

NEW BEDRAPHUS

NEW GEOGRAPHIES

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Is not love some kind of a cosmic imbalance? I was always disgusted with this notion of 'I love the world, I love the universe'. Love for me is an extreme violent act, it is not 'I love you all'. It means I pick out something and say I love you more than anything else. - S Zizek

Be it for a journal, a book or an exhibition, editing is a mode of curation, a strategic selection and a cosmic imbalance similar to Zizek's description of love. Prolonged with an original agenda or position, it is an uneasy grouping of material whose togetherness would otherwise not be visible. Regardless of the possibility to have diverse ambitions and intentions - either extracting particular commonalities from the past or the present to make them symptomatically visible or making a predefined statement to stimulate future work and discussion - an editorial project's intrinsic inclusiveness remains as equally important as its radical exclusions. The very nature of the cosmic (im)balance created between these poles (that of inclusion and exclusion) determines the particularity of any editorial or curatorial venture.

Especially for the emergence of a new publication project - like *New Geographies* - the significance of this (im)balance as well as its strategic relation to a larger agenda becomes indispensable. *New Geographies* journal has been launched very recently with the first issue numbered 'zero', and with the second titled 'After Zero'. The project started with discussions among the members of the founding

editorial board – who have been doctoral candidates at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design – around our research topics in contemporary urbanism.¹ For the emergence of the publication, two ideas have stood out as important as they each affected the editorial framework and the strategies of the publication.

The first idea has been the reconsideration of design's agency after more than two decades of seeing architecture and urbanism as the spatial manifestation of globalisation. On the one hand, we have experienced the production and popularity of design in our contemporary culture with iconic landmarks and celebrity architectures. On the other hand, designers have been increasingly compelled to address enquiries (related to infrastructure, ecology, culture, etc), which were previously confined to the domains of other disciplines. As much as seeming beyond the capacities of design, these critical questions have opened up a range of technical, formal and social repertoires for architecture and urbanism. Rather than reacting to a predefined context, with these questions design is bound – and perhaps even empowered – to redefine and shape contexts (where design decisions cannot simply be innocent extensions of externalities). Symptoms and challenges such as these might seem to trigger a quest for the need of interdisciplinary expansion in design; however at a much deeper level, of more immediate relevance is the political and formal significance of that very same empowerment. At this juncture, the journal started as a platform to prompt further discussions on design agency and the role of the designer in our contemporary society in a broader spectrum. Being unfettered by – and uninterested in – dichotomies of naive morality, totalising narratives or cynical

1. *New Geographies* founding editorial board: Gareth Doherty, Rania Ghosn, El Hadi Zajairy, Antonio Petrov, Stephen Ramos, Neyran Turan.

escapism, we have been interested in the idea of agency, a capacity in relation to new techniques and strategies as well as a faculty of acting, power and repositioning within the complex field of cultural production.

In addition to agency, the second important idea for the editorial framework of the *New Geographies* project has been the new scales of context that appear in our contemporary culture, or *the geographic*. Within the last two decades, latent theorisation of the geographic paradigm has emerged as a symptom in architecture and urbanism. With their clear and necessary replacement of postwar contextualisms and an emphasis on scale, a number of different discussions regarding landscape, infrastructure and networks produced various interpretations on the expansion of architectural or urban thinking. These are exemplified, for instance, by explorations of infrastructural/landscape urbanism, territory, infrastructure and transnational polity as well as the pervasive 'design as research/mapping' phenomenon. The impact of these explorations is visible within the design disciplines with key words such as rapid urbanisation, mapping, networks and flows, which have affected the analysis and interpretation of emergent mutations on the spatial and urban dimension. These investigations created the necessary setting – and convincing supporting evidence – for much-needed 'retroactive manifestos' of emerging urban realities; however, they have also brought a sophisticated aestheticisation or seductive exaggeration of facts, combined with an unreceptive attitude towards the abundance of that evidence.

In parallel to these developments, beyond dichotomies of merely pragmatic journalistic reporting or isolated academic enquiry detached from any architectural or urban speculation, *New Geographies* positions itself as an alternative platform for new interactions between critical stance and speculative work. By aiming to create a synthetic platform to bring various formats of rigorous work (academic research, design project

presentation, critical reflection, intellectual enquiry or any other hybrid formation) as well as incorporating various fields of enquiry (architecture, landscape, planning, geography, sociology), the journal has aspired to create discussions regarding new linkages between the social and the physical, the form and the context, the very large and the very small.

