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U.S. Pavilion at 2018 Venice Biennale. Freespace is Citizenship

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Mimi Zeiger, Niall Atkinson, Ann Lui. Photo by Nancy Wong

At the next Venice Architecture Biennale US Pavilion presents "Dimensions of Citizenship" curated by ***Niall Atkinson*** *(Associate Professor of Architectural History in the Department of Art History at the University of Chicago),* ***Ann Lui*** *(Assistant Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and co-founder of Future Firm) and* ***Mimi Zeiger*** *(Los Angeles-based critic, editor, curator, and educator, who has curated, contributed to, and collaborated on projects that have been exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago, the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale, the New Museum of New York). This kind of theme appears against Trump's policy, but surprisingly the curators are optimistic about the effectiveness of architecture to change the meaning of citizenship. They have invited seven design teams: Amanda Williams & Andres L. Hernandez (Chicago, IL), Design Earth (Cambridge, MA), Diller Scofidio + Renfro (New York, NY), Estudio Teddy Cruz + Fonna Forman (San Diego, CA), Keller Easterling (New Haven, CT), SCAPE (New York, NY), Studio Gang (Chicago, IL). Il giornale dell'architettura has interviewed the curators.*

Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara have said that "*Freespace* describes a generosity of spirit and a sense of humanity at the core of architecture's agenda, focusing on the quality of space itself". How does this relate or not relate to the themes explored in the US Pavilion?

Mimi Zeiger: We are excited by the generosity of spirit encapsulated in the overall *Freespace* theme. Grafton Architects' exhibition and ours share important parallel interests in architecture not only as a public good for the citizenry, but also as a potential site for democratic exchange and as an agent of civic activity. In hearing Farrell and McNamara present their theme in New York, we were surprised to find other overlaps, such as the recognition that architecture operates with measure (like our scales) from the micro to the macro—from bench to building or

infrastructure to planet—and also explorations in materiality and time.

Dimensions of Citizenship is the theme of the US Pavilion. How and why did you choose this concept?

Ann Lui: Questions around citizenship today are pressing, both in the U.S. and globally. *Dimensions of Citizenship* points to the important role of architecture in responding to these questions. From ancient models of ideal cities, to current questions around the edges of the nation state, to diverse visions of possible futures, the built environment is always involved in both reflecting and shaping our ideas of what it means to belong.

In *Dimensions of Citizenship*, we will show how architects and designers have a critical, and unique, voice in conversations about the ways we come together and how we negotiate that togetherness. Our exhibitors are taking deep dives into case studies at different scales. They explore the ways that the rights and responsibilities of citizenship are not just organized around the nation but also around city blocks, census tracts, watersheds, and cultural diasporas. We hope that this conversation around citizenship, and the role of architects within it, will catalyze design and discourse around future modes of belonging going forward.

During a Trump presidency, it seems bizarre to discuss Citizenship when your government does not recognize the rights of people like the Dreamers. Is your exhibition a rebuttal to your government?

Mimi Zeiger: Architecture can't evade these thorny questions of inclusion and exclusion. We are at a moment when headlines from around the world routinely ask us to consider who has access to the full rights of citizenship and who doesn't. While it is urgent to address our present condition and how the built environment is a platform for, expressive of, or complicit in political events, we believe these questions are much larger and much older than a single administration.

As we use the U.S. Pavilion to investigate/interrogate these issues, our ultimate context is global and is historically expansive. Ultimately, our hope is to transcend the current U.S. condition and put forth a vision of architecture as an important agent of transformation. Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman's piece *MEXUS*, for example, explores a transnational commons at US–Mexico border, while Amanda Williams, Andres Hernandez, and Shani Crowe's installation in the courtyard proposes an architecture that might move all marginalized people from a place of

survival to what they call “thrival”, a condition of liberation and democratic agency.

Ann Lui: While the works in the exhibition often explore the design of more inclusive futures, they also do not avoid the ways that architecture and design have been historically and continuously complicit in conditions of exclusion. Studio Gang’s work, for example, reckons with the legacy of confederate monuments in Memphis; Keller Easterling’s looks at the ways global logistics serve exploitive labor and cheap products but rarely populations in crisis. I believe that it’s critical that architectural disciplines have a conversation about the specific ways that design can and cannot intersect with both the construction and dismantling of conditions of citizenship.

How can architecture influence populism?

Niall Atkinson: If, by populism, you meant the current US and European movements that have been reshaping the political landscape, then architecture, as far as we are conceiving it and putting it into play, does have a specific role to play. If populism tends to unite certain groups around an idea of a common identity to the particular exclusion of others who are not considered to belong, then our strategy of getting designers to think about belonging across a whole range of scales counters the exclusionary aspects of populism. For example, modes of architecture that address individual connections to larger groups, that connect people through regional ecologies rather than cultural myths, that reconfigure spaces dedicated to transnational human flows, and that allow users to digitally customize their spatial coordinates and cross-border relationships, can all work to undermine forms of populism that reduce human spatial relationships to narrow forms of access. We think that one of the strengths of our theme and the way our participants are putting it into play, not only expands traditional notions of citizenship but also recognizes the ways in which all of us simultaneously inhabit multiple forms of belonging. In our daily lives, we live within these extended and overlapping groups, continually entering and exiting, for which architecture can act as a spatial facilitator.

At a more local level, our outreach efforts at this year’s Architecture Biennale, as part of our “*Citizenship”* programming, are working to establish a dialogue with Venetian residents and highlight their efforts to redesign their lives and their city from below. We are working with different groups and individuals who are engaging in a street-level urbanism of their own, one that injects diverse “popular” elements (in contrast to “populist”) into the discussion of what a human architectural landscape could look like.

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Cover photo: Memphis Landing. Courtesy of Studio Gang

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Architetto, critico di architettura, fotografo, dirige la webzine archphoto.it e la sua versione cartacea «archphoto2.0». Si è occupato di architettura radicale dal 2005 con libri e conferenze. Nel 2012 cura la mostra "Radical City" all'Archivio di Stato di Torino. Nel 2013, insieme ad Amit Wolf, vince il Grant della Graham Foundation per il progetto “Beyond Environment”. Nel 2015 vince la Autry Scholar Fellowship per la ricerca “Living the frontier” sulla frontiera storica americana. Nel 2017 è membro del comitato scientifico della mostra "Sottsass Oltre il design" allo CSAC di Parma. Nel 2019 cura la mostra "Paolo Soleri. From Torino to the desert", per celebrare il centenario dell'architetto torinese, nell'ambito di Torino Stratosferica-Utopian Hours. Dal 2015 studia l'opera di Giancarlo De Carlo, celebrata nel libro "Giancarlo De Carlo: l'architetto di Urbino"