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 indigenous, 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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