MANTOWNHUMAN

MANIFESTO:
TOWARDS A NEW HUMANISM
IN ARCHITECTURE

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For the first time in human history, half the world's population lives in cities.
And yet, instead of cheering this historic urban moment, the sound of hand-wringing is deafening. At home and abroad, arbitrary limits on what and how we develop betray the current exhaustion of architecture and urbanism, and its diminished sense of future possibilities. In the developing world there are parochial fears of the pace of rapid urbanisation. In the West too, we are constantly told to slowdown: the urban renaissance has become an eco-town.

It is clear that modernity, reason, and the notion of progress itself have come under intense attack from those disdainful of the humanist aspiration to transform the world. While we at the Manifesto: Towards A New Humanism In Architecture welcome the potential for greater human activity,

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they warn of the dangers of population growth; where we praise technological innovation, they bemoan the use of energy; where we demand more, they insist on less. We need to challenge this, our age of architectural angst.

It's time to challenge the tawdry and compromised architecture born of the contemporary paradox of urban low horizons. Instead, we must seek a new humanist sensibility within architecture - one that refuses to bow to preservation, regulation and mediation - but instead sets out to win support for the ambitious human-centred goals of discovery, experimentation and innovation. This is a cry for dissent, critical thinking and open-minded enquiry to be the foundation for a new metropolitan dynamic.

1

While architecture is enjoying a resurgence in the media, in popular opinion and within mainstream party political discourse in the UK, architecture has never been more vacuous, pliant, parochial and insular. After decades in disfavour, architects have now become all too comfortable with their new approval rating and aim to maintain that cosy position at all costs. The almost total lack of creative tension within architecture further fuels its impotence and loss of direction. Today, there seems only to exist the 'radical' architecture of deference: architects who rarely challenge the brief; who blithely replicate government social programmes; wilful in their instrumentalism and meekly incorporating 'behaviour change' guidelines. It is an architecture that accommodates to environmental criteria without any recognition that by so doing, the needs of humanity have become secondary to nature - or even believing that a debate about this is needed. We have a neutered profession of tick-boxing, pro-regulatory, managers in which design is reducible to a mere spreadsheet monitored by self-satisfied, self-certified *carbonistas*. Architecture may have reached its zenith in formal acceptability, but it is at a nadir in terms of meaningful content.

THE TIME HAS COME TO RE-THINK ARCHITECTURE.

2

With half the world's population living in cities, where is the sense of exhilaration in the creative urbanisation of a planet for 7, 8 or 9+ billion? Such a dynamic moment in history demands maximum engagement, but architecture has become paralysed in its growing acceptance of the Malthusian environmental orthodoxy that humanity is a problem. Rather than an opportunity for creative improvement, rapid urbanisation is frequently presented as symbolic of the problems of over-population and the dangers that this creates for communities and the environment. Lacking the confidence to impose principles, ideals and a sense of purpose, architects commonly defend virgin green fields over the expansive reach of the metropolis. 'Sprawl' and 'suburbia' have become euphemisms for irresponsible expansion as opposed to a representation of a social dynamic. Defensive self-loathing does nothing for a 'creative' profession that is supposed to revel in building more - and more often. Whether celebrating 'alternative urbanism' (i.e. sustainable subsistence in 'developing' world villages and slums); deploring the unreconstructed dynamic of megacities of the emergent developing world; or fawning over the single iconic building in the west, the redundancy of current Western ideas about the city is manifest.

THE TIME HAS COME TO RE-IMAGINE THE CITY.

3

As architectural visions for the city self-consciously retreat, it is little surprise that symbolic representations emerge: from the simplistic paeans to Barcelona or Copenhagen, to the desperate and deadening desire to recreate the caricatured urbanity of the Victorian city. Everywhere local identities take precedence. At root, architecture has lost its capacity for meaningful engagement with society in the here and now, and has retreated into irony – a self-referential world where 'subversive' in-jokes are endlessly recycled. Today pluralism and relativism are rife, where once we might have acted on universal values underpinned by a rigorous methodology. Such is the legacy of a battery of postmodern texts that have succeeded in inculcating a belief that progress is a myth, human endeavour is detrimental, and knowledge is relative, that we now have a profession dominated by fear of meaningful intervention and content to seek prestige in aesthetic 'statements.' Yet, seductive as the canvas might appear filled with 'subversively' constructivist shapes, a vision for the city of tomorrow remains strangely absent.

THE TIME HAS COME TO RE-ENGAGE WITH SOCIETY

4

In a world where possibilities are deemed to be limited, designers happily occupy the frontline of the pseudo-political quest for social engagement. Architects and architecture now frequently fulfil the roles of community counsellor, urban memory estrangement therapist, firm-but-friendly policeman, environmental taskmaster or social capital builder, rather than as a means of creating structures for a new century. When urban planners talk of 'creating communities,' whose 'community' values are they regurgitating? Architects now feel morally justified in interfering in personal choices and boast of the need to change peoples' behaviour. In reality, citizens' private lives and personal choices, however non-conformist - should be their own business.

