Architecture and Freedom

Searching for agency in a changing world

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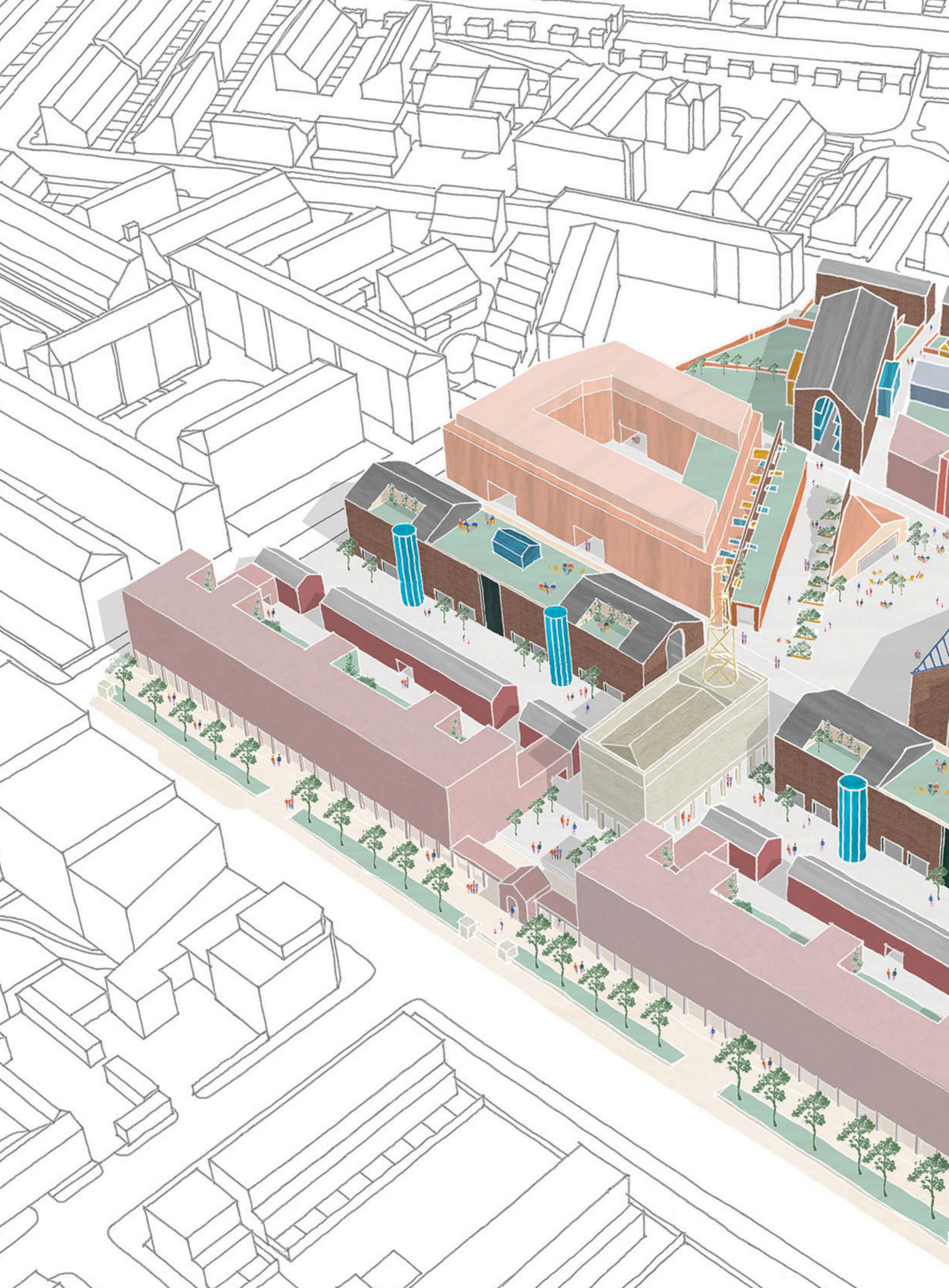
Guest-edited by
OWEN HOPKINS



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Profile No 253

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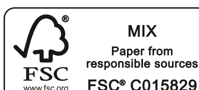

