The utopian desire, the image-ability of possible futures, and the poetics of new social forms and expressions are in a moment of directed experimentation. This research explores whether art and architecture, beyond the production of new forms of capital or building solutions, have the power to re-imagine new forms of collective aspiration.

*Formica Redux* creates an alternative vision for the present and future of the New York re-enacting a utopian project from the city’s architectural past. It explores the potential of replicas in architectural production embracing the double meaning that the word bears in Romance languages—both a literal copy and an answer to previous statements. *Formica Redux* both appropriated an existing design and used it to make a statement.

Its value has been attested by its inclusion in the exhibition, *Past Futures, Present, Futures*, (October 6, 2012 - January 12, 2013), curated by Eva Franch at Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York. The exhibition presented 101 unrealized proposals for New York City, dating from its formation to today with 101 re-enactments by invited artists, architects, writers and policy-makers to create alternative visions for the present and future of the city. With the belief that art and architecture, beyond the production of new forms of capital or building solutions, has the power to re-imagine new forms of collective aspiration, the exhibition presented a past and future historiography of novel ideas in New York to open discussion about relevant actions in the city, their vectors of desire, methodologies, limits, audiences and agents.
3. On October 27th, the Metro North and Long Island Rail suspend service beginning 7 PM, dramatically reducing the suburban attendance to the weekend events. On October 28, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo declares a state of emergency and orders the closing of all public transportation to eke's local population unveiling 1970s-autonomous architecture's reliance in infrastructural networks.

4. On October 29th, Mayor Michael Bloomberg orders mandatory evacuations for Zone A, which comprises older portions of the Lower Manhattan. Some of the inhabitants resist the evacuation, calming their right to its own building. The mayor responds cutting electricity and other basic services. The effectiveness of such measures remains unclear when that same day YouTube videos depict parties going on in the dark. Events do not require visible architecture.
5. On October 30th the morning lights unveil a landscape of Formica fragments floating on a flooded city. EFE has been wiped out and few wet ruins remain, illustrating the limited resistance of 1970s architecture to menaces coming from the air.

6. Few complete panels float back from New York to New Jersey. In the recent past discussions around Formica have move back and forth between architectural educational institutions in both states, yet actual material fragments were never part of such interchanges. The future of EFE in the interior of the suburbs remains uncertain.
7. The remaining citizens of Efe wonder around down town Manhattan, disoriented. No traffic lights guide their movements, no vendors to offer grande skim-soy-caramel-macchiato, no place to hide. The surviving fragments of a formica utopia only evidence its relentless absence. As theme-parks have already proved, the hiper-signification of fake materials intensifies nostalgia.

8. The night arrives on October 30th as darkness begins. Three nights in a row, event, parties, openings, performances, and concerts will be planned minutes in advance and barely announced. Listings are not accessible in the black out area, since phone and internet service is down. Candles and noises guide the citizens of Efe, homeless, blinded, drifting through architecture of the weather.
9. THREE DAYS LATER, DURING A MEETING IN WHICH ARCHITECTS DISCUSS THE POTENTIALITY OF DARKNESS, THE PERIOD OF EXCEPTIONS ENDS. TRAFFIC LIGHTS COME BACK TO LIVE FOLLOWED BY TVS AND LAMPOSTS.

10. AREAS OF QUEENS AND BROOKLYN REMAIN IN THE DARK, TOO FAR AWAY FROM MANHATTAN, WHERE THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE EFE(R) BEGINS.
Obsessed with a material that, according to commercial brochures, replicated any existing material while improving its technical performance, Kee Ness & Soui Yho shaped for three years, in architectural terms, Formica's omnivorous appetite for color and texture. The result, named Endless Formica Eventiment (EFE), was an empty ever-growing warehouse built with identical prefabricated panels finished in Formica (if ever completed the building was meant to include 982.056.960 panels, as many as combinations of colors and textures commercially available) and located in downtown Manhattan yet populated by visitors from New Jersey. Behind the pattern of colorful strips an endless metropolitan events entertained the suburban masses. Users enjoyed but also played a key role in the construction process. As the authors described, “after the assemblage at the port warehouses in Newark, each of the 150'-long 2'-wide Formica panels (maximum dimension of a continuous strip of Formica) accommodated thirty partygoers in their way to Manhattan, where the temporary boat became part of a construction that housed never-ending metropolitan events, while growing with each new arrival of visitors and material.” Embracing Formica's superficiality and abstraction, Kee Ness & Soui Yho designed the architectural equivalent of Borges' Library of Babel. Their building contained every material combination and programmatic transgression of every building in the history of architecture: An empty Formica shed.

Initially conceived as a series of collages first published in March of 1973 in Casabela 374, the EFE project expanded to include plans, sections, assembly manuals and construction details. In 1975 L’autre AMC publish a hand-drawn storyboard for an EFE movie that was never completed. A second version of the storyboard, featuring the original collages and diagrams, inserted in the Catalan magazine CAU in 1976 remains the most complete documentation of the project.

URTZI GRAU
CRISTINA GOBERNA
(FAKE INDUSTRIES
ARCHITECTURAL
AGONISM)

Formica Redux

Exhibition designed by Leong Leong
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.

Franch i 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. Franch i 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. 

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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.