THE TIME HAS COME TO BREAK FREE FROM BUILDING IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND STABILITY... AND GET ON WITH BUILDING

Meddling in the quotidian is everywhere, but it is the desire to shape the world of tomorrow that is missing. Where once the aim was to intervene - to plan and design the world according to human ends, today architects find solace in simply describing the world. Statistics, graphs and models are used not only to describe what is, but to dictate what will be allowed. The failure to mount a challenge represents a retreat from the pursuit of what could be – it is a retreat, where hiding behind complexity, climate chaos and community consensus avoids us having to impose humanity's vision on the world around us. Architects and designers regularly censor themselves as to what we might be allowed to do, and consequently call into question what we mean by achievement and progress. This is pathetic. The architectural profession seems currently to welcome constraint and uncertainty as if it feels unable to think, act or feel for itself unless justified by a performance indicator. Today's ironic decadence delights in self-definition: creating a self-referential architecture of amorphous shapes, algorithms and fractals that reinforce the anti-humanist, pseudo-religious notion that truth is a mathematical/scientific exercise that can lead the way. It is humans – not disembodied abstractions – that have the capacity to create a meaningful world.

THE TIME HAS COME TO CHALLENGE 'WHAT IS PERMITTED', WITH 'WHAT COULD BE'

Rather than celebrate the city as liberating us from the backwardness of the parochial, the city and its inhabitants are now presented as something to be tamed. Nowadays, Western societies are more likely to look to the future with trepidation than anticipation. Ambitious, free vision – that which goes beyond the pernicious lexicon of sustainability – is lacking. From a mystical attitude to 'mother nature', to a creeping wariness of society; from a suspicion of the 'new' or the 'ambitious' to more widespread uncertainty about 'the future', fear has become an all-encompassing state which envelopes and then undermines the architectural imagination. Most worrying is the extent to which architects have become afraid of freedom. With contemporary fears used to justify and even celebrate the imposition of limits, constraints on ambition, and impositions on how to behave in a proscriptively 'responsible' manner, the architect now dutifully accepts the stultifying social strictures of risk, precaution, and the moral disease of self-restraint.

THE TIME HAS COME TO BREAK FREE OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF LIMITS.

Experimentation, unless within certain narrowly defined parameters, is presented as being potentially - inherently - dangerous. Caution, precaution, introspection and stasis are everywhere. With precaution pervasive, social dynamics have become reversed. The pursuit of innovation capable of extracting more from less is only permissible nowadays if justified as a way of minimising society's impact on the planet. Whatever happened to maximising one's impact on the planet? Today, innovation, experimentation and modern methods of construction are parodies of what they could be, bogged down in the demand that through the course of their development, no harm be done to the environment.

We, at ManTowNHuman, see potential gains: rather than potential harms. We are optimists but we realise that establishing a truly progressive credo of societal efficiency, experimentation and resource exploitation will not be easy in a time when seeking to elevate 'the human' currently plays second fiddle to the regressive Puritanical worship of the environment.

THE TIME HAS COME TO PRIORITISE THE HUMAN AND DOWNPLAY - AND EXPLOIT - THE SO-CALLED NATURAL WORLD

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We, in ManTowNHuman, believe that a more critical, arrogant and
future-oriented cadre of architects and designers can challenge the
new eco-centred, bureaucratic, anti-intellectual, fragmentary, localising
consensus and in this way can lay the ground rules for overcoming the
cosy rut in which architecture now finds itself. To do so requires a stance
against the prevailing culture of pessimism, so that a new, more exciting,
more challenging, more assertive architecture can emerge as part of a
more strident society.

  This will only come about if architects are prepared to kick against
the mainstream orthodoxies that infect and misinform current practice.
Importantly this means creating a case for architecture that dissents from
our current precautionary, risk-averse, climate-infatuated culture.

  We believe that to realise a new, human-centred architecture
we must have the confidence to assert a belief in human creativity.
Only through architectural autonomy from the directional diktats
of pseudo-independent policy-wonks can there be created a freedom
for designers to challenge the limitations of the current all-pervasive
mantra of sustainable development.

  We assert the right to experiment with new forms, processes
and materials, regardless of their environmental provenance.
We fundamentally oppose those who downplay aesthetics in the service
of the so-called natural world, but, in the service of the human-centred ▸

world, we do not wish to decry the creation of buildings that prioritise human utility and functionality irrespective of aesthetic sensibilities. We suggest that architects should dare to fail. Good architecture need not have an ethical dimension. 'Responsible architecture' is safe and seldom 'good'. 'Good' architecture need not be 'responsible'.

Architects must become confident in architecture for architecture's sake, asserting their trained eye for design rather than falling back on clichéd cod-scientific justifications. A starting point is the need for critical faculties and architectural tongues to be sharpened.

We advocate a challenge to the externally (and self-) imposed restrictions on debate, dialogue and design in order that new architectural possibilities might emerge. In the process of so doing we can truly aspire to move the city forward.

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Summation ▸

For: *An architecture that imposes its will on the planet*
Against: *Architecture that 'treads lightly on the earth'*

For: *Creative tension: robust assertive architecture*
Against: *Ideology-lite architecture where social policy initiatives, participation, consultation and engagement are lauded for the sake of the process*

For: *Extending the frontiers of architecture: Dare to know... Dare to act... Dare to fail*
Against: *The precautionary principle in architecture – the imposed and self-imposed limits to design*

For: *A new internationalism - dynamic architecture for an integrated planet: an end to all restrictions on the global flow of people, goods and ideas*
Against: *The new parochialism - passive architecture, self-sufficient villages, slow cities*

For: *Architecture as discipline – for the autonomous exercise of professional judgment and the defence of integrity*
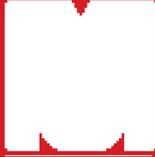**Against:** *Architecture to discipline – the instrumentalisation of design for therapeutic or interventionist objectives*

For: *Building more - in the knowledge that we can, and should, always rebuild later*
Against: *A culture in decline that questions whether we should be building at all*

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