commodity,” he continues,

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 2nd edition, 1998), 52-3.

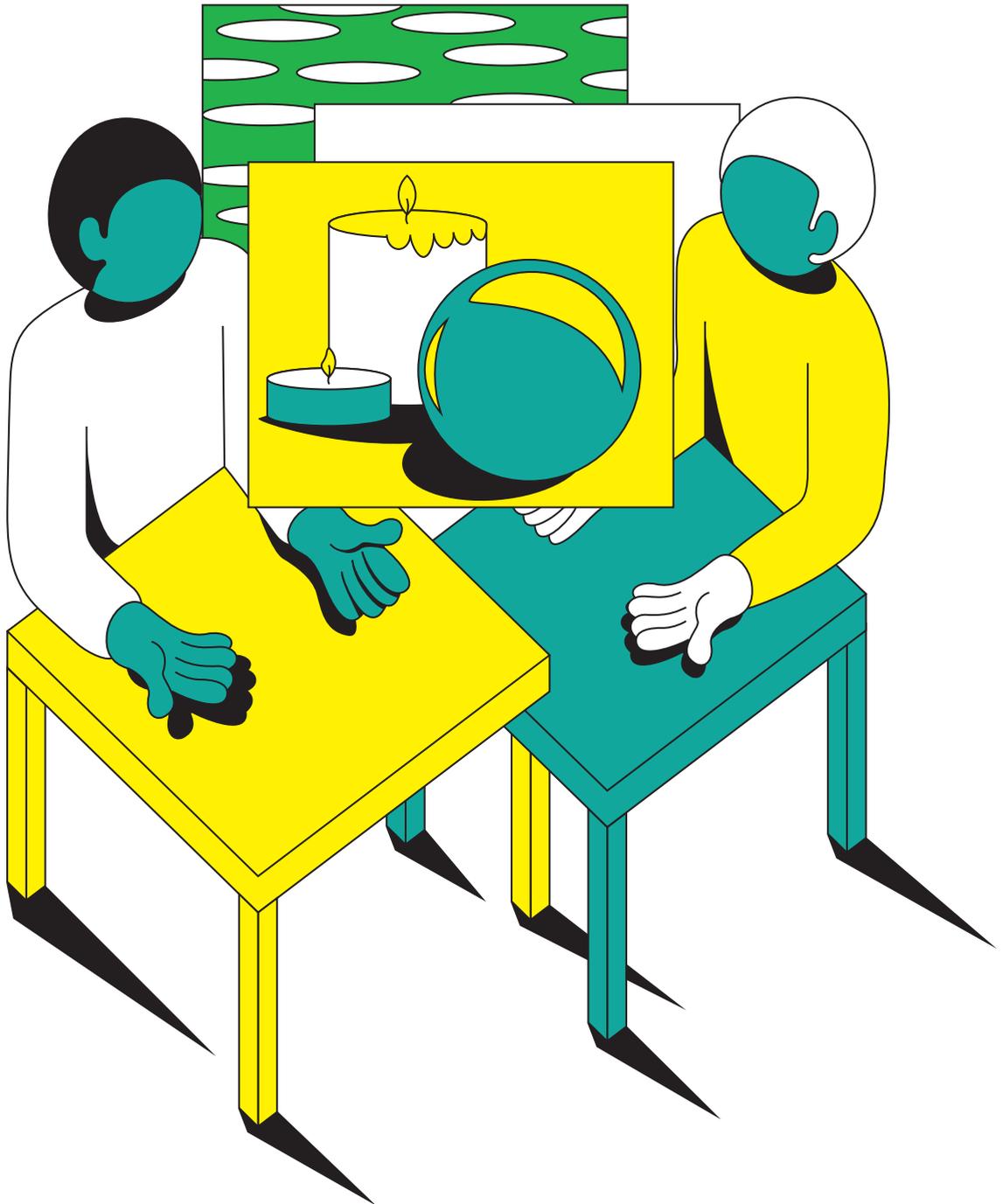
<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol 1., trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 163.

