

# A QUESTION OF TIME



Atomium construction site for Expo 58 in Brussels, 1957, André and Jean Polak (architects), Andre Waterkeyn (engineer). Atomium archives.

IN SEARCH OF TEMPORAL STRATEGIES  
FOR AN ARCHITECTURE OF TRANSITION

In architecture, space occupies a central place; sometimes to the detriment of time, which is too often neglected, even though it is a key factor for thinking about ecological, social and economic transition. Given the urgency of climate change, this symposium puts the question of time at the heart of the debate, as an essential element of architectural, urban, and territorial projects. Reconsidering our discipline through the factor of time will enable us to reconsider architecture in relation to the temporal dynamics in which it is embedded, offering an indispensable condition for modifying its circumstances and mechanisms.

Historian Marvin Trachtenberg has emphasized that temporality is an epistemic condition that silently affects all production and experience of the built environment. In his book *Building-in-Time*, he outlines the modalities of building with and in time that took place in the Renaissance, in a period before the radical overturn of the human relationship to time. Indeed, mechanized, measurable and quantifiable time is a legacy of this first modernity, and oriented towards progress. German sociologist and political scientist Hartmut Rosa develops precisely this aspect in his book *Acceleration: a Social Critique of Time*, showing how the question of temporality is becoming increasingly apparent in the subsequent crises of modernity that we are currently experiencing or enduring at an accelerated pace. If the question of time becomes more central in our contemporary debate, how do environmental problems reintroduce temporality into architectural practice?

The exponential depletion of resources and the polluting character of the building industry confront us with the limits of continuous progress. Time is no longer conceivable in its linear progression, but should be addressed in a renewed manner. The dynamics that have hitherto governed the world – ‘the tempest of progress’, to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin’s *Angel of History* – have not stopped dragging us towards a future that risks turning into a catastrophe. Isn’t the introduction of ‘counter-time’ essential if we are to break out of the trajectories we’ve embarked upon? Are these the premises of a future that will – by force of circumstances – be radically different? Refusing to remain passive in the face of this accelerating process, this conference proposes to think from now on about time and temporalities that determine the course of things. It calls for more resilient, more inclusive counter-dynamics, and explores ways of establishing greater resonance with the world.

## ACCELERATION / DECELERATION

If we consider time as a dynamic vector for action, it seems that strategies of acceleration or deceleration offer counter-dynamics at an architectural, urban, and territorial scale, in response to trajectories that are putting the Earth in crisis. Accelerating or decelerating corresponds to a divide between those who support technological progress and those who distrust it. How do these temporal counter-dynamics manifest themselves, and what exactly do they propose? What kind of operational and aesthetic levers are mobilized?

**Acceleration** would aim – in the face of urgency – at the transition towards high technology and production efficiency, and the management of renewable resources and energy *on a global scale*. The mode of action would be to precipitate the current dynamics in order to move with great speed – before or after decline – towards a renewal, employing all available technical means for founding a more ecological world. Creative destruction plays a key role in this posture of radical renewal.

**Deceleration** would tend towards sobriety and the circular economy, relying on local and natural systems, and even on the archaic as a source and resource for a possible rebirth *on a local scale*. The mode of action would be to take a step aside and build counter-dynamics, places of resistance, places of sustainable materiality, places of new societal forms. Bottom-up movements, self-governance and self-construction would be part of this strategy, which seeks to create a new form of resonance with a world in crisis.

These two opposing strategies, which at first glance seem irreconcilable, do they not have a common vector in their ultimate goal, namely the introduction of ‘counter-times’ and ‘counter-spaces’ into the dynamics that currently govern the world in order to make it more sustainable?

A ‘*contretemps*’ (hitch, setback) is an event, a circumstance that runs counter to what was expected. In music, the French expression ‘*contretemps*’ signifies the ‘action of attacking a sound on a weak beat’ (offbeat, syncope), followed by a brief silence. What if this ‘unfortunate hitch’, this attack ‘on a weak beat’, enabled us to engage in this brief moment of suspension a turning point to initiate a transition, a sort of *reset*?

In this conference, we are interested in visions that establish, on an architectural, urban, and territorial scale, a different relationship between man and nature, the urban and the rural, architecture and matter, duration, and sustainability, by reconsidering time as a key factor for the transition. What about this underlying time, barely perceptible, barely touchable, which nonetheless determines the relationship that architecture establishes with the world? What tools do architects have at their disposal to ‘manipulate’ time, or to intervene in the temporalities of matter? What are architects’ strategies for dealing with the temporal dynamics that govern cities, territories and even the world as a whole, and how can they be countered? What should be accelerated or decelerated, by using which kind of means and finally: to what ends?

Rethinking our disciplines in terms of time and not just space is a challenge that concerns all scales (buildings, cities, landscapes, territories). The magnitude of the challenge calls for openness to other disciplines: history, the arts, philosophy, economics, literature, sociology, and anthropology. Many synergies could thus be developed

between researchers from different international research laboratories. Given the scale of the problem, don't we need to look at things from different angles, and fundamentally reconsider the way in which time shapes space?

## REQUIREMENTS

### Category Texts (contributions to the conference with a paper)

We invited conference participants to introduce their papers with an observation or fiction about a temporal strategy and to problematize the associated questions. Is it a question of acceleration or deceleration?

What are the issues at stake, what are the possible ways of envisaging a different relationship with resources, society, and the world? On what scale should action be taken, and what tools are available? The view can be retrospective or prospective (towards history or towards the future), concrete or speculative (or both).

### Category Drawings (without necessarily an associated paper)

In parallel to the written contributions to the conference, we are collecting non-textual contributions (drawings, collages, films, soundscapes) and other ways of expressing thoughts about this thematic beyond words. These contributions should be accompanied by a brief text explaining the approach (1,000 characters). A selection will be presented in the form of exhibition panels and/or screened during the conference. Afterwards, they will be accessible on a website and may accompany the publication.

## PROMOTION

A selection of the contributions will be made available on an Internet platform (*text category* and *video-drawing category*).

We are also planning a publication with a selection of articles, to be supplemented by illustrations and images from the *video-drawings category*.

## TIMETABLE

- **Reception of abstracts (1,000 characters)**  
10<sup>th</sup> of April 2024
- **Choice of speakers**  
22<sup>nd</sup> of April 2024
- **Reception of papers (15,000 characters)**  
21<sup>st</sup> of June 2024
- **Presentation**  
20<sup>th</sup> of September 2024
- **Conference**  
26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of September 2024

## LOCATION

Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, 1 place du Trocadéro et du 11 novembre, 75016, Paris, France.

## PARTICIPATION FEES

A contribution of €50 will be requested from speakers.

## TO BE HANDED IN

- Abstracts of 1,000 characters must be returned at latest on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 2024 (midnight) to the following e-mail address:  
[susanne.stacher@versailles.archi.fr](mailto:susanne.stacher@versailles.archi.fr)
- In the following format for the PDF:  
*NAME\_First name\_Title*
- In the "subject" of the email, write:  
*"Conference A Question of Time"*

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