

Giovanna Borasi

Voices (Towards Other Institutions) #9



DESERT STORM VICTORY DAY, from the series & quot; Empire & quot; Partial view of four helicopters in flight and clouds, Washington D.C., United States photographer: John R. Gossage between 1987 and 1993 Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal; Gift of the artist © John R. Gossage

Towards Other Institutions

The pandemic has indelibly marked the way we live, as entire populations and industries have drastically adjusted their usual movements and daily patterns. Millions have moved indoors, and the 24/7 digital connection (for those who have access to the internet) and the intermixing of programs that were promised to be upheld by the city, have coalesced in the domestic interior. Our home is no longer just our home.

Now, emerging from our isolation, and some populations entering, there is an awareness, curiosity, and care in the interactions between people, their immediate surroundings, and the city. And so, while these systems temporarily provide a flexibility to adjust to precarious circumstances, they are also waiting to be exploited.

The flexibility of working from home in another city from your employer, for example, could be leveraged as a way to justify the reduced pay because of the lower cost of living afforded by living in a different municipality, an assertion made by Facebook.¹

Now, amid the chaos of 2020 and its convergence of crises (Covid-19 pandemic, racial injustice, income inequality, burgeoning housing crisis, access to medical care etc.), a need for deeper change is felt amongst the public; a search for ways to reshape individualism towards a shared, inclusive, and equitable future.

The 1973 oil crisis, for example, spurred architectural innovation by taking on an environmental agenda, paired with a DIY mentality and looking at how new techniques and technologies could be embedded into architecture and its processes itself. Architecture felt empowered to search for solutions and potential new ways of living. The 2008 financial crisis expanded the definition of what an architect could be beyond just the act of building, extending its particular way of thinking into other mediums. However, taking heed from these past global disruptions, often these radical and speculative futures envisioned fade, as the comfort of a familiar normality returns. Imagining new futures has always been far easier than realizing them.

Previous missteps have been framing these futures using tools, concepts, and structures that were used in the past, and so we are projecting a set of values, techniques, and ideologies on contemporary issues that no longer suit the present moment. The issue has never been creating new ideas, but the tools and systems used to enact positive change; that acknowledge inconvenient memories of our past and present.

Perhaps cultural institutions cannot incite a revolution, but we can resist easy images of the future and not let deep critical thought slip through our hands; especially concerning our own self-imposed structures. In moving toward other versions of what institutions can be, we must first start with acknowledging our complicity in these systems and no longer operate under the false pretenses of a neutral framework. As American historian Howard

Zinn has noted “you can’t be neutral on a moving train.”²

1 — Kate Conger, “Facebook Starts Planning for Permanent Remote Workers,” *The New York Times*, 21 May 2020

2 — Zinn, Howard. 1994. *You can’t be neutral on a moving train: a personal history of our times*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Architect, editor, and curator, Giovanna Borasi joined the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in 2005, and has been Director since January 2020. Her work engages with the contemporary architectural practice, considering how it responds to and is shaped by environmental, political, and social issues. She studied architecture at the Politecnico di Milano, worked as an editor for Lotus International (1998–2005) and Lotus Navigator (2000–2004) and was Deputy Editor in Chief at Abitare (2011–2013). What it takes to make a home (2019), Borasi’s latest curatorial project, is the first in a three-part documentary film series that considers changing definitions of home and homelessness as a result of urban and economic pressures.