“... it not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.”<sup>2</sup>

Both Arendt and Marx’s vanishing, animated, dancing tables have a spiritual, magical nature. Not by chance, a popular interest in spiritualist table-turning had been spreading throughout Germany since the late 1840s. Marx’s formulation around that mysterious inner life of the commodity, could very well be brought here today to talk about architecture, and to its magical, mystical and ghostly qualities as a commodity. In my mental image of those men seated around a table, the table also starts dancing above their heads. What brings them together is probably nothing other than the ghostly qualities of architecture as a commodity. “Are we feeling ashamed enough by those architectures that show embarrassing sides of our culture?” asks one of the proposals.<sup>3</sup> Are we, for instance, ashamed by how architecture has been rendered a monumental repository of capital?

I did miss, in the 433 ideas submitted for the 2020 Open Call, more on housing. Rather than a people’s right, the architecture of housing has become a preferred form of investment. The contemporary house is an asset at the centre of speculative operations and neoliberal policies of urban development. Its architecture follows the cruel logic of the markets. The majority of contemporary housing projects, masterplans and policies serve to sustain forms of precarity and processes of unequal access amongst the population. Inequalities that perpetuate long-lasting forms of violence towards excluded and oppressed communities, and in which the architectural community is also complicit.

<sup>3</sup> Fabio Ciaravella, Cristina Amenta, Mimi Coviello, Clara Cibrario Assereto, “Architecture of Shame. A collective psychoanalytic session for European architecture”, Future Architecture platform, Ideas Call 2020: [futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/w/c5b96c3a-658e-4573-82b7-587c4b6c7276/](https://futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/w/c5b96c3a-658e-4573-82b7-587c4b6c7276/) (accessed April 30, 2020).



4 Goda Verikaite, "Recycling Utopia. Exploring (im)possible futures of Socialist mass housing", Future Architecture platform, Ideas Call 2020: [futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/5bdd0916-6b64-4fac-b9af-a4a04cebfca5/](https://futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/5bdd0916-6b64-4fac-b9af-a4a04cebfca5/) (accessed April 30, 2020).

In this context, some of the proposals address the "utopian promise to provide every Soviet family with its own apartment" and attempt to imagine futures for the stock of prefabricated house-machines.<sup>4</sup> Obviously, we can now have a critical view on the homogenising nature and forms of oppression embedded in these architectures. Yet, where are our current ideas for providing housing for the majority? And for bringing the majority to the table(s)?

Whereas some propose to design alternative tables, such as platforms that steer the conversation between agents in the construction and habitation processes, most architects seem to have ambiguous positions when seated at the table: aiming to be critical while wanting to be part of the same structures and systems they criticise.



Tables. We need more tables. Tables that prioritise affective dimensions, structures of solidarity or alternative forms of collectivity. Tables that encourage forms of resistance and societal demands for more horizontal structures and strategies for increased civic agency. Rather than aiming to sit at the tables we claim we are not being invited to, architects have the opportunity, and I would argue the responsibility, to render those tables obsolete. And to focus, instead, on creating new ones at which to

reorganise architectural practice and its role in reimagining societal, economic and political structures.

Tables are something that bring things together or set them apart. So do lines. The Open Call 2020 attracted a series of projects centred on lines, very long straight lines, very long arbitrary lines. Symbolic and geopolitical lines through which to treat the planet as an artefact that could be handled. Territories, time and climatic zones, products of infrastructural libido, colonial and imperial enterprises are defined by long, seamless lines. As an outcome of architectural and logistical thinking, these lines aim to alter collective life by introducing systems of order and control.

Architects have been historically trained to draw lines; sharp, abstract and assertive lines. Lines that define insides, outsides, ups and downs, lines that support and materialise differential conditions and, therefore, entire system of divisions, historical forms of exclusion, and discrimination.

