

Unbuilt: An Incomplete Compendium of Anticipatory Architectural Fictions

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“Architecture cannot create a revolution. However, architecture possesses the ability to position technological and social change into situations people can understand, thus either accelerating or slowing such transformations.”

–Bernard Tschumi

Architecture has a long history of unbuilt projects. Failed financing, a competition loss, a client with cold feet, or an economic collapse can render a project unbuildable. But there is also a world of purposefully unbuilt architecture – critical, speculative architectural fictions – that merge spatial and temporal working methods to apprehend the complex world around us in new ways and to anticipate our collective future.

This paper examines seminal works of speculative architecture from 1900-2000 through comparative case studies and draws alignments between these works and the anticipatory frameworks that enabled them. Speculative architects combine temporal and spatial modes in their work by embedding architectural concepts within a critical narrative. These speculative architectures combine temporal methods from other disciplines – media, politics and literature – with spatial architectural methods to unite spatial thinking with temporal storytelling.¹ Speculative architecture that utilized media transformations (such as 1960s magazine culture, the 1990s website boom, and the early 21st century social media revolution) to influence public discourse through anticipatory architectural fictions has arguably had greater impact in future making than any single built architectural project ever could.²

This paper relates to existing research and practice in architecture and anticipation studies by examining architecture’s ability to leverage critique through designs that address plural perspectives.³ Architects, through years of rigorous training, are uniquely capable of synthesizing and envisioning complex information in accessible ways. Most architects design buildings, and certainly all architects design narratives and stories to communicate their work to multiple stakeholders. This skillset has clear application for strategic anticipation of technology transitions, policy transformations and cultural shifts, but is seemingly undervalued by the architecture profession itself.

Professional architecture organizations tend not to legitimize speculative architecture because of its unbuilt status. There is a deeply engrained notion within the profession that

¹ “What Is Speculative Architecture? FAQ by Liam Young,” Strelka Mag, accessed February 10, 2019, <https://strelkamag.com/en/article/what-is-speculative-architecture>.

² Geoff Manaugh, *A Burglar’s Guide to the City* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux Inc., 2016).

³ Robert Campbell, “Critique,” *Architectural Record* 189, no. 8 (August 2001): 57.

real architectural practice is rooted in making buildings. Yet, architectural practice comes in many forms, with intellectual application across many industries and disciplines. Furthermore, architecture as an academic discipline has long been image based. Before founding the Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) at Columbia University, William Ware traveled the architectural ateliers of Europe documenting the work of master architects with a revolutionary new imaging technology of the time: the slide. He returned and founded the first ever School of Architecture at MIT, and then GSAPP at Columbia University. The slide was profoundly democratizing as it enabled architecture to transition from an aristocratic pursuit to an academic discipline. Buildings cannot come to a classroom, but images of them can, thus allowing architecture into the university.

Today, digital imaging technologies are radically changing the ways we envision and record architecture. This paper argues that in the evolving media sphere, speculative architecture, rather than built architecture, has an increasingly greater capacity to mold the future by shaping public discourse through its ability to critically engage with the forces at play behind the built environment such as interconnected systems of finance, computation, global-scale flows of standardized building materials, and risk management protocols. All of these interconnected and multi-scalar systems influence the built environment, but operate at faster timescales than buildings do. Moreover, speculative architecture is able to make use of evolving media technologies to embed visionary critique within streams of readily circulating images. While various editors and curators contribute in substantial ways by collecting and organizing speculative work, there are a number of speculative architects who have directly capitalized on specific transformative media technologies. Their speculations were united with emerging instruments of media and became embedded in the public imaginary, thus having considerably more impact on the future than a single building might have.

Based upon the long-established scholarship and practice of speculative architecture and the emerging scholarship of anticipation studies, this paper builds upon work that distinguishes anticipation as an empirical phenomenon from the conditions that make anticipation possible.⁴ Specifically, in the works of speculative architecture presented through comparative case studies, the relationship between the anticipatory design and the present-rooted conditions that made the act of anticipation possible are interrogated within the context of architectural design processes and media distribution networks to lift expertise and knowledge from architecture into anticipation studies.

⁴ Roberto Poli, "The Many Aspects of Anticipation," *Foresight* 12, no. 3 (2010): 7–17.