The world is in flux and seems to be shifting with speed. Last year UG12 designed embassies and explored the theme of ‘belonging’ and ‘cultural attachment’ in Europe’s and America’s shifting political climates. Whether we like or not, the world is changing fast and democratic/political discussions, and decisions, have split large population groups within Western nations. This year, UG12 will explore the notions of escape and disruption by ‘disruptors’; a term now used to describe system changes in our society currently being enacted by non-governmental initiatives.

We will eventually direct our focus towards San Francisco, which is home to some of the key global disruptors. With its close proximity to Silicone Valley, the city absorbs the ethos and lifestyle of the disruptors who spend their working lives dreaming up ways to influence the world through technology. Their dreams are usually utopian, and when some eventually become reality; they change the world forever. Parallel to this, the city has historically been a destination for those escaping the mainstream; a frontier city. A space for ‘escapees’ to find a home and assert an identity: from its early Spanish settlement to the growth as part of the gold rush, and later becoming a symbol for the alternative hippie culture and gay rights, San Francisco has always been a place of escape and disruption.

With the capital power of the success stories come giant architectural beacons, which all work to amplify the ambition and hopes of the thousands of garage start-ups that are born in and around the city. But what will the city become if it continues to work as the domestic-vessel for the ever expanding Silicone Valley? And what will it retain from its significant past as one of the world’s most open-minded cities?

Technological breakthroughs are often synonymous with a notion of mystery and secrecy, and flourish in environments that turn their backs on the normal to escape the everyday. UG12 wants to explore architecture that accommodates spaces of escape, ambition, disruption and change. We will also look into how the next generation of architecture fits, adds to, or counteracts the public space of cities. We don’t yet know where this will take us, or the themes which the work will involve, but that’s the point of this year’s brief.

‘The best way to predict the future is to invent it’, Alan Kay
project 1 - Anti

Drastic change normally starts with an urge to escape or disrupt the status quo. The past and present has to be known and understood, but not necessarily agreed with. Revolutionary ideas usually flourish in micro-environments of likeminded people. The first project will look at this notion by exploring ‘clubs of everyday escapism’ and start off by investigating this on a smaller scale.

Throughout centuries people have escaped their everyday by becoming part of self-chosen groups that exist in parallel to the wider society. From the fictional film ‘Fight Club’ to the mysterious world of the Free Masons and the 60’s hippie culture, we can get glimpses into made-up, mini societies, that want to exist, but remain protected (and maybe even hidden) within a known context. Even if it’s just for a few hours a day, the micro-social environment of these clubs have their own rules, traditions/rituals that all offer an alternative existence for their members. Similarly people escape by engulfing themselves digitally within the universe of a computer game or by flicking through others’ lives on social media platforms.

We start in London, a more familiar territory, with a project that will end in a small building proposal that will test new architectural typologies for these micro-societies. You may, or may not, know London very well, but it is a metropolis that houses an almost infinitive number of cultures, lifestyles and stories. So many places for communities in London are not visible to the uninformed: The layers counter-programmes form the hidden makeup of the city. The political situation has, similarly to the States, been heavily altered in the UK within the recent years and it is still very much in a state of flux. This has created a sea of expressed opinions from all sides and it has flagged up issues and critiques in relation to our current and future environment. We want to know what you would like to change. And what group of people would you like to design for. This could be answered by creating an architectural intervention that shouts, hides or makes people escape their everyday. Whether you’re providing for an existing (or an imagined) group, the brief must carefully and cleverly tailor your proposal to a part of London and a specific community. The project can be as subversive as you want it to be, but you will start by identifying who (and where) you want to provide for.

project 2 - The introduction

We will be travelling to San Francisco, a city in the States that continues to signify an alternative way of looking at America. It is the place where openness and tolerance has defined the city’s character as one of the most accommodating parts of America that supports escapees and disruptors in equal measure. It is a place where alternative lifestyles seem to be seamlessly accepted, but how does it fit in the new American political landscape? And what does a new American counter-society look like? We are interested in looking at both historic and current ways of challenging fixed ideas within our society. What does a new community’s architecture of escapism or disruption, in San Francisco, look like? And, how does the city respond to the agenda of the ever expanding and influential Silicon Valley?