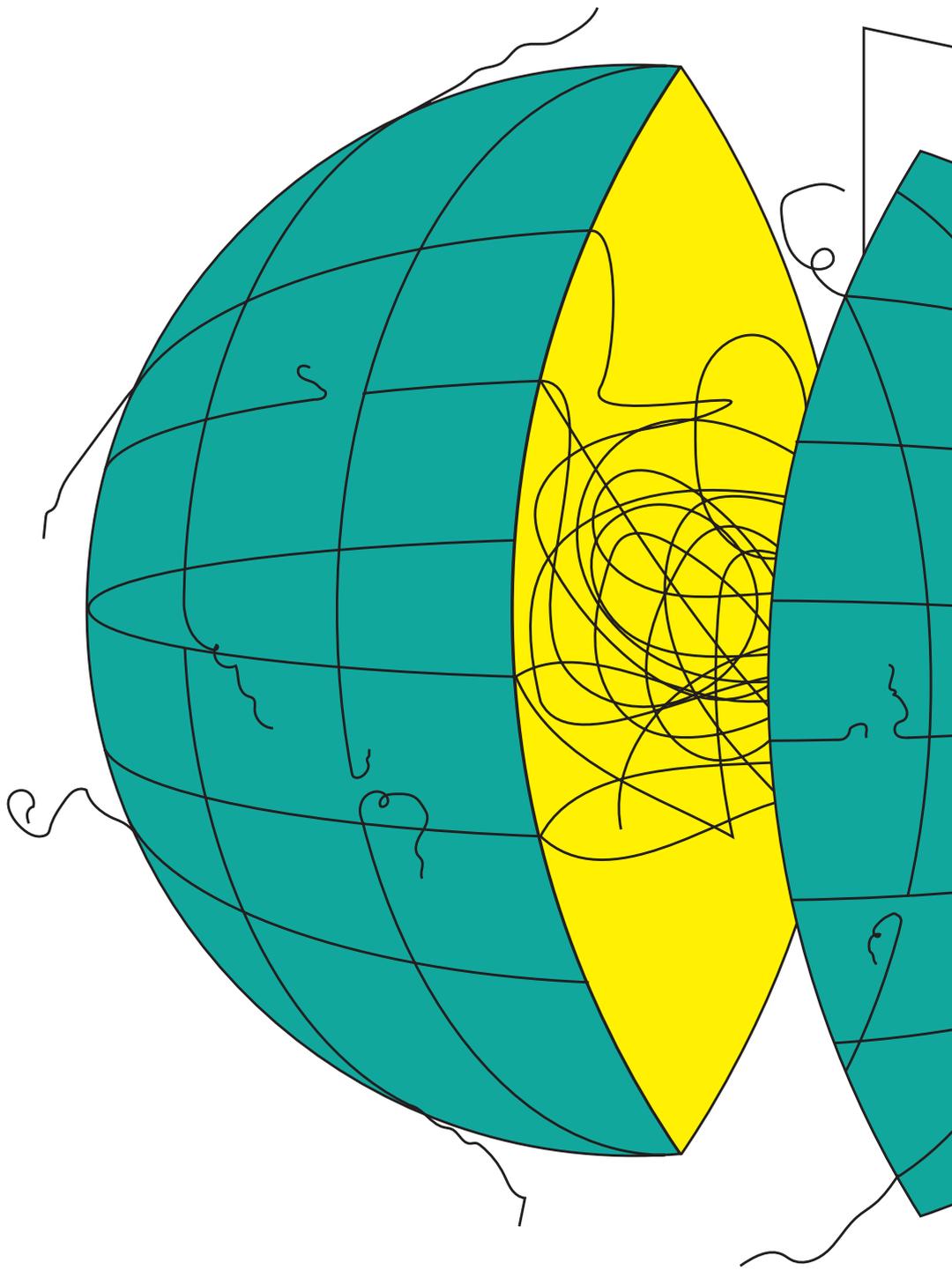
These lines are emblematic of a visual and conceptual order, one that stimulates humanity's modernist dreams for command over space and time, over territory and resources. Lines are imagined and drawn, their thicknesses and imperatives clashing with the spaces and material realities upon which they are imposed. What actually happens when these lines touch the ground? What if we follow and look closer at these lines constructing borders?<sup>5</sup> What if we walk and survey these otherwise abstract and floating lines such as parallels and meridians?<sup>6</sup>

