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To See the City

2012 | Past Futures, Present, Futures

Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York

This project examined the role that radical planning proposals in the maturation of a city and how these historic proposals can be reimagined for the 21st century city. Initiated in 2012 by Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York, the exhibition Past Futures, Present, Futures assembled 101 architects, artists, theorists, and designers to respond to a series of radical proposals for New York City from the past 100 years. Each commissioned designer was asked to respond to a unique proposal, creating a new visual and text-based project.

Our project was a response to the 1916 visionary plan for New York City by engineer T. Kennard Thomson. His project called for the damming and draining of the East River to create valuable new real estate for the rapidly growing New York Metropolitan Area. Our project re-imagined the proposal as a response to the outbreak of polio that terrorized the city in 1916.

Storefront for Art and Architecture is the leading gallery for experimentation and research in spatial design. Past Futures, Present, Futures presented a past and future historiography of novel ideas to open discussion about relevant actions in the city, their vectors of desire, methodologies, limits, audiences and agents. Curated by Eva Franch, the exhibition included leading contributors to the field such as: BIG (Bjarke Ingels), Snohetta and Geoff Manaugh & John Becker.
Exhibition designed by Leong Leong
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By including the exhibition *Past Futures, Present, Futures* in its thirtieth anniversary celebration, New York’s *Storefront for Art and Architecture* is marking its sustained presence in the city somewhat surreptitiously. In the show, curator Eva Franch i Gilabert along with fellows Greg Barton and Chialin Chou have smartly taken the opportunity to populate Storefront’s unique platform with over 100 historical and contemporary imagined architectural futures for the city — articulating the gallery space in general, and theirs in particular, as the appropriate amplifier for forward-thinking visionaries within the profession.

The premise is clear: the curators presented a past vision of this city’s then-future (such as Elizabeth Woods’s 1961 *Design Loitering* essay or the Pneumatic Transit System proposed by Alfred Ely Beach in 1870) to a contemporary designer who was asked to reimagine its central terms for an altered future (such as dpr-barcelona’s *Altocumulus-Data-Structure Over Manhattan* for 2035 or Snøhetta’s *Parks over Parks* for 5012 [1]). Multiply these pairings by 101, add in a growing collection of audience-generated visionary content, place everything within the powerfully affective prismatic space designed by Leong-Leong, and *Past Futures, Present, Futures* is “complete.” The physical manifestation of these projects’ representations as well as the links between them require notable effort to unravel — with QR-coded links and “Random Contextual Information” panels scattered throughout the disorienting space of densely-packed reflective blinds, staggered video screens, and background audio tracks. While the logic of each of these pieces could be described in more detail, I’d rather take this opportunity to think through the general strategies of this exhibition in its present institutional context, especially given the fact that each passer-by isn’t privy to the same explanatory walk-through by the curator that I was allowed.
As both reflection of and commentary on today’s oversaturated media landscape, “overdoing it” has become a common curatorial tactic. Past Futures, Present, Futures certainly ascribes to these methods, though it critically leverages the overwhelming nature of the large amount of “content” by further complicating access such that a definite commitment is required to negotiate even a small piece of the body of information. Though frustrating, this elusive clarity works to the exhibition’s advantage by constantly forcing participants to extrapolate whatever “conclusions” they choose. Without being directly handed an overarching explanation, every visitor’s attempt to articulate his or her own fosters the same kind of creative invention found at the heart of the included projects’ architectural optimism — even if it nevertheless reinforces the absence of their constructive realities, along with the absence of many of those realities’ intended effects.

But more broadly at Storefront, especially recently, "overdoing it" has lost some of its own — already elusive — criticality. While I appreciate the political skill required to consistently lure fundraisers, participants, and a constantly changing public in today’s New York, I haven’t appreciated the short-sighted tactics that seemingly lack any direction other than bigger audiences and more projects. Discourse for the sake of discourse doesn’t lead anywhere in particular. And from my
perspective, an only slightly modified discussion that starts firmly rooted on one side of a well-articulated argument is no less of a discussion than one that begins in more “neutral” territory. In spite of their divergent opinions, I think most of Storefront’s large audience would nonetheless agree that “fair and balanced” approaches to representation are not only impossible but also undesirable. Accordingly, a space that hosts a platitudinous chat with starchitects one evening and a hastily-organized Occupy event the next is, for me, ultimately a space that does more to distill the tenuous focus and commitment to change in our professional community than to enliven it.

Franchi Gilabert told me that her curatorial strategy here was to frustrate any easy “consumption” of the projects within the exhibition, and my experience of this frustration was indeed surprisingly thought-provoking.

In this context, Past Futures, Present, Futures somehow appropriately nods to these recent unproductive excesses while offering hope that change is coming. Franchi Gilabert told me that her curatorial strategy here was to frustrate any easy “consumption” of the projects within the exhibition, and my experience of this frustration was indeed surprisingly thought-provoking. I only hope that this is a strategy that can solidify, basing outreach on well-developed, progressive content, and not simply on thirty years of rich history and a full schedule. These are frustrations I have with many cultural institutions, but Storefront, to its credit, holds a special place in New York’s architectural heart. Thinking about the city’s and the profession’s past futures and present futures through this lens, I’m cautiously optimistic that the most important projects will be given prominence, and that the conversation might find a path forward instead of staying hidden behind its own reflective blinders.

Notes:

1. The examples chosen here were not explicit pairings themselves, but rather were chosen to represent the variety of themes and historical moments addressed broadly within the exhibition. The curators left the specific links between each “past future” and “present future” in the background, and I’ve chosen to treat them similarly.
1. Past Futures, Present, Futures, Domus, Jacob Moore
   https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2013/01/10/past-futures-present-futures.html

2. ‘Past Futures, Present, Futures’ Exhibition, archdaily
   http://www.archdaily.com/270057/past-futures-present-futures-exhibition/

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Past Futures, Present, Futures
Storefront for Art and Architecture
97 Kenmare Street, New York