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ABOUT THE

GUEST-EDITOR

OWEN HOPKINS

Owen Hopkins is a writer, historian and curator of architecture. He is Senior Curator of Exhibitions and Education at Sir John Soane's Museum in London. Prior to that he was Architecture Programme Curator at the Royal Academy of Arts. He has a longstanding interest in the interactions between architecture, culture, politics and society, which has fed both his writing and curatorial projects, notably at the Royal Academy of Arts, where he was responsible for a number of initiatives exploring the role of architects in public and cultural life through debates about housing, urban regeneration and the notion of the 'maverick' architect, among other topics. A feature of his work is the way he tackles issues and ideas through a range of formats and media, including exhibitions, events programming, commissions and publications. The theme of this issue of AD emerged from a series of events he organised in autumn 2015.

The exhibitions and projects that he has curated include 'The Return the the Past: Postmodernism in British Architecture' (2018) and 'Adam Nathaniel Furman: The Roman Singularity' (2017), both at the Soane, and 'Origins: A Project by Ordinary Architecture' (2016), 'Urban Jigsaw' (2016), 'Mavericks: Breaking the Mould of British Architecture' (2016), 'Four Visions for the Future of Housing' (2015), '100 Buildings 100 Years: Views of British Architecture Since 1914' (2014) and 'Nicholas Hawksmoor: Architect of the Imagination' (2012), all at the Royal Academy.

He is the author of five books: *Lost Futures: The Disappearing Architecture of Post-War Britain* (RA Publications, 2017), *Mavericks: Breaking the Mould of British Architecture* (RA Publications, 2016), *From the Shadows: The Architecture and Afterlife of Nicholas Hawksmoor* (Reaktion, 2015), *Architectural Styles: A Visual Guide* (Laurence King, 2014) and *Reading Architecture: A Visual Lexicon* (Laurence King, 2012). He is also the editor of a collection of essays: *Sensing Architecture* (RA Publications, 2017).

He is a frequent contributor to the architectural and wider press, his work featuring in publications such as *The Independent*, *Dezeen*, *The Architectural Review*, *Architects' Journal*, *The Herald*, *Burlington Magazine*, *Apollo*, *RA Magazine*, *C20 Magazine*, *Spitalfields Life* and *Building Design*. He regularly sits on 'crit' panels at UK architecture schools, and has judged a number of prizes. He is a frequent lecturer and chair of events and has appeared on national TV and radio. AD

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INTRODUCTION

OWEN HOPKINS

Architecture Paradox of

Der Scutt/Poor, Swanke, Hayden & Connell, Trump Tower, 721 Fifth Avenue, New York City, 1983

No building currently symbolises the paradox of architecture and freedom more obviously than Trump Tower. Built by the property developer and latterly President of the United States – de facto 'leader of the free world' – who claims to represent the interests of the culturally and economically overlooked, Trump Tower is the epitome of ostentatious luxury and self-aggrandisement. Combining offices with 'luxury residences', including Donald Trump's own three-storey penthouse, in the words of the Trump Organisation website: 'Trump Tower is one of New York's most visited attractions since its completion in 1983', featuring a 'magnificent waterfall run[ning] through the Atrium of Trump Tower further enhancing its beauty, with Trump Bar and Trump Grill on its entrance and lower level.'

e and the Freedom

To ask nothing.
To expect nothing.
To depend on nothing.

— Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*, 1943[1]

For the Russian-American author Ayn Rand, writing in her famous novel *The Fountainhead*, freedom was about complete self-reliance. Not for her protagonist, the young, ambitious architect Howard Roark, was it enough – indeed even possible – to go with the flow and accept what he saw as the stifling historicist conventions of the architectural establishment. For Roark, his bold Modernist designs were symbols of individual defiance as he embarked on a classic struggle of rugged individualism in the face of the closed ranks of collectivist society and the systems that shape it – or so the story goes.

