

**URTZI GRAU, CRISTINA GOBERNA
(FAKE INDUSTRIES
ARCHITECTURAL AGONISM)**

Formica Redux

2012 | *Past Futures, Present, Futures,*
Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York

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 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.

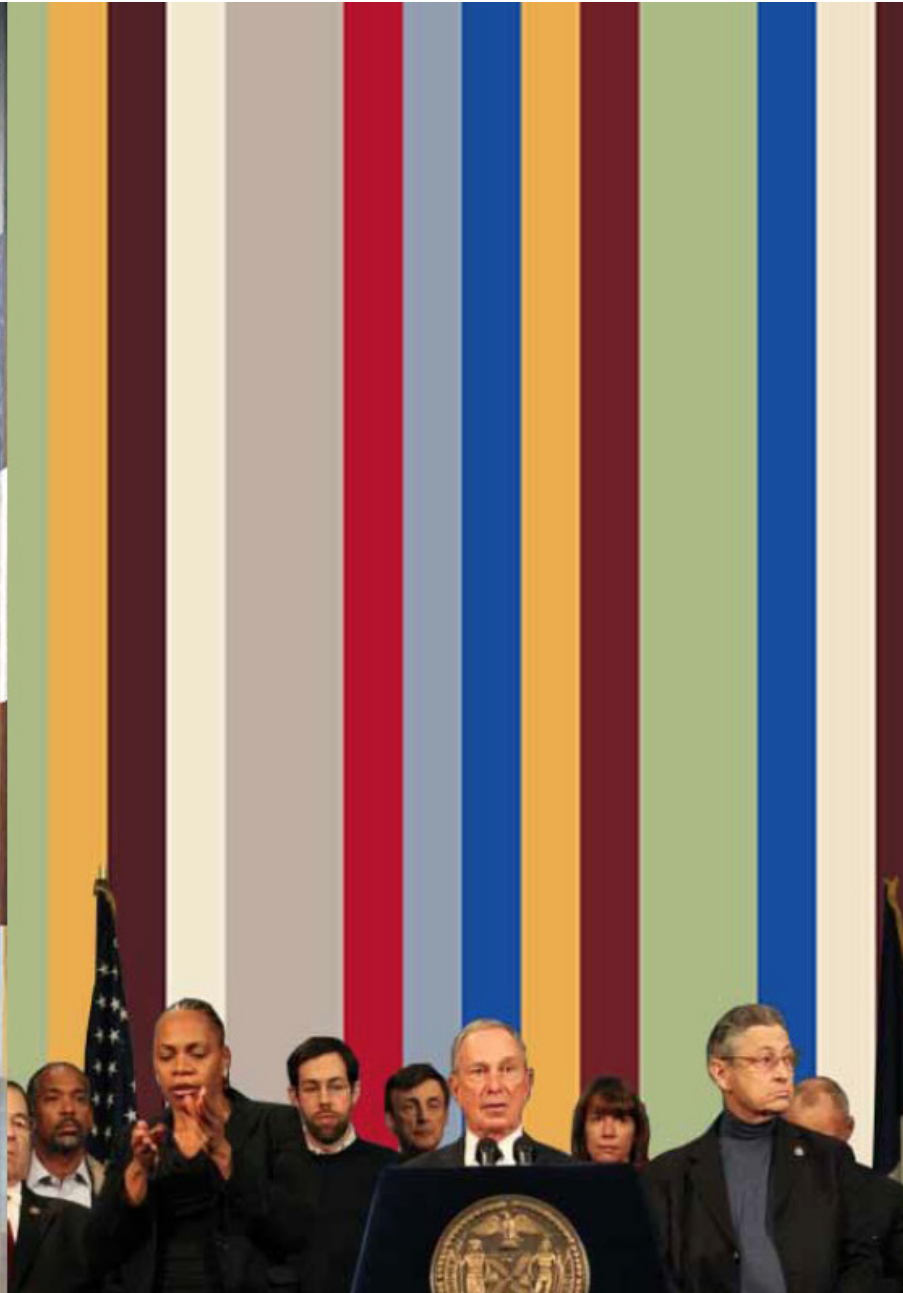
Its value has been attested by its inclusion in the exhibition, *Past Futures, Present, Futures*, (October 6, 2012 - January 12, 2013), curated by Eva Franch at Storefront for Art And Architecture, New York. The exhibition presented 101 unrealized proposals for New York City, dating from its formation 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.

Formica Redux
by FAKE INDUSTRIES ARCHITECTURAL AGONISM

1. ON OCTOBER 22ND, 2012, A TROPICAL WAVE IN THE WESTERN CARIBBEAN SEA BECOMES A HURRICANE. FOLLOWING THE TRADITION OF IDENTIFYING DESTRUCTIVE STORMS WITH FEMALE NAMES IT IS GRACIOUSLY NAMED SANDY, ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR NAMES IN THE YEAR OF EFE’S INCEPTION, 1973.

2. AFTER 29 YEARS OF EFE’S INTERRUPTED GROW, 2,788,425 PANELS COVER 64 ACRES AND 585 SQUARE FEET, 43.48% OF MANHATTAN’S LAND AREA. 8,365,275 COMMUTERS HAVE MOVE TO HUMONGOUS FORMICA WAREHOUSE. THE INCREASING NEED FOR NEW EVENTS HAS RENDERED USELESS THE CENTRALIZED LISTING. SEVERAL PUBLICATIONS, TWITTER, EMAIL LISTS, FACEBOOK, SPECIALIZED WEBSITES HAVE TAKEN OVER. MANHATTAN BELONGS TO SUBURBIA.

