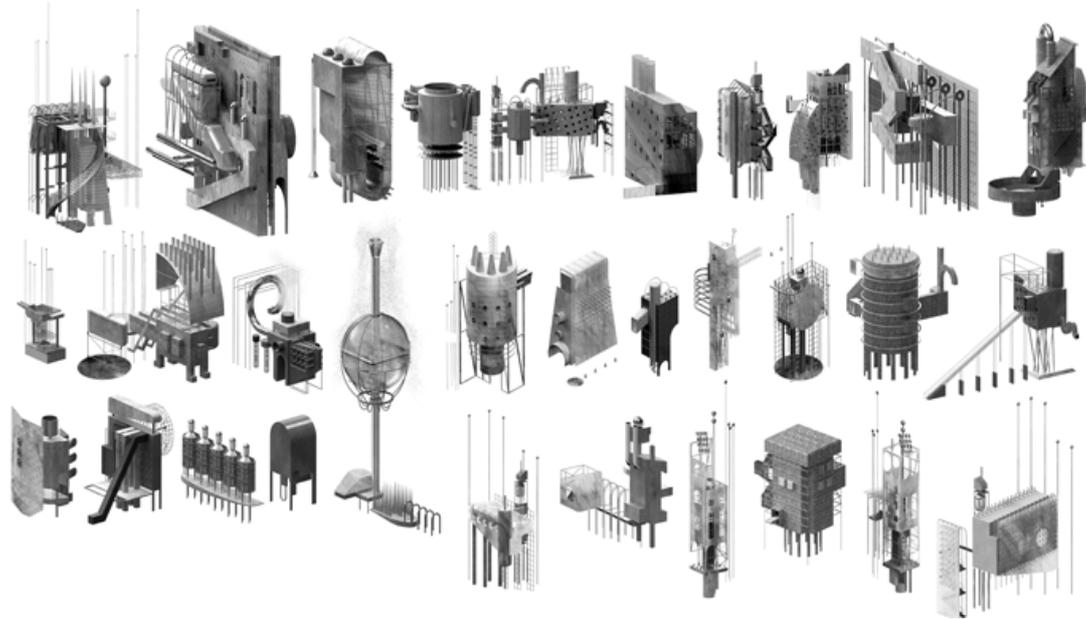


MArch Unit 12

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A CITY IN A BUILDING / AN INTIMATE MEGASTRUCTURE



An Eye on the Past and the Future

The Roman god Janus looked two ways simultaneously: to the past and to the future. The most creative architects have also looked to the past and to the future, in order to reimagine the present. In many eras, the most fruitful architectural innovations have occurred when ideas and forms have migrated from one time and place to another, by a process of translation that has proved to be as stimulating and inventive as the initial conception. Twenty-first century architects need to appreciate the shock of the old as well as the shock of the new.

Architects of Fact and Fiction

The architect is a 'physical novelist' as well as a 'physical historian'. As a history is a reinterpretation of the past that is meaningful to the present, each design is a new history. Equally, a design is equivalent to a fiction, convincing the users to suspend disbelief. We expect a history or a novel to be written in words, but they can also be delineated in drawing, cast in concrete or seeded in soil.

Cities that Evolve, Cities that are Planned, Cities that are Imagined

Cities that evolve may do so quite unevenly, guided and molded by many factors and events, such as wealth, war, plague, location and climate. Cities may be planned in response to an immediate and defined need, such as population growth, exploitation of natural resources or industrial expansion. Cities that are imagined may have architects that know how to be bold and experimental, combining the known and unknown, fact and fiction, allowing words and forms to inform each other.

MArch Unit 12 will be designing a city in a building this year, and in order to do so, we will research, acknowledge and question the many ways that cities have been founded and made. And will be seeking a new model for London.

Two Cities

London is a product of gradual evolution. Founded in 43AD, the Roman city of Londinium even in its earliest incarnation was a city of two parts straddling the Thames. Subsequently, London developed from two cities: the City of Westminster, where parliament and government reside, and the much larger City of London, which once combined homes, businesses and industries within the 'square mile' but is now dedicated only to the financial market. Far larger than any other British city, London has been the focus of the nation's political, economic and cultural life for generations. In 1700 around 675,000 people occupied the city while the population of its urban area is now nearly 10 million with many more commuting each day. The city has taken shape over the last twenty centuries to become Greater London, and today consists of 33 districts, which, including the City of London, the 12 London boroughs and the 20 Outer London boroughs, cover over 600 square miles. This growth has happened incrementally, affected by changing cultures and populations, shifts in prosperity and politics, inclines and declines in industry. Yet to many it is still an intimate city—and a city of two parts. Various attempts have been made to contain London's expansion. In 1661 John Evelyn conceived practical and poetic measures to deal with the city's polluted atmosphere, proposing that the edges of London would be forested with trees and planted with fragrant shrubs so that wood could replace coal as the principal fuel and the whole city would be sweetly perfumed. In the early twentieth century, a number of garden cities were created around London, and, in a similar spirit, new towns were constructed in the mid-twentieth century, with the green belt separating the new garden cities and towns from the urban periphery of London. Once again, in 2017 this distinctly suburban model was adopted in the UK government's proposal for more garden towns and villages.

A City in a Building: A Metro-rural, Micro-city, Mega-structure

However, we propose that the answer to London's expanding urban life and acute housing shortage should be urban not suburban. Architects from the Renaissance to modernism have repeatedly emphasised the analogy of a house to a city, which is notably expressed in Palladio's remark that 'the city is nothing more or less than some great house and, contrariwise, the house is a small city'. The house he refers to is not the private house that we know today, but a house that combines private and public lives, whether a farm, a business or a workshop. Precedents for such a megastructure that incorporates multiple functions in a single form include Old London Bridge, Kowloon Walled City, and the welfare state universities of the 1960s. In response to climate change and the need to create a compact, sustainable and seasonal city, Unit 12 proposes that all the programmes—houses, schools, farms, cinemas, businesses, industries etc.—necessary to sustain a rich and varied urban life should once again be integrated into a single complex—a city in a building: a metro-rural, micro-city, mega-structure—sited in London or at its periphery.

Venice and the 'Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable'

In Term 1 we will visit Venice, which is so dense and urban that it can be understood and experienced as a building as well as a city. A plethora of islands in the lagoon dedicated to specific agricultures and industries sustain the city. We will explore the 2017 Venice Art Biennale; Damien Hirst's 'Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable'; Vicenza, the city that Palladio rebuilt as a new Rome; Padua, the world's oldest anatomical theatre; Palmanova, the ideal, concentric Renaissance city; Torcello, the original settlement in the Venetian lagoon.

Image: Alex Cotterill, London's Eden, 2015