

PNYX

WEEKLY COMMENTARY, RESEARCH, AND REVIEW

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END COMMUNICATION

PNYX WAS FOUNDED by two students of the Architectural Association in 2015 as a free weekly paper. Funded by but editorially independent of the School, we featured contributions from both students and professionals of architecture as well as the broader visual cultures.

Since we took a break from publishing two major events have occurred: the vote to leave the European Union and the Grenfell Tower fire. Critical as these two events are, we believe they are symptomatic of a series of deep underlying phenomena upon which architecture is necessarily contingent.

In the case of the vote to leave, these included the post-industrial devastation of communities, a fragmented sense of belonging and identity that has long gone unaddressed by political orthodoxies, the rise of rightist populism, and the erosion of civil discourse, all of which are common to many regions throughout the EU.

In the case of the Grenfell Tower fire, a complete systemic failure to provide basic safety, legal aid, and technical support to society's most vulnerable, as well as accountability of those bodies entrusted to do so.

For the next 30 weeks these phenomena, and architecture's inescapable contingency upon them, will be our focus. We will ask whether we as practitioners will remain passive receivers of circumstance or seriously pursue architecture and design as a political and social project.

The rise of the right

In the months leading up to the referendum, pro-EU campaigners from both parties failed catastrophically to make their case for the union, warning of economic peril in areas that had already been devastated for decades, or that house prices would fall in cities already asphyxiated by impossibly high prices. Leave campaigners maintained a form of legitimacy by downplaying the issue

of immigration, focusing instead on British sovereignty and lies about the UK's rebate, until the final weeks of the campaign, when we bore witness to a torrent of racist and xenophobic rhetoric, the death of an MP, and Nigel Farage's 'Breaking Point' Poster.

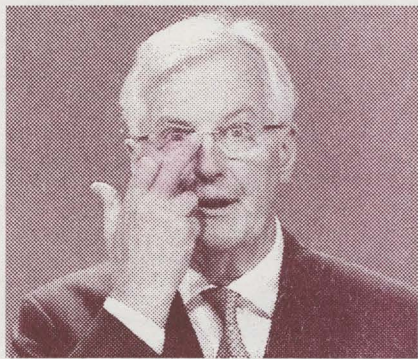
16 months later, the clock ticking down to March 2019, the tone deafness of the campaign has been supplanted by 'constructive ambiguity'. The Conservative Party remains riven by a seemingly irreconcilable conflict over how and when and if at all Brexit shall be delivered. The Labour Party has offered scant opposition by

making its own deliberately nebulous pronouncements at every turn. Both are caught between alienating one section of their base over the other.

By virtue of a transition period, the Brexit process may yet continue well past March 2019, delaying its most destructive impacts for architecture: the ending of freedom of movement, the collapse of investor confidence in the UK and its sidelining of on the international stage, and the compromise of the rights of EU citizens working here. Labour and environmental laws for the UK also hang in the balance.



Grenfell Tower in October (Photo: PNYX)



Chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier (Photo: Reuters)

But we are not mere spectators to this process. We are subject to it, participants in it. We stay silent to our peril.

From the RIBA there is some guidance on the current situation and sympathy for members who are deeply concerned about all of the above. As a registered charity the RIBA is in many ways consigned to remain apolitical, despite the existential threat facing the industry it represents. But if this must remain the case, what are more suitable avenues for agitating on behalf of the industry and its workers?

The forces that brought us here are neither unique nor contained to the UK. Although denied the presidency, the far right Front National's Marine Le Pen made it through to the final round of the presidential election in May, winning 33.9% of the final vote. In the German federal election, Angela Merkel retained the chancellorship but lost ground to Alternative für Deutschland, who won 12.6% of the vote and 94 of the 709 seats of the 19th Bundestag. This week, the far right People's Party won 31.6% of the vote in Austria's national elections. So despite a modest uptick in support for the EU in general following the Brexit referendum, it is clear the very same phenomena that drove its result continue to shape Europe. We will therefore endeavour to cover how design practices and researchers throughout Europe are critically and meaningfully responding to this context, whether the bodies that claim to represent them are willing and able to do so or not.