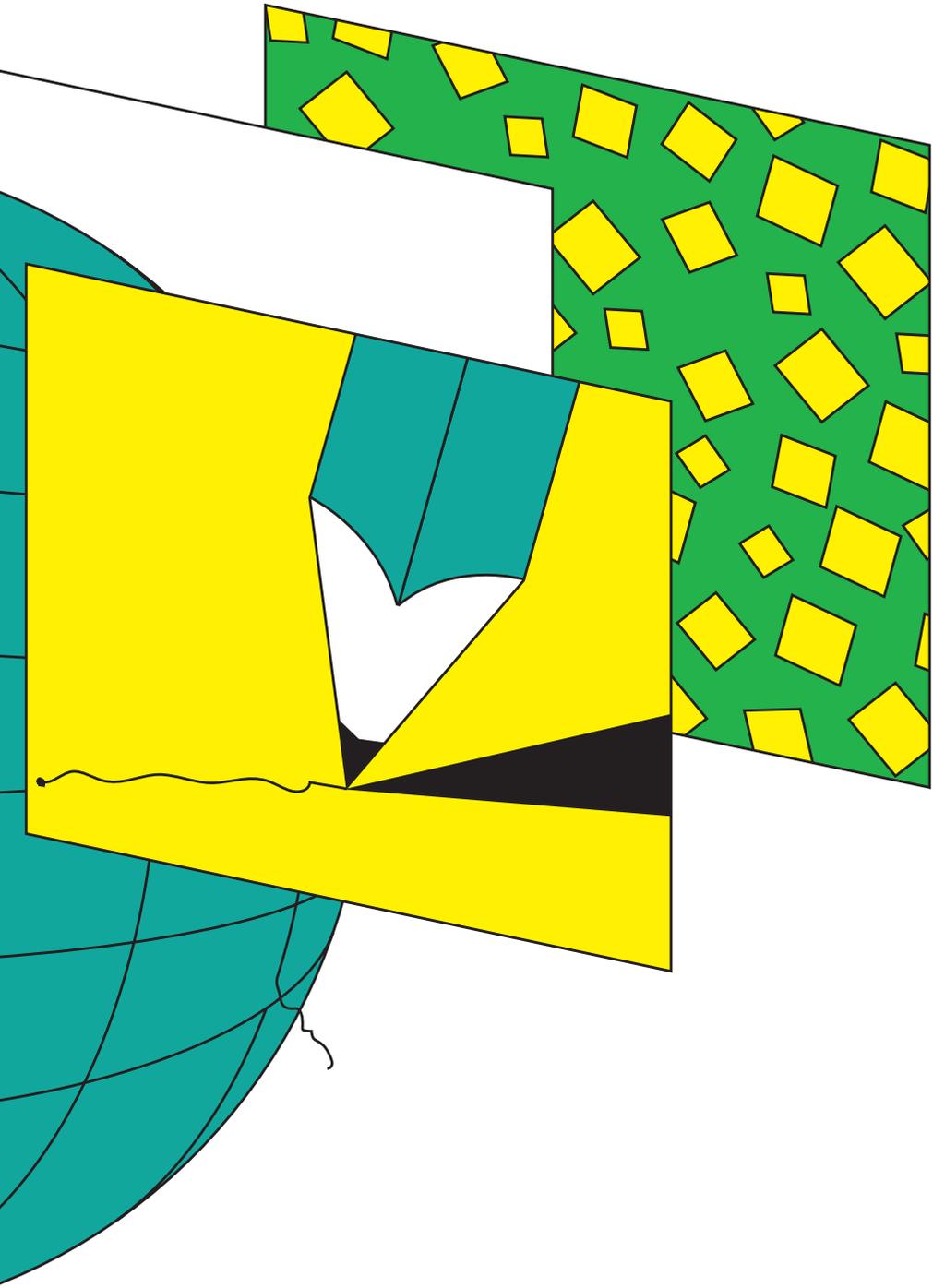
The intangible and arbitrary lines of the parallel and meridians cross through climates, geographies and borders – the crossing of which is impossible or has dramatic consequences for many hundreds of thousands today. The establishment of prime meridian time, in 1884, for instance, was central to the international division of labour and systems of spatial distribution, accumulation and exploitation

## Lines

5 Matilde Igual Capdevila and Luis Hilti, "Institute for Linear Research. Walking around the Globe", Future Architecture platform, Ideas Call 2020: [futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/eadbcd51-a83b-41a0-bd68-b50eeb242d89/](https://futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/eadbcd51-a83b-41a0-bd68-b50eeb242d89/) (accessed April 30, 2020).

