

# “ARCHITECTURE AND CHANGE”

The Politics of “Change” in the U.S. Pavilion at the 2016 Venice Biennale, by *Detroit Resists*

Entitled “The Architectural Imagination,” the U.S. Pavilion at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale exhibits “speculative architectural projects” authored by twelve “visionary American architectural practices” for four sites in Detroit. According to curators Cynthia Davidson and Mónica Ponce de León, these projects comprise “new work that demonstrates the creativity and resourcefulness of architecture to address the social and environmental issues of the 21st century.” Post-bankruptcy Detroit is a city shaped by violent processes of displacement in the form of mass evictions, mass foreclosures, mass water shutoffs, and mass blight removal primarily targeting the city’s working-class African-American families and communities. Taking this city as a field upon which to demonstrate architecture’s relevance, the U.S. Pavilion gestures to architecture’s long colonial tradition of appropriating sites of race- and class-based inequality as laboratories of disciplinary research.

On October 1, 2016, the curators of the U.S. Pavilion will host “conversations” under the title of “Architecture and Change.” “Change” might be a very appropriate topic for the curators to address. As perhaps the most generic, value-free and depoliticized term in the historiographical lexicon, “change” offers itself up as a precious discursive resource: a word that can refer to virtually any difference over time whatsoever. Whether the architectural projects displayed in the U.S. Pavilion are posed as harbingers of “change” or consequences of “change,” conversations on “change” run the risk of displacing *political* understandings of historical transformation as, for example, in the form of decolonization or democratization. Repeated references to “the social” and “the political” in the description of these conversations may function as a ruse: these categories may be brought up as frames for discussion in order to elide their absence in the curatorial process itself.

*Detroit Resists* is a coalition of activists, artists, architects, and community members working on behalf of an inclusive, equitable, and democratic city. You can find us at [www.detroitresists.org](http://www.detroitresists.org), follow us at @detroitresists, and get in touch with us at [detroitresists@gmail.com](mailto:detroitresists@gmail.com).

**Architecture and Change**

Conversations at the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale  
A United States Pavilion event, in cooperation with the Nordic Pavilion  
Brought to you by

SCI+ARC Harvard University Graduate School of Design Princeton University School of Architecture มหาวิทยาลัยธรรมศาสตร์

How does architecture foster social and political change? Can architecture be a catalyst for real change in today's cities? How does architecture respond to change?

Expanding on *The Architectural Imagination*, the US Pavilion exhibition that presents 12 architectural ideas for Detroit, three panels of architects, historians, and critics will discuss architecture's potential to provoke and/or react to change. The first panel will address architecture as a catalyst for social and economic change in Detroit and other declining postindustrial cities. The second panel will consider the influence of social, political, economic, and technological forces on architecture itself. A third, brief wrap-up panel will include the audience in a conversation about both aspects of architecture and change.

**Date:** Saturday, October 1, 2016  
**Place:** Nordic Pavilion, La Biennale di Venezia, Giardini  
**Time:** 11:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Free and open to the public with Biennale tickets

**Program:**  
Welcome and Introduction  
11:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

**Cynthia Davidson**, Editor, *Log*; Executive Director, Anyone Corporation, New York; Co-Curator of *The Architectural Imagination*  
**Mónica Ponce de León**, Principal, MPdL Studio, New York; Dean, Princeton University School of Architecture; Co-Curator of *The Architectural Imagination*

**Panel I**  
12:00 – 1:30 p.m.

**Beatriz Colomina**, Professor, History and Theory of Architecture, Director of Graduate Studies, and PhD Program Director, Program in Media and Modernity, Princeton University School of Architecture  
**Milton S.F. Curry**, Chair, Urban Planning, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan  
**Robert Fishman**, Acting Dean, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan  
**Jesse Reiser**, Principal, RUR Architecture, New York; Professor of Architectural Design, Princeton University School of Architecture

Lunch Break  
1:30 – 2:45 p.m.

**Panel II**  
3:00 – 4:30 p.m.

**Marcelyn Gow**, Principal, Servo Los Angeles; Design Faculty, SCI-Arc, Los Angeles  
**Farshid Moussavi**, Principal, Farshid Moussavi Architecture (FMA), London; Professor in Practice of Architecture, Harvard GSD  
**Antoine Picon**, Professor of the History of Architecture and Technology and Director of Research, Harvard GSD  
**Tom Wiscombe**, Principal, Tom Wiscombe Architecture; Undergraduate Program Chair, SCI-Arc, Los Angeles

Wrap Up  
4:30 – 5:00 p.m.

**Cynthia Davidson**, Co-Curator of *The Architectural Imagination*  
**Mónica Ponce de León**, Co-Curator of *The Architectural Imagination*  
**James Taylor-Foster**, European Editor-at-Large, ArchDaily; Co-Curator of the Nordic Pavilion exhibition *In Therapy*

And surprise guests . . .

The 2016 US Pavilion is sponsored by

Microsoft Building Envelope, Princeton University School of Architecture, Deshler, Knight Foundation, Shinola Detroit, AIA Community Foundation, Log, Graham Foundation, GTM, Dassault Systemes, GSS3, Architectural Record, The Westin Europa & Regina Venice, Microsoft

The 2016 Nordic Pavilion – *In Therapy* – is a collaboration between ArkDes (the Architecture and Design Centre, Stockholm), the Museum of Finnish Architecture (Helsinki), and the Nasjonalmuseet – Architecture (Oslo).

“Architecture and Change: Conversations at the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale, October 1, 2016,” *The Architectural Imagination*, September 12, 2016, accessed September 12, 2016, <http://www.thearchitecturalimagination.org/news/2016/9/13/architecture-and-change>.

The circling of disciplinary wagons around the notion of architecture that the U.S. Pavilion advances is perhaps most vividly revealed in the constitution of the panels in “Architecture and Change.” The panelists are all faculty members from one of four schools of architecture in the United States, each with a deep stake in the U.S. Pavilion project: the University of Michigan Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning is the Pavilion’s institutional organizer and direct recipient of the funding for the Pavilion provided by the U.S. Department of State, while the Princeton University School of Architecture, the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and the Southern California Institute of Architecture are each official sponsors of this specific event. These schools are also employers of nine of the visionary American architects displaying work in the U.S. Pavilion. *The panels therefore consist of the representatives of four institutions, discussing the work of faculty employed at these institutions, and funded by the same institutions themselves.*

As the list of the U.S. Pavilion’s sponsors reveals, most of the capital supporting the Pavilion comes from corporations that would directly benefit from the displacement of Detroit’s working-class African-American communities: Shinola is a luxury fashion company, Westin is a luxury hotel chain, and Aperol is a luxury liquor; Dassault Systemes makes Catia and other 3D software that designers use to make luxury architecture; and the Deshler group, Global Transportation Management, and GS3 are different subsidiaries of a single corporate conglomerate supplying the parts and logistics that manufacturers use to make automobiles, luxury and otherwise. The list of the U.S. Pavilion’s sponsors is itself an important text; it illustrates how the Pavilion participates in the current alignment of architectural attention and economic investment that is transforming Detroit into a city of gentrifying consumers and it points to the beneficiaries of the architectural imagination that the Pavilion stages.

Who is absent from these conversations? We might suggest that the very communities these processes pretend to aid are both invoked and erased. *Architecture can never change in decolonizing and democratic ways without transformative engagement with movement-based activism—the only site of emancipatory agency in our historical conjuncture.* This is a proposition that the U.S. Pavilion not only refuses to grapple with but also, with all the talk of “change” floated around it, might actively attempt to displace. ■