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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 EFE'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 EFE IN 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.

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5.



6.

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.



8.

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.

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9.



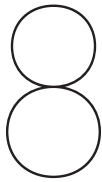
10.

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 LAMPPOSTS.

10. AREAS OF QUEENS AND
BROOKLYN REMAIN IN THE
DARK, TOO FAR AWAY FROM
MANHATTAN, WHERE THE
RECONSTRUCTION OF THE
EFE(R) BEGINS.

Weblinks:

Past Futures, Present, Futures,
<http://storefrontnews.org/programming/events?c=489&preview=true>



EFE - END- LESS (FORMICA) EVENT MAN

Date 1973/76
Author: KEE NESS & SOUI YHO

Partial context, 1973/76

New York
Inhabitants
7,648,000

Mayor-Party
JOHN V. LINDSAY (DEMOCRAT/
LIBERAL)

Western Anglosaxon Culture
New Terms / Neologisms

WATERGATE
Obsolete Terms
THE AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC AS-
SOCIATION REMOVES HOMOSEXUAL-
ITY FROM ITS DSM-II

Literature
THOMAS PINCHON — GRAVITY'S
RAINBOW

Music
PINK FLOYD RELEASES THE DARK
SIDE OF THE MOON

Film
BRUCE LEE DIES

Art
THE AUSTRIAN EXHIBITION:
GROUP EXHIBITION, ICA, LONDON

Architecture
GLOBAL TOOLS FOUNDING MEET-
ING, MILAN

Design
SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE OPENS

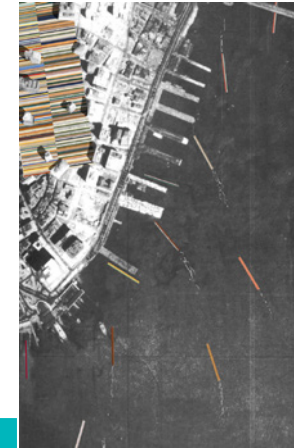
Technology
PROJECT CYBERSYN CHILE

Medicine
ROE VS. WADE STRIKES DOWN
EXISTING STATE ANTI-ABORTION
LAWS

Random
U.S. PULLS OUT OF VIETNAM

(New York, 1976)

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 enjoy but also played a key role in the construction process. As the authors described, "[a]fter 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.



EFE - ENDLESS (FORMICA) EVENTIMENT, 1973/76

Initially conceived as a series of collages first published in March of 1973 in Casabela 374, the EFE project expanded to include plans, sections, assemblage manuals and construction details. In 1975 L'autre AMC publish a hand-drawn storyboard for a 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.

Paul E. Rupert, the Agonistic Adventures of Kee Ness Soui Yho Unpublished dissertation.

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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.

Supporting Evidence

Past Futures, Present, Futures, Domus, Jacob Moore
<https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2013/01/10/past-futures-present-futures.html>

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Past Futures, Present, Futures installation view at Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York. Photo courtesy of Cameron Blaylock

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.



Past Futures, Present, Futures installation view at Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York. Photo courtesy of Cameron Blaylock

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

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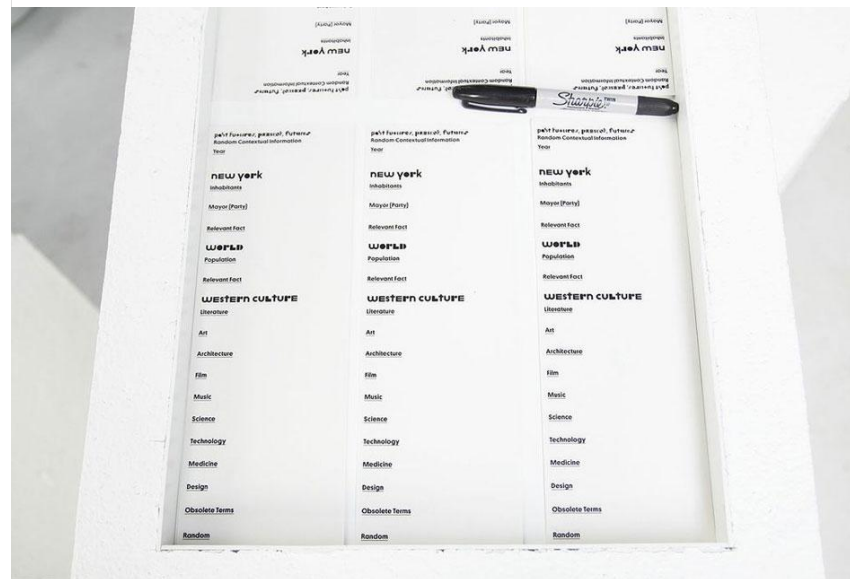
perspective, an only slightly modified discussion that starts firmly rooted on one side of a well-articulated argument is no less of a discussion than one that begins in more "neutral" territory. In spite of their divergent opinions, I think most of Storefront's large audience would nonetheless agree 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



Past Futures, Present, Futures installation view at Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York. Photo courtesy of Cameron Blaylock

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. *Jacob Moore (@jacobrmooore) is a New York-based critic and editor whose experience in international development informs his perspective on architecture's power to affect substantive change at many scales.*



Past Futures, Present, Futures installation view at Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York. Photo courtesy of Cameron Blaylock

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.