6 Alkistis Thomidou & Gian Maria Socci, "35 Meridians of Radical Rituals. Along the 45° parallel from the Atlantic coast to the Black Sea, an itinerant survey on collective actions, heritage, and imaginaries that reinvent common space beyond identity and borders", Future Architecture platform, Ideas Call 2020: [futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/6e95d226-d227-4866-bda8-a7e67affee66/](https://futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/6e95d226-d227-4866-bda8-a7e67affee66/) (accessed April 30, 2020).





connected to the history of imperialism and colonialism. It has been paradigmatic of an abstract idea of time and space. The existence of a longitude  $0^\circ$  inevitably renders other territories beyond it as peripheral or in perpetual delay and latency. And if the connection with architectural practice is not self-evident, let's reflect on how the time differences have benefitted, among others, renowned Western architectural practices. By employing the services of offshore workers, such as those in so-called render farms,<sup>7</sup> architectural offices have assured a 24/7 production machine capable of responding to the demands of the market.

<sup>7</sup> See Liam Young, film description for *Renderlands* video, 2017, source: [robotlove.nl/en/liam-young/](http://robotlove.nl/en/liam-young/) (accessed April 30, 2020).



Too often, through history, architectural proposals based on straight, very long, abstract lines, frequently stand for hegemonic systems of political domination. Tools

for subjugation and exhaustive reconfiguration of the territory. Yet, as these lines engender geopolitical and social imaginations, they could also be deployed, perhaps, for the re-imagination of collective politics. And that's precisely what some of the FA ideas selected here propose. These FA ideas seem to take the lines that order and divide the world, and attempt to use them to bring the world together. That is to be celebrated and taken further.

Could we design systems that instead of striving for generalisation and homogeneity, would be able to accommodate contingency, diversity and difference? Fluid, trans, queer and non-binary lines instead of straight ones. Could we also aim to blur certain lines that divide the world in "we(s)" and "other(s)", distinctions such as those that differentiate between humans and non-humans, allowing for the exploitation of those recognised as the latter.

As lines are broken, twisted, bent, or erased, the spaces and structures they sustain turn into hollow remains of the Cartesian logic that they enact, and that we are set to transcend.

"We live in an age of ruins", claims Urbanaarchitettura, "the ruins of the welfare state in its various ideological and geopolitical embodiments."<sup>8</sup> Yet, it is "precisely in the ruin of an institution lies the prospect of a de-institutionalised idea of collectivity."<sup>9</sup>

As even the immediate future becomes increasingly uncertain, architectural practices embrace the exposure of their future ruins instead of their concealment. This position, I would argue, renders possible a form of collective agency. One that allows for the re-evaluation of the impact of the architect's work in relation to received ideas of progress.

## *Ruins*

8 Marco Moro, Paolo Pisano, Sabrina Puddu, Francesco Zuddas (Urbanaarchitettura), "Institutes of Care. Spaces of (de)institutionalized collectivity", Future Architecture platform, Ideas Call 2020: [futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/879e9c28-fd01-46b3-bb18-e8c8205d28e6/](https://futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/879e9c28-fd01-46b3-bb18-e8c8205d28e6/) (accessed April 30, 2020).

9 Ibid.

10 Jason Rhys Parry, “An Anticipatory Theory of Ruin Ecology. Building Future Ruins For Endangered Species to Thrive”, Future Architecture platform, Selected Ideas Call 2020: [futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/834007fc-a8e5-4081-a313-6dcaa3a34ce4/](http://futurearchitectureplatform.org/projects/834007fc-a8e5-4081-a313-6dcaa3a34ce4/) (accessed April 30, 2020).

11 For a reflection on what manages to thrive in the ruins we make, as well as how capitalist destruction could bring new forms of multispecies collaborations, see Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

12 See Patricia MacCormack, *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

Perhaps the pressing desire to render architecture durable has to be confronted with a more unstable paradigm.