Since its publication in 1943, *The Fountainhead* has become an important text for libertarians and those who claim to be proponents of total individual liberty. It was even cited as an influence by the property developer turned TV personality Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election.[2] Rand's choice of architecture – or specifically the figure of the architect – for the book's motif/protagonist is a consistently intriguing one with, like the political philosophy the book espouses, many contradictions. There is the notion of the sheer force of will of the individual bringing a design into existence; the multiple obstacles therein, whether practical, financial or cultural; the way architecture is perceived as a series of styles or conventions that threaten to subsume individual creativity and innovation. While seductive, all of these ideas are, of course, fictions, or at the very least gross oversimplifications. Of all creative disciplines, architecture is in reality the least libertarian – it has always depended on collaboration, compromise and discussion – and is defined by its constraints: the limits of materials, the effects of gravity, budget, and above all that buildings are functional things. So in a sense, Rand's idea of architecture is a straw man. By the very nature of the discipline, Roark was never going to succeed in achieving complete individual liberty, even in the construction of the skyscraper as a (phallic) symbol of personal (male) achievement, which stands as supposed evidence of his final vindication in the book's closing pages.

Limits and Delimits

If a Randian individual liberty is by definition unobtainable for the architect (let alone everyone else), what of architecture itself? On the most basic level we might see architecture as inherently limiting freedom. Erecting a building or even a simple wall serves to separate and demarcate what was once freely traversable; it is a spatial imposition that physically forces us to alter our route and go around. But what if that wall stands between us and a cliff face to a deep gorge, or is keeping a dangerous animal away? Here, conversely, architecture is creating freedom for everyone: freedom from falling to our deaths or of being gored by an aggressive bull, for instance. In this sense, freedom is not an absolute, but a series of constantly shifting codependencies, which in the case of architecture is about finding a balance between those interventions that limit individual action and those that protect us all – and those that do both. To some extent this balance is present in every work of architecture, but becomes most explicit and with a clear social-political dimension in the idea of prison and of intentional confinement. In these situations, architecture is used to severely limit the freedom of an individual in order to protect the freedom of society.

Yet architecture is, of course, not always about limiting the freedom of the individual for the greater common good. It can create new freedoms for the individual. At root, every building is a shelter that frees its inhabitants from suffering the effects of cold or inclement weather. It also offers some degree of security or protection – both for ourselves and our property. While increasing the freedom of its owner/user, the erection of a building does necessarily result in a decrease in the freedom of society or of the collective: the land is no longer able to be used freely; the materials are no longer able to be used by someone else (or their purchase has reduced supply, thereby increasing the price for others); or some other kind of usually very minor, but sometimes significant, deleterious impact on the common or public realm.

Balancing Freedoms

In this way, we can see architecture as existing in the centre of a series of reciprocal relationships between the freedom of the individual and that of the collective, with the role of the architect at its most fundamental level about trying to find the appropriate balance. It can be argued that this is inherent to the practice of architecture and is consequently manifested to a greater or lesser extent in every project undertaken by architects. We can see how it plays out at various moments over history, both through individual works and collective endeavours assembled over time. The Parthenon (447–432 BC) stands as the defining symbol of ancient Athenian democracy and the foundations of Western civilisation, yet its inner sanctums, which contained the cult statue of Athena, were inaccessible to all but a few priests. In many ways it acts reciprocally with the Agora, south of the Acropolis, which was not a physical thing, but a space for Athenians to assemble, and central to public, political, spiritual and commercial life. While the Parthenon symbolised freedom through culture and civilisation, the Agora was where it played out.

For much of architectural history, the question of style was a given: there was only one way to build. In the 19th century, however, styles began competing for the historical or moral value they were perceived or made to hold. For many Gothic Revivalists the style was a cipher for the religious practices and social structures of the Middle Ages, which stood in stark contrast to the upheavals wrought by the Industrial Revolution. For the designer and social reformer William Morris, style and morality were inseparable. He argued that the designer needed to become a craftsman once more, as a way of counteracting what he saw as the damaging effects of the division of labour and of industrialised production. For him, medieval styles were the natural reflection of this position, harking back to a time when designer and craftsman were one and the same. Thus, aesthetics became allied to social reform, at the root the idea that a particular style could in some way increase the freedom of its makers and users.

