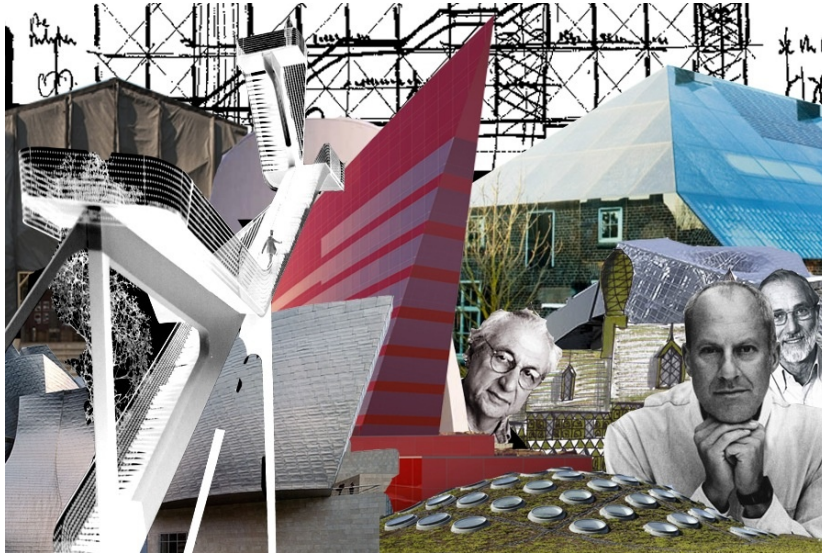


STUFF

THE FUTURE OF ARCHITECTURE

VICE FUTURE WEEK

By Eddie Blake



Some people seemed surprised when Bowie produced a top ten hit at the age of 66, but no one bats an eyelid at the 75-year-old Renzo Piano penning the Shard. **Oscar Niemeyer**, who died last year, was still churning out drawings at the age of 104. Can you imagine if Cliff Richard, Acker Bill and The Osmonds dominated the whole of this week's top ten? Architects, like a trans-dimensional alien race, live at a different rate.

There are good reasons why architects are old – mostly that people are idiots well into their early twenties. Buildings are the most expensive things we have contact with in day-to-day life, so we leave them in the hands of trustworthy people. And trust is built over time. After all, Piano was voted by *TIME* as one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 1996, but last year he changed the entire London skyline.

There's a problem with all this. There's a huge difference between being structurally competent and responding to the nuanced needs of a society. How can we let geriatrics design the future? There is a creeping conservatism in old age, Rogers and Piano's Pompidou was genuinely revolutionary, but that was in 1977, ever since then they've been riffing off the same ideas, with decreasing vitality. The architects that most of the general public could name were born before the atom bomb, before misogyny and racism went out of fashion. They are past retirement age and yet they march on, pulling out the same ideas over and over again, while the planet fawns obsequiously at their feet.

There are a limited number of buildings to build, and so the stranglehold that septuagenarians and octogenarians have on design means that no-one under 30 gets to build a building. Forty-year-old architects are hailed as bright young up-and-comers. *Architects Journal* herald the youth of the next generation by printing "40 under 40". It's all pretty infantilising.

Like Pavement said: *"Architecture students are like virgins / with an itch they cannot scratch / Never build a building till you're 50 / what kind of life is that?"*

What I'm not saying is that old architects make old looking buildings – the Shard is crazily futuristic; but unfortunately it's a future that was dreamt of in the 1970s. As thrusting and strident as the Shard may be, it is the product of a geriatric mind. If we let the AOC (**Agents of Change**, average age 35) design the future, it might feel like we're going somewhere (somewhere good).

Because I'm so helpful, I'd like to show you how to reject the father figure and move on. I've written a list – no, not a kill list; a list of people who are holding us all up. Like a colonic blockage. Note they are all men and all but two are over 70. So, in no particular order:

Renzo Piano (born 1937)
Norman Foster (born 1935)
Frank Gehry (born 1929)
Cesar Pelli (born 1926)
Richard Rogers (born 1933)
Tony Fretton (born 1945)
Peter Eisenman (born 1932)
Wolf D. Prix (born 1942)
Terry Farrell (born 1938)
Daniel Libeskind (born 1946)

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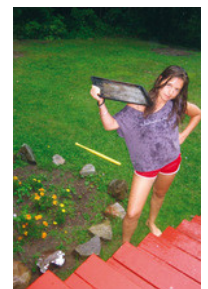


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Frank Gehry designed this, but you probably knew that

Last year, Wolf D. Prix of **Coop Himmelb(l)au** had the audacity to attack the Venice Architecture Biennale (the most important show in architecture). He claimed it was no longer about lively discussion and criticism of topics in contemporary culture. It was instead, he said, just another forum for awarding celebrity. The thing is, he's a celebrity architect. One whose ideas have stymied in the last two decades. But nevertheless, he's not wrong.