In his project An Anticipatory Theory of Ruin Ecology, Jason Rhys Parry proposes to study buildings’ afterlives as potential future homes for nonhuman species.<sup>10</sup>

Architecture practice is, in this example, entangled with uncertainty and forms of disappearance; its ruin having generative potential in the aftermath of climate crisis and the collapse of the dream of industrial progress.<sup>11</sup>

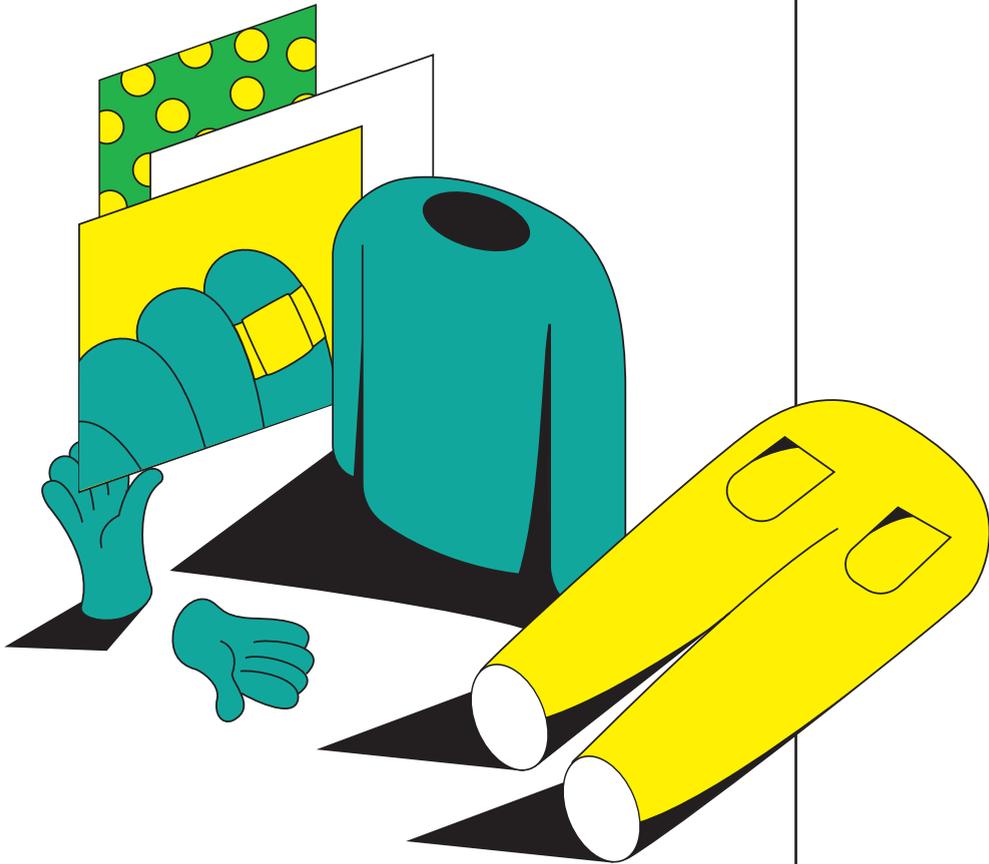
This condition enhances a productive state between emergence and decay. And it prompts, I would argue, the critical reinvention of the discipline in the face of open, uncertain futures.

Yet, this understanding of ruins and of architectural practice is situated far from the longstanding enthrallment of fascist regimes with ruins, generally exemplified by the “theory of ruin value” claimed by Adolf Hitler’s chief architect Albert Speer. Leaving behind aesthetically pleasing ruins that would defy time and oblivion, as the monuments of old, is not the main focus here. Rather, the architecture of ruins acknowledges the transience of human societies, and their ways of living. Some, like the scholar Patricia MacCormack, take it even further, arguing for human extinction as the very least we can offer as an act of love to the planet.<sup>12</sup>

I’m not making a plea for human extinction here, but instead for compassion for and acceptance of humanity’s ruins. Ruins that are, in many cases, a result of the workings of tables and lines. More than ever, these ruins, and our ruined bodies, are a testimony, carrier of stories and actions, and a call for action.