Should it be questioned that homeless people on the city’s streets sit uncomfortably next to the busses that escort affluent workers daily to the revolutionary corporate headquarters in the Valley? It is becoming more apparent that the clashes and counter-culture between the historic and future values will play a significant role in this year’s unit focus. Before going on the field trip we want you to put together a book of research interests informing your audience about the group of people who you want to make a building for and where you anticipate it to be placed within the city. This book will ground your main building project, and will be a catalyst for its brief and design development. Your building will become an institution for a group of people working towards whatever theme you want to introduce. Your book will be presented before Christmas.

project 3 - Disruptive

This main building project will explore the parameters of the brief set out in your research from Project 1 and our discoveries on the field trip. You will place a building of architecturally high ambition in the San Francisco site that you’ve previously identified. We want you to site your project so that it will respond the site both socially and spatially. Your proposal can have a simple brief, but it should be highly inventive and understood through multiple design iterations. We will encourage you to push yourself with all your knowledge from the previous projects and expect to see a variety in investigative exploration through all kinds of media.

Matthew Springett & Johan Hybschmann
/ MSA Limited & Archmongers LLP /

2066 Crist Drive, Los Altos, California, birth place of Apple Inc.
UG12 Methodology

Placing architecture - Whether a context is to be embraced or ignored it must first be understood. Through understanding a site, the architect makes connections that others might miss; identifying opportunities for function, delight and beauty in the most unlikely of places. Understanding what makes a place operate requires the architect to reveal its layers; to ‘delaminate’ and ‘disentangle’ the connections and systems that define its physicality. Within the context of the unit the skill of the student-architect is then to reconnect these layers/connections in a meaningful way through a new building that is original, innovative and ‘extra-ordinary’.

Fabricating space - Fabrication is a key technique for the studio and production is seen as a vital bridge between an architectural intention and reality. Making something physical (drawing, cast, model, collection, instrument etc.) enables a dialogue to develop both in the context of the studio, and in the context of making architecture. Students will be encouraged to design by spatial experience, and fabrication will be a vital tool in transforming this experience into architecture.

Extra-ordinary - The unit aims to focus on the extraordinary nature of the ordinary brief. We enjoy the richness that can come from a simple brief skilfully executed. We prioritise spatial inventiveness and imaginative making over complexity of programme. We believe that extraordinary architecture can be developed from simple briefs (exquisitely considered and refined) through an instrumental design process where drawings, models, installations and other techniques are used to test and enhance a site’s coding.

Thinking ahead - The planning of a project is crucial in all of its phases. Following the timetable is one thing but students are asked to manage their time and research on a much more personal level; a level which is tailored to their project. We believe that we constantly build up a stronger archive of possible ways to develop projects. Think well beyond a simple Google top-three search and your Pinterest. Your archive will contain theoretical, practical and physical methods/material that enable you to design with more freedom. We strive to expand the methods of fabrication and representation but we also want to make sure that you are aware of how your designs would be built and to what extent they would comply with some of the most important constraints and regulations. The compromise between theoretical ambition and reality has proven to create beautiful, relevant and concise designs. We believe planning ahead in all stages and beyond the life of a student project will make your work even stronger.

UG12 Teaching

We see Making as a key way for you to transform an architectural concept into an architectural proposition. We would initially suggest that fabrication could be a primary technique, but are of course open to you pursuing a wide range of methodologies.

From the beginning of the year we want to emphasise the importance of testing an idea through production - the more production, the more testing, the more real your architecture will become!

It is important for you to realise that not everything produced needs to be a ‘final’ piece of work, and that sometimes cruder pieces of work can be critical in developing the projects, and in some ways are essential in producing refined proposals.

We would like you to think in terms of spaces from the beginning of the project. You should be constantly considering who will use the spaces they develop, how they will use them, and what the wider intention of the space is.

We will encourage a studio environment where you can collaborate, discuss and foster creative ideas and become strong independent designers. We will expect you to work in the studio in college.

We believe your architecture should be born through discussion with us and your peers. With this in mind the dialogue established in your tutorials is fundamental and critical to the successful development of your projects.