

CCA Charrette 2017 | Machines for Discord

The 22nd CCA Interuniversity Charrette invites young creative designers to reimagine a collective architectural platform in the city—a new mechanism—for dialogue, resistance, and social movement at the crossroads between physical space, media, and technology.

Background

As Jacques Rancière observes, democracy is not the smooth veil of *consensus* but the act of provoking *dissent* and the ultimate potential of disruption. In democratic societies, political identity emerges and develops in public spaces—both physical and virtual ones. These public spaces are essential to nurturing and negotiating conflict and coexistence. On one side, there are political, cultural, and corporate forces that produce meaning. On the other, there are citizens who refute, refuse, and redefine its meaning. Space and architecture are not simply by-products of these processes, but active participants in them.

The political potential of architecture was one of the founding credos of the modern project in the early 20th century. Yet today it is commonly believed that this potential was overwhelmed by economic realities and by the sense that architecture has become symbiotic with power structures. Arresting visions of wartime modernism in support of popular political fronts haunted not just the culture of architecture but the built reality of the contemporary city into the mid-century. Subsequently, the late 20th century's haste to fashion modernism as the antithesis of totalitarianism led to the abandonment of modern architecture's core ideology of justice and equality, and opened the door for the presumably apolitical and corporate vision of the contemporary city which we inhabit today.

Fortunately, modernism's collapse of public buildings, monuments, streets, and squares into an abstract primacy of *space* is not a terminal condition but only a temporary and potent silence. Perhaps, freed from the repression of corporate collectivity, contemporary urban space and architecture are ripe for transformation into constructive arenas and provocative machines for democratic resolution and political action.

Media and technology

Political action no longer operates mainly under physical conditions. As with politics itself, the importance of the parallel virtual territories of media and of technology cannot be underestimated in our understanding of contemporary architecture and its role in society.

Technology serves both as a filter and a road map. It allows access to vast amounts of data, endowing the power structure and the citizen alike with (highly imbalanced) capacities of surveillance and even clairvoyant means to predict each other's behaviour. To develop architecture's potential we now need to develop an awareness of the transformational capabilities of technology and reconsider the new ways it allows us to navigate and utilize, as public beings, the contemporary city.

Media presents a similar double-edged sword. It offers the population a potent mechanism of power, all the while acting as a tunable echo chamber generating power to manipulate the masses. Simultaneously receiving and transmitting on multiple channels, the true reading of the presence of media is blurred by the sheer quantity of personal vignettes. As we are repeatedly reminded, the overall narrative can be manicured to be a telling of a story that may or may not be reflective of the individual vignettes of which it is composed.

In contrast to both media and technology, physical space presents both measure and scale. As the Jackson/Varias composite photo of the 2009/2017 American presidential inaugurations illustrated, it ultimately presents a balanced response to the fluid constituencies and unstable identities of today's virtual presence. Today, only under the combined conditions of the physical and the virtual can our public selves become capable of egalitarian, effective interaction and extend our agency in any fruitful way.

The Design Challenge

CCA Interuniversity Charrette 2017 asks participating teams to design provocative counter-spaces, architectural mechanisms within and against the physical and virtual processes that tame and dissolve the crucial *loci* of democracy. Guided by modern architecture's values of justice and equality, teams are asked to reassert architecture's role as an active participant and instigator in society, and a constructive instrument of change.

Each participating team is asked to choose a meaningful site in their city. It may be a public forum, a seat of power, or a place undergoing a transformation deemed unjust. Beyond the usual suspects of official civic and public spaces, the intervention can include neglected spaces and liminal conditions, commercial centers and corporate campuses—all sites ripe for provocative intervention and.

Each team is invited to transform the chosen site into a real or imaginary theatre for dissent and confrontation, or dialogue and reconciliation. The space in question should engage and operate on both physical and virtual terrains. It must allow all individuals to develop and demonstrate a “public self” where no participant’s identity is hidden or their performance diminished. The teams are asked to see architecture as a provocative act, open ended and operating at different scales; where architecture is all at once the playing field and the instrument of change.

It is important to keep in mind that resistance can take many forms from the blurring of social borders and the redistribution of resources to radicalism, institutional critique, and iconoclasm. The proposition could illustrate a new type of civic space or a user’s manual for co-opting public infrastructure. It could describe the occupation of existing structures of authority or wandering machines of disruption.

Somewhere between agora and colosseum the intervention must manifest the collective power of its citizens and their right to dissent. It must be a provocative space that fosters communication and confrontation. However, it must be inclusive enough to allow access and action to everyone while, at the same time, leveling the playing field for all agents.

Above all else, it must actively respond to the current conditions of our polis and become a mechanism for democratic action and change.