My body is a ruin. In 2015 I got Lyme disease from a tick. My recovery was lengthy, and left me, as a reminder, a

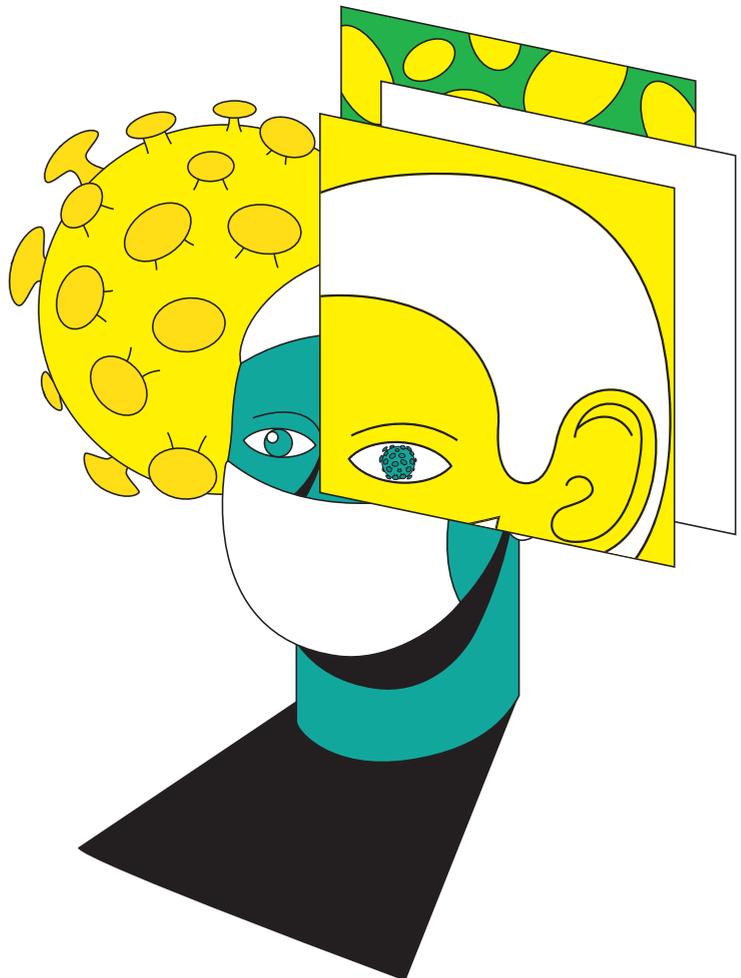
## Archifutures



tendency to fatigue. The exhaustion of my ruined body is that of the planet. One of the fastest growing zoonotic diseases, Lyme disease and its proliferation are inherently connected to patterns of urbanisation. As humans alter landscapes and replace forests with new urban developments, diseases spread from animals to humans, crossing some of the historical lines and edges of once self-contained compartments. The displacement of animals due to urbanisation and the climate crisis have dramatic effects on the spread of pathogens. Diseases ruin bodies as humans ruin the body of the planet, leaving both in a vulnerable position.

Humanity's exploitation of ecosystems is also to be blamed for the coronavirus pandemic, the effects of which are unprecedented. However, the extraordinary measures that have followed the pandemic have not yet weakened or ruined the systems of extraction, exploitation and discrimination. In fact, the pandemic could serve as an alibi to reinforce them. Some would feel the urge to restore to known formulas of leadership, responsibility and creativity. Yet, this is, I would argue, not the time for

**“The extraordinary measures that have followed the pandemic have not yet weakened or ruined the systems of extraction, exploitation and discrimination.”**



heroic architectural figures. Or masters. It is not the time for desires for domination of the landscape. It is not the time for proudly sustaining and encouraging overwork and hyperproductivity; the relentless machinery of architectural production.

Instead, it is the moment to conceive and put into practice alternative forms of collective organisation and action based on solidarity, care for the other, empathy. To challenge the Cartesian dogma, and with that the current distribution of power, wealth and resources. To de-centre the “human” – and in particular the notion of Man as a universal, rational subject – from the architectural discourse and practice and explore, instead, ideas of space, comfort and property that account for humans and non-humans, thus challenging the inevitability of unequal relations between them. To acknowledge humanity’s ruins, and the collapse of the dreams of techno-industrial progress, and see architecture’s generative potential for other lives-in-common.

The adoption of humility – vulnerability even – is a political position. Perhaps it is the best position from which to challenge the conventional tables and lines that have guided architecture and the white masculinist subject who sees the world as his own possession. ■

**“The adoption of humility – vulnerability even – is a political position.”**