Finally, in the States, the election of a symbolically grotesque (if so far legislatively ineffective) Mr. Trump has shattered the understanding of many of those both on the left and right of the political landscape. Mr. Trump's victory has emboldened the emergent alt-right and alt-lite, even as their own project threatens to spiral out of control, such as in Charlottesville. It has seen Ben Carson appointed head of US

Department of Housing and Urban Development, a man devoid of experience in spatial development but equipped with contempt for housing subsidies and government aid for the working class. How has the discipline in the US responded?

Following the election, Robert Ivy, the vice-president and CEO of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), the largest professional organization in the US, was quick to issue an official statement, emphasising that the organisation and its members stood 'ready to work' with Trump and his incoming administration. The letter was broadly criticised by students and professionals alike, including Architecture LOBBY, who wrote:

The AIA has demonstrated neither the will nor the incentive to address fundamental tensions in the profession or deal with structural impediments.

Ivy's letter revealed the discrepancy between architects who consider their work a serious vehicle for social and political change and those who would rather assign it the agency of a deckchair. If the AIA has abrogated its responsibility to challenge the state, who will?

Systemic failure

In June in London a tragedy claiming at least 80 lives erupted in the form of the Grenfell Tower fire, when in the early morning a fire ripped through the building's newly installed foam-backed aluminium cladding and became uncontrollable within half an hour.

The building, owned by the council, had been managed by a tenant management organisation (TMO), one of the largest in the country. It is obvious now that between these two bodies a yawning void of accountability had opened. When residents had for years made their concerns about the safety of the tower known, they had been palmed off from one to the other, and because of cuts to legal aid made by the government four years ago, they had had little recourse to professional representation. When the building was recently refurbished, its residents had been asked to sign off on one type of cladding, specified by the architect. But another type of cladding, with a lower fire rating, had been installed.

For the tower's residents (and others in the social housing system), the fire was no more a surprise than Brexit was for citizens of Boston, Lincolnshire. Common to both has

been shock on the part of the relatively privileged and resigned perspicaciousness on the part of the working class.

How then in this context are we as architects and designers to operate? Can architecture be a tool to expose and interrogate and visualise the problems of identity, communication, sovereignty, and belonging that characterise our age? Can we use our expertise to argue on behalf of what we believe is most urgent and critical, to assist those who are most vulnerable? What is it that we as designers are best placed to do, and how will we put it to use to combat the rise of the far right and the criminal negligence that killed more than 80 people last June?

Over the next thirty weeks it will be our agenda to try to answer these questions. As in previous years we will invite contributions from not only students and academics but practitioners across all visual and literary disciplines, whether it is a drawing or a photo or an essay or a piece of prose. Everyone has a position. We invite you to declare yours.—EDS.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

DEAR MR YERBURY,—On receiving last month's copy of the A.A. JOURNAL we were much struck with the good sense and sound reasoning displayed in the letter signed "A Student."

It has forcibly represented to us that we have altogether missed our vocation in life, and, in spite of the many happy and industrious months spent at the A.A., we have determined to try to make good this mistake, and to leave the school for woman's true sphere—the hearth and home.

As you have always been most kind and considerate to us, in spite of our erring ways, we feel you will not take it amiss if we ask you, as Secretary of the Association, to mention our names to any members requiring char-ladies for their offices, as we have often noticed in architectural circles that these are needed more than women architects.—Yours sincerely,

THE LADY STUDENTS.

Eagle-eyed readers will have noticed the letter above is in fact from nearly 100 years ago - from the 18 March, 1918 issue of AA Journal - displayed as part of the AA XX 100 exhibition currently on at the AA, celebrating a century of women in the Association. Sadly, it would seem the attitudes fought against here are yet to become extinct. — EDS.