Although they differed in considerable and obvious ways, the idea that architecture had the potential for driving positive social change, as proposed by Morris and other Arts and Crafts thinkers, helped paved the way for Modernist architects' aspirations for an architecture that would reflect the new conditions of modernity. For Le Corbusier, modern architecture had the capability of mitigating the social 'unrest' that modernity had brought on. If society did not embrace modern architecture, he argued, then revolution would ensue: 'It is the question of building which lies at the root of the social unrest of today: architecture or revolution.'[3] In early Soviet Russia, before the turn to Socialist Realism and historicist styles, however, architecture and revolution were one and the same: architecture became an active instrument in trying to realise the new communist social order, with architects inventing new typologies to act as 'social condensers'. While Le Corbusier, in contrast, saw

Iktinos and Callicrates,
The Parthenon,
Athens,
447-432 BC

Replacing an earlier building, which can be pieced together from fragments held in the nearby Acropolis Museum, the Parthenon proclaimed Athens's pre-eminence as the cultural centre of the Ancient Greek world. The building itself is a perfectly proportioned peripteral octastyle Doric temple, adorned with sculptures of a then unprecedented naturalism and vigour. With the whole scheme overseen by the great sculptor Phidias, the Parthenon stands as the perfect union of sculpture and architecture – the cultural emblem of Athenian democracy and the foundations of Western civilisation.

Ancient Agora,
Athens,
6th century BC

Situated to the northwest of the Acropolis, the Agora was a kind of prototypical public space containing various temples and municipal buildings, as befitting its role as the social, cultural and political centre of the ancient city. The built structures were arranged around a central open area where citizens would gather, and which also functioned as a marketplace. Even when Athens's political and military power declined, the city remained an important cultural centre with the Agora at its epicentre.

DH Burnham & Co,
Flatiron Building,
175 Fifth Avenue,
New York City,
1902

The Flatiron Building is one of New York's most recognisable landmarks. Standing 20 storeys tall, the building's distinctive shape is the direct result of the triangular site created by the intersection of Fifth Avenue and East 22nd Street as they are cut across diagonally by Broadway. The Flatiron is the classic example of how Manhattan's gridded layout, which viewed on a plan in two dimensions might be expected to constrain architectural variety, actually yields a far more thrilling cityscape than if development had been allowed to proceed without a city plan.

Modernist architecture as a way of avoiding political revolution, whether in his Plan Voisin for Paris (1925) or Ville Radieuse (1930), he was similarly convinced that Modernist architecture and city planning could address the social ills of modernity, and transform every aspect of people's lives as powerfully as industrialisation had transformed the means of production.

Before the Second World War, Modernism's transformative spirit overrode any affiliation to a specific political ideology. It was variously taken on by both socialists and fascists – and many in between – and used in different guises as an instrument to further the freedom of individuals or collectives depending on the political context. However, after 1945, as Europe looked to chart its emergence from the ruins of the war, the transformations heralded by Modernism were taken on by social-democratic politicians who saw the opportunity to rebuild anew. New schools, hospitals, public buildings, not to mention countless housing estates, and even whole new towns rose from the destruction. During the postwar decades, most architects were employed by the public sector as the state took an unprecedentedly active role in all areas of society and economy. This was an era of righteous certainties and absolutes, admirable even if the realities of what was built did not always match the bold aspirations of its creators. Looking back at the worst excesses of postwar town planning and the most technocratically conceived housing estates, it is tempting to view the attempts at furthering the freedom of the collective as going too far and compromising individual freedoms.

Crisis Conditions

Today, after the so-called 'Neoliberal Revolution' of the 1980s, forever associated with Reagan and Thatcher, during which time a wave of privatisation and free market policies swept away the planned and tightly regulated economies of the postwar era, the pendulum has swung back the other way, towards the freedom of the individual. And after the global banking crisis of 2008, for many it has swung back too far. The change in the political-economic climate has affected every aspect of society, but its effects have been felt by the architectural profession particularly acutely. In the 1970s, most architects worked in the public sector, and most were involved in building (social) housing. Today, a tiny fraction of architects remain employed in the public sector, while almost all housing is built by and for the private sector, with many developments having little if any architect involvement.[4] More broadly, for decades architects have seen their traditional role diminish in scope as their responsibilities have been taken over by other disciplines within the construction industry. As a Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) report issued in the aftermath of the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire tragedy in London acknowledges: 'Developments in building procurement approaches mean that the Lead Designer (architect or engineer) is no longer responsible for oversight of the design and the specification of materials and products from inception to completion of the project, with design responsibility often transferred to the contractor and subcontractors, and no single point of responsibility.'[5]

Aesthetics became allied to social reform, at the root the idea that a particular style could in some way increase the freedom of its makers and users

Alison and Peter Smithson, Robin Hood Gardens, Poplar, London, 1972

Although among the most influential thinkers of their generation, Alison and Peter Smithson had to wait until the 1970s to put their ideas for housing into practice. At Robin Hood Gardens, the couple dealt with the difficult site by creating two blocks, with flats accessed by 'streets in the sky'. The blocks were arranged pincer-like around a central garden mound created from rubble from the slums that made way for the new development. Although revered by architects, the estate is widely viewed as a failure, and despite persistent campaigns to save it, demolition began in 2017.

