

STATEMENT ON THE U.S. PAVILION AT THE 2016 VENICE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE

The US Pavilion at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale will host The Architectural Imagination, an exhibition of new speculative architectural projects commissioned for specific sites in Detroit but with far-reaching application for cities around the world. The exhibition will emphasize the importance and value of the architectural imagination in shaping forms and spaces into exciting future possibilities. The birthplace of the automobile industry, the free-span factory floor, the concrete paved road, and Motown and techno music, Detroit was once a center of American imagination, not only for the products it made but also for its modern architecture and modern lifestyle, which captivated audiences worldwide. Like many postindustrial cities, Detroit is coping with a changed urban core that for decades has generated much thinking in urban planning. As advocates of the power of architecture to construct culture and catalyze cities, curators Cynthia Davidson and Monica Ponce de Leon will commission twelve visionary American architectural practices to produce new work that demonstrates the creativity and resourcefulness of architecture to address the social and environmental issues of the 21st century.

“The Architectural Imagination,” www.thearchitecturalimagination.org

We thank the curators and architects involved in “The Architectural Imagination” for their interest in Detroit.

We understand the ambition of “The Architectural Imagination” to commission architecture in Detroit with “far-reaching application for cities around the world.” At the same time, however, we are aware that nothing facilitates such applications more than architecture’s indifference to its political context. Indeed, what the project description refers to as “the power of architecture” might serve as simply another name for architecture’s political indifference—the capacity of architecture to be of service to political regimes, no matter their ideological orientation. This architectural power has been manifestly apparent in architecture’s recruitments against indigenously impoverished, marginalized, and precarious communities across the globe, usually in the name of “development” or “modernization” in the second half of the 20th century. Now, as the project description aptly points out, it is being increasingly mobilized in the name of “the social and environmental issues of the 21st century.”

As the curators of “The Architectural Imagination” note, “the power of architecture” has been very apparent in Detroit. We appreciate that the project recalls Detroit’s “modern architecture and modern lifestyle, which captivated audiences worldwide,” although we cannot avoid noting the dependence of that architecture and lifestyle on the city’s enduring legacy and reality of racism. Nonetheless, we believe that the power of architecture is being demonstrated in Detroit even more emphatically today, in the wake of the city’s emergency financial management, forced bankruptcy, and current austerity urbanism.

We see audiences worldwide still captivated by the power of architecture in Detroit—awestruck by the spectacle of tens of thousands of families living in houses where the water has been shut off, tens of thousands of “blighted” houses demolished while the need for affordable housing remains acute, and tens of thousands of families evicted from their homes in the course of the largest municipal tax foreclosure in U.S. history. Indeed, if the mass dispossession of Detroit’s predominantly African-American residents by the mobilization of their homes in austerity urbanism does not exemplify the power of architecture, then we do not know what does.

We therefore wonder who and what benefits from an idealization of “The Architectural Imagination” in Detroit at a time when architecture is being violently re-imagined by austerity politics. We are curious to see the relationships that emerge between the speculative architectural projects produced by the U.S. Pavilion’s visionary architects and the urban catastrophe that many of Detroit’s residents are currently attempting to survive. We fear, however, that the U.S. Pavilion, precisely as an attempt to advocate “the power of architecture,” is structurally unable to engage this catastrophe and will thereby collaborate in the ongoing destruction of the city.

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