If the ambition of the first volume of *New Geographies* was to set the terms, lay out the general themes (the changing scale and role of design as well as the synthesising aspect of geography) and bring together various formats of work that share our excitement and criticality, then the second volume points to the challenges and possibilities of a 'zero point' (ie, zero-context, cities from scratch, zero-carbon) in architecture and urbanism, and focuses on the provocations regarding the future, or the After Zero. The idea of an After Zero has been crucial from the very initial stages of the publication's development for two reasons. First, it reflects our ambition to explore the future following the zero condition within the contemporary built environment and society – that is, we see zero as a starting point, as a chance to restart, rather than as a finale. In an era of environmental or economic crises, or crises regarding form and context within the design disciplines, After Zero marks the possibility of rejuvenation regarding the political and formal significance of design. Second, After Zero has acknowledged the future premise of our first *New Geographies* volume AFTER our previous volume, titled ZERO. After previous strategies of wilful reality mapping or iconic formalism, volume 1 has aimed to investigate possibilities after crises, after mapping and after signature architectures.

In his definition for the *Dictionary of Human Geography*, geographer Derek Gregory defines geography as 'earth-writing' through its Greek roots – *geo* (earth) and *graphia* (writing), articulated as writing both on and about the world. Gregory writes:

[T]he practice of making geographies ('geographing') involves both writing about (conveying, expressing or representing) the world and also writing (marking, shaping or transforming) the world. The two fold in and out of one another in an ongoing and constantly changing series of situated practices, and even when attempts have been made to hold geographing still, to confine its objects and methods to a formal discipline, it has always escaped those enclosures.²

Marking a clear interest to see *the geographic* as a much broader framework for architecture and urbanism rather than merely a shift in scale, the initial two volumes of the journal have proposed the idea as a new synthetic ground in terms of its potential to link physical, political and aesthetic attributes. Furthermore, in parallel to the double signification inherent in the idea of geography – both writing *about* (representation, expression, analysis) and *on* (marking, shaping, transforming) the earth – the geographic framework was relevant for its ability to emphasise both the *analysing* and the *shaping* of the forces that constitute the built environment.

As a plausible form of 'adaptive reaction' within a post-crisis society, Anthony Giddens has a renowned preference for the attitude of radical engagement over the other possible attitudes he puts forward – pragmatic acceptance, sustained optimism or cynical pessimism.³ Similarly the idea of design agency connotes an inclusive willingness for understanding and impacting realities.

2. Derek Gregory, 'Geography', *Dictionary of Human Geography* (London: Blackwell, 2008).

3. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp 134–37.

However, agency becomes relevant to the extent that it can balance this inclusive attitude with strategic suspensions and necessary exclusions. Thus, while marking an interest to better understand wider contexts/scales and interdisciplinary juxtapositions, design agency equally connotes a strong belief in design's intrinsic specificity, as well as its power to challenge these larger aspects.

As described, geography has been a latent phenomenon in architecture and urbanism, and further explorations are needed to cultivate its potentiality in terms of understanding histories and projecting futures. The inherent potential of the geographic is explored in interesting ways in the disciplines of environmental history and political ecology. Perhaps what is needed more in the design disciplines are rigorous approaches that will go beyond exaggerated depictions of contemporary globalisation, objectified/sophisticated cartographies and fascination with seductive facts, and focus more on the kind of questions and possibilities these facts bring to the table. If the true potentiality of the *geographic* for architecture and urbanism lies in its ability to provide unconventional perspectives and ideas on the political and provisional aspects of our built environment, this enquiry evidently requires a 'radical engagement' in interdisciplinary discussions but, perhaps more importantly, it also calls for a belief in the disciplinary specificities of architecture and urbanism and a willingness to incorporate these discussions into our thinking and practice in unusual ways. In this context, editorial projects like *New Geographies* gain further significance in their capacity to push boundaries and instigate prospective lines of thinking for architecture and urbanism. These editorial projects might not 'love them all', but will certainly continue to create cosmic imbalances and activate design's potential to imagine alternative futures.