

# 16-17 UNIT ELEVEN BACK TO THE FUTURE



This year we will **dream of future pasts** with a focus on the interaction of old and new, the historic and modern. The natural tensions and antithetical relationships characterised by the struggle between preservation and progress provide lessons, opportunities and restrictions for the continuum of landscape and urban histories and, more importantly for us, their emerging futures. This is underscored by national and international designations that seek to record and preserve cities and landscapes, making them, to an extent, future-proof and at the same time fossilised in their current states.

The following 5 scenarios tell of the complexity and potential of questioning our relationship with the past whilst proposing alternative futures. They also begin to suggest themes and inspiration for our year's work, including UNESCO's list of intangible Cultural and World Heritage, model villages, alternative preservation manifestos, museumification, fakery, architectural graveyards, demonstration landscapes, theme parks, etc. Each piece is intended to spark curiosity and lead to bold and inventive architectural designs.

## 1

The zenith of preservation is inscribed by the **UNESCO World Heritage List** for natural, built and cultural landscapes, cities and monuments, as diverse and wide-

ranging as Easter Island, 17 works of Le Corbusier, the Statue of Liberty and the industrial ruins of an Argentinian Fray Bentos Factory.

Listing protects sites through international law; however, it has also been described as a lethal weapon deployed in the act of preservation's crimes against cities (D'Eramo, 2014). UNESCO states that listing sites of 'outstanding universal value' is in the 'collective interests of humanity' but world heritage listing also 'stands in perceived or actual conflict with urban development necessities' and limits an area's ability to make decisions about its own heritage and future.

Rem Koolhaas' controversial provocation 'CronoCaos', first exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2010, addresses the issues of preservation in architecture, urbanism and landscape, and asserts that preservation—as a destructive force—increasingly regulates and restricts development and by consequence, architectural and cultural progress. In a subversion of the UNESCO Convention, he advocates for the 'creative destruction' of all urban buildings over 25 years old and asserts "it is incumbent on the international community as a whole to participate in the removal of cultural and natural heritage that constitutes *Insignificant Universal Junk...*".

— *Preservation, like architecture, operates within cycles of taste, and judgment informed by the forces of the day. What's 'insignificant' about today's junk?*

— *Might one aim to design junk-ready, or conversely junk-proof architecture?*

## 2

UNESCO listing provides financial life-support via access to tourist cash for rural and urban landscapes, as well as for many cities' aging and anachronistic historic cores. Paradoxically, this carries with it the dilemmas and predicaments associated with the impacts of mass tourism. For example, the Venetian Lagoon, listed in 1987, is striving to maintain its inclusion on the World Heritage List in a developing battle between tourism and culture, past and present. The city hosts over 600 cruise ships per year which, as well as pumping money into the city, also endanger its physical fabric and cultural significance in terms of its UNESCO listing.

Could the construction of replica cities and pseudo landscapes, relocated across the world, be an alternative to the museumification of listed sites? These embodiments of Umberto Eco's concept of 'Uffiziland', such as the unfeasibly blue and chlorinated Grand Canal at the Venetian hotel-casino in Las Vegas, where the historic is supplanted by the ersatz via a 14-minute 'gondola experience', are designed to improve on the touristic rather than the authentic 'experience'.

— *What doppelgänger states would you propose and how would you achieve instant authenticity or stage-managed fakery?*

## 3

Retelling and sometimes recasting of histories through copies and their significance in preservation, is given credence via museum collections such as the **Cast Courts** at the V&A, which contain collections of historic plaster and wax replicas of monumental sculptural and architectural fragments from across Europe. Their current exhibition, *Fragile Worlds* at the Venice Biennale, examines the contemporary role of copies in the preservation of cultural artifacts and global heritage threatened by war, climate change and societal pressures. The emergence of new technologies such as 3D scanning and digital printing, mean that copies can now be 'dematerialised' to the hard-drive rather than the museum gallery. One can imagine a future reprinting, like a Jurassic Park style recreation of cultural artifacts, cut off from their context and meaning, reanimated nowhere and everywhere.

— *What are the alternative futures for the digital museum and its immaterial artifacts?*

## 4

The model village, a quaint construction in which scale-shifted and context-stripped elbow-high Eiffel towers sit cheek-by-jowl with dwarf London buses, offers another Lilliputian alternative to the real thing. The UK has over 30 model villages. Bourton-on-the-Water proudly boasts the epitome of the meta-village tradition in the form of a 1:9 scale replica of itself, built in the 1930s. The village,

which is grade II listed, includes an oddly amusing physical manifestation of the 'droste effect' through the ultimate level of miniaturisation — a model of the model of the model village within the model village.

— *How can aspects of 'reductive aestheticisation' inform future architectural landscapes?*

— *What's this thing with scale: is bigger better?*

## 5

As a counterpart to World Heritage Status, UNESCO has developed a definition for **Intangible Cultural Heritage**. This fascinating classification currently lists and by association validates, 165 activities as diverse as falconry, traditional dance, local sports, cuisine, indigenous crafts, and story telling in need of safeguards.

— *Is listing an (illogical) migration from living culture to cultural artifact, from reality to relic?*

— *What would you add to the list: fish and chips, hopscotch, pokémon stops, smoking shelters, boy racers, the international date line?*

## U11

U11 is established as a laboratory for research, invention and spatial imagination which we pursue through iterative, inquisitive and imaginative processes. The unit is primarily interested in space and materiality, with a focus on the future of landscapes and urban cultures. We relish bold ideas, the dexterous and the exquisite.

Synergies between theory and design studies, together with thinking and making processes, allow students to develop strong individual approaches to design, via real and hypothetical problems that are design-led and fed by research, curiosity and innovation.

### **Project 1, Recasting Wonderland**

We will begin with reflections and proposals on the Intangible Cultural Heritage and World Heritage listings. Each student in Year 4 and Year 5 will be asked to make a contribution to a new form of Cast Court with a provocation on the role of preservation and culture. Proposals will be accumulated to form a collection of artifacts that might identify, record or interpret emerging or overlooked phenomena you feel worthy of record. The collective work will be exhibited at the end of term.

### **Project 2, Creating Instant Histories**

From term 2 onwards, individual design themes will be pursued in greater detail and complexity using real, imagined, built, unbuilt or fantasy sites found or inspired by our field trip. In U11 we alternate short and long haul trips. This year's field trip is a Euro-tour: very old, very new, very big, and very small! Including the scenic splendour of Wunderland in Hamburg, and the Venice Architecture Biennale.

Design research will be cultivated and expanded upon through a small building with big ideas, the Year 4 Design Realisation project and for Year 5, a large-scale architectural project together with the written thesis.

Image: Venezia e le grandi navi. © Gianni Berengo Gardin