PUP Architects, Antepavilion, Hoxton, London, 2017

The Antepavilion is the first project in an annual initiative run by London's Architecture Foundation with sponsorship by the developer, Shiva, to create experimental rooftop structures in urban settings. Sited on the roof of Columbia Studios along the Regent's Canal, it takes the form of a two-storey air vent after the architects realised that this would be allowed by planning regulations. Functioning as a prototype micro-dwelling or summerhouse, the project acts as a poetic counterpoint to the sometimes stifling effects of planning.

Once upon a time, we might have seen architects as the conductor of the orchestra; now they are but one cog in a vast and increasingly complex machine.

Faced with this situation, many architects now feel that their profession is experiencing a crisis of agency. No longer, one could reasonably argue, do architects possess the ability to balance the demands of individual and collective freedoms that had previously defined their practice. This question provided the basis for a series of lectures and debates at the Royal Academy of Arts in London held in Autumn 2015, from which this issue of AD has emerged.

Since then, in an attempt to find a way out of this crisis, the debate about how architects might reassert the importance of their role and influence has continued to grow louder. This came to the fore, for example, at Alejandro Aravena's Venice Architecture Biennale in 2016, which, as its title 'Reporting from the Front' suggested, argued for architects' unique role in 'taking care of the common good ... [and] expanding the frontiers of civilization'.[6] According to this view, it is imperative that architects reacquaint themselves with what many still believe to be the discipline's core mission of advancing social progress and promoting the public good, and at the same time expand the scope of their traditional disciplinary remit. While the intentions of those promoting such a way forward are often admirable, beyond the dilution of technical expertise, the risk here is that the example of the few socially engaged practices serve to legitimise the activities of the whole profession, some of which will inevitably be more ethically dubious.

The counterargument is that architects must refocus their attention on the internal demands of the discipline and the unique possibilities it can offer society, rather than wading into external debates and issues.[7] Yet architects cannot be immune to the changing contexts in which architecture exists – social and political, and, increasingly, digital. Walking into a room and realising that most people are not engaged with the space they are in, but with what is happening through their personal five-inch window into the online world, is now a familiar occurrence with a potentially transformative effect on how we think about and create architecture.

IF_DO, After Image, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, 2017

Commissioned to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Dulwich Picture Gallery in South London, the 'Dulwich Pavilion' was conceived by its designers to respond to the monumentality of Sir John Soane's adjacent gallery – a seminal building in the history of gallery design – and the comparative transience of its garden site. Over the summer of 2017, the building acted as a platform for events and activities organised by the gallery, and received significant press attention, raising the profile of its architects, a young, London-based practice.

Richard Feilden Foundation, Dormitory and classrooms, Lake Bunyonyi Christian Community Vocational and Secondary School, Uganda, 2014

Founded in memory of the late Richard Feilden, partner at UK architecture firm Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios, the Richard Feilden Foundation works to support and help improve the educational infrastructure available to children and young people in Africa with the hope that their projects will act as a model for other practices to follow. Working alongside engineers from BuroHappold, this project has included the creation of an open dining hall structure, new kitchen and latrines, classrooms and boarding accommodation.

It is tempting to view the attempts at furthering the freedom of the collective as going too far and compromising individual freedoms.

Architecture 00, The Foundry Social Justice Centre, Vauxhall, London, 2015

Architecture 00 was commissioned by the Ethical Property Company to turn a former shoe-polish factory in South London into a building that could accommodate various charitable organisations, as well as amenities such as a cafe and meeting rooms that were available for the use of the local community. The architects chose to retain much of the building, to which they added a new concrete-framed structure, with angled glazing and a rooftop pavilion with three gable ends echoing those of the original.