"Keep them alive... keep them fallible. Perhaps heavily sedated, chained to their drawing board where we can keep an eye on them." This was the solution to the problem put forward by **Sam Jacob** of **FAT (Fashion Architecture Taste)**. And there are some merits to such an idea. Not only would we be able to torture them, mocking their ego led, dogmatic, masturbatory design, but we could undermine them, argue with them and point out their failures. We could enjoy the discourse we have never yet been allowed.

Their legacy will be long and hard to follow and their egos crush many coming up behind them, but there are people on the horizon who might just be able to sort this all out. They have had to reject, reform and reposition architecture, and although they are in their thirties and forties, they have made a sharp break with the generation before. They represent the future of architecture.

We're talking about **FAT**, **AOC**, **HAT Projects** and **Muf** (yes, they sound stupid to you, but rappers' names sound stupid to architects, so shut up). There are also those in their mid-twenties: **Assemble**, **Studio Weave** (who I sometimes work with) and **Aberrant**, all of whom are taking architecture in different directions. Like most facets of contemporary culture, the emerging architecture won't arrive in a uniform mass, it'll be made of multiple micro scenes. You'll notice none of these practices are named after a person, they all design co-operatively, and they all do different things and have different approaches.



The FAT "A House For Essex"

All these groups tend to build temporary structures, things a bollock-faced PR man has deemed we all call "pop-ups", whose lives are short, but leave an impression. They are indicative of a certain depressing gyre of late capitalism. It's not their choice but it's the only work that's available. Maria Smith of Studio Weave has said we are the "*Challenge Anneka* generation", inspired by the 1990s TV series in which Anneka Rice performed seemingly impossible tasks in implausibly short periods of time. But this begs the question – who the fuck are we doing all this running about for? Perhaps soon enough this generation will be designing the really big things.



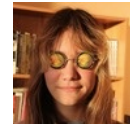
Our favorite bits of our favorite country (USA).



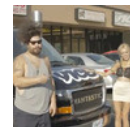
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So what will the architecture of the future look like? Well, technological advances will inevitably affect the way architecture looks, but technological progress does not have a direct relationship with societal progress, and it's societal change which most deeply impacts architectural form. There will be an eventual shift away from relentless steel and glass (basically Victorian technology) towards new materials. But the way things are made will be the biggest technological change. The first 3D printed house is **being designed** by the Dutch Universe Architects; they say it will be ready in 18 months. This will be the first of many, meaning a shorter distance between ideas and eventual physical building. Which in some ways will be good, but it will lead to a tendency to emphasise shape, rather than object or function. Better technology does not equal better architecture.

The medium of design always influences the final product, from pen and ink, through photography to film and 3D animation. So one way of guessing what the future of architecture looks like is looking at the tools architects are starting to design with. 3D scanners, 3D printers, laser-cutters, 3D computer screens... When I worked the night shift at the laser-cutters (a place that fabricates architectural components from computer files), I suppose I had a Ballardian glimpse of the custom computer fabricated future of architecture. But these machines were only ever as promising as the architect behind it.



MVRDV's Glass Farm, Amsterdam

What excites me about the younger crop of architects is their emphasis on the evolution of a building, rather than how it looks as a finished piece. We all know that buildings grow and take on different guises over time, changing to fit circumstances. Architects have to recognise the contingent factors involved in the production of space. The Shard is dazzling, but its edifice overshadows visionary dreams of incrementally making cities better places to live. Daisy Froud (AOC) says, "I have no issues with those particular people (the list of 10 above), and I respect much of their work. But their cultural dominance - their deification even - perpetuates a myth that architecture is something 'done' by creative individuals, with buildings heroically designed by a single great thinker. Rather than what is nearer the truth, that they haphazardly evolve, through a bunch of decisions and compromises and the influence of multiple voices and hands."

It is hard to point at examples of the architecture I'm looking forward to. Not least for the reasons stated above, but also because the new architecture may well be less photogenic or media friendly than the edifices of the ageing star architects. For the more sci-fi part of what the future holds we should look to a lot of the various spin-offs from **OMA** (a practice headed by **Rem Koolhaas**, an architect whose near-perfect onomatopoeic name goes unmentioned in the sobriety of the architecture world) seem to be doing architecture that may well define the future. To name a couple, there's **MVRDV's Glass Farm** in Schijndel, Amsterdam and, taking the **N64 GoldenEye** aesthetic to a mind-blowing new level, **UNStudio's Observation Tower**.

A lot of the UK architects who will define the future will cite the visionary **Cedric Price** as an influence; less sci-fi but just as weird as the above. Muf's **Barking Town Square** is uncanny; it slips under the radar and then presents you with an alternate reality. Assemble's **Theatre on the Fly** is brilliantly subdued, temporary and anti-architecture. FAT's **A House for Essex** has a seemingly egoless design, though whether that's because or in spite of the fact it was thought up collaboratively with the doyen of British contemporary art, Grayson Perry, is a matter for debate.

I'm excited that this generation use collaborative design and they find complex and evolving meaning in architecture. Architecture is a dumb medium for self-expression, but it expresses so much about the society that builds it.

For now the old guard are still running the show. But time will change that.

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Illustration by Marta Parszeniew.

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