



A PROMISE IN RETROSPECT: The Architecture of Prosperity

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Photography: Matthew Attard

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Certainty folds under the weight of a global crisis. The futures that felt so deeply embedded into the rapid trajectory of progress suddenly evaporated into thin air. Future projects, businesses, currencies, destinations: on hold, pending several nations combating the same invisible enemy. The world comes to a halt, our presumed immovable and unquestionable reality succumbed to a pandemic. The only observable movement is in our shifting patterns of everyday life - coping mechanisms forged under the twisting forces of adaptation to a new playbook that is writing itself in real time. Home-office, home-school, silent shopping centres, closed businesses, empty roads - a new socially-distant territory we could never have fathomed in our pre-COVID lives. As we anxiously navigate this newly assembled context, the only certainty is our au courant fixation on living in restriction and confinement.

Rewind the clocks 2 months back.

The UK was busy with BREXIT and accelerating the we-can-make-it-on-our-own narrative, successfully keeping the majority of Brits hooked on the promise of a brighter future by tugging on the secret chords of a revived Empire. Across the pond the largest presentation of democracy in the world was gearing up in the States, gathering large viewership, thirsty perhaps not so much for the intricacy of the democratic process at play but rather for more of the exaggerated hyperboles we've come to expect (and love to hate) from Donald Trump. The promise of American greatness was then, more than ever, stronger and brighter. So strong in fact that the Trumpian optimism would offer a resolution to the long and tangled Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the "Peace to Prosperity" plan.

Delusion was not contained to the UK and the US. It seemed that governments all over the world had been propagating the same promise for a prosperous future. More tourism, more business. New roads, better projects. Building faster, reaching higher. No matter if Venice should sink under a combination of rising sea levels and an insatiable tourism industry. The imagined consequences of not fulfilling the promise would be far more deadly than the polluted air in our cities, said the politicians. The promise became a powerful narrative more contagious than the Bible. The pandemic of identical generic buildings sprouting across all corners of the globe is a testament to its universal spread.



Architecture is (inadvertently or not) recruited as part of the politicians' repertoire to propagate this promise, becoming a symbol of power and prosperity. With each built project the narrative is simultaneously reinforced and used to justify more architecture to fulfill this promise. It is therefore no coincidence that the "Peace to Prosperity" plan is delivered not only through economic and political reform but also in the form of tunnels, access roads and buildings. After all, built legacies are reliable walls which politicians lean on to lend credibility to governance. More indicative than any graph, the cityscape is the new measure of GDP growth and popularity enjoyed by the novel hybrid salesman-politician.

Today we watch as in the midst of a crisis those built legacies come under the ultimate test of realizing that promise for prosperity. Undeniably, the cracks begin to emerge; the inadequacy of our hospitals, the darkness and compactness of our homes, the unforgiving claustrophobia with our neighbours or the antithetical longing for a sense of community amongst segregated dwellings, lonely highways and cars stowed away unused, meager public spaces leaving much to be desired within the frame of social distancing measures. Quarantined living has made visible the faults of an architecture built to maximise real estate value and not the requirements of habitation. The cityscape, once the poster image of a thriving society, now only evokes a sense of ambivalence.



We look upon our once-familiar landscape with unfamiliar eyes. The most immediate and conspicuous revelations have certainly been those concerning the shifting relationship with our dwellings. Sun beds on rooftops, work-spaces in bedrooms, pop-up band performances in balconies, sprees of green-scaping interiors, home-grown vegetables hanging over slivers of light breaking through openings. The functional cap on our households blown through the roof as we reinvent and circumvent the limitations of many of the buildings that have become a temporary cage. This recalibration is not insignificant and perhaps not limited to our dwellings. The easing of quarantine restrictions in several territories will in no doubt confront us with other shifting relations in built and public spaces. Will we ever stand in proximity as we once did? Will our journeys in public transport be the same? How will beaches and other public spaces prevent acts of gathering? Can the promise of prosperity be maintained or will a new narrative unfold?



This Text Catalogue column is situated in a moment of retrospection which will hold suspect the condition of spaces and activities propagated under a promise of prosperity, and illustrate how events (pandemics for example) force a change in activities and meaning of spaces. This exercise of retrospection is not bound by territory and could be familiar to people situated in different locations by using universal themes such as dwelling, infrastructure, and the public and commercial realm.

Although paradoxical at first, looking backward instead of forward to the future perhaps could serve as a much-needed pause in the journey towards the promise of prosperity. Here, the documentation of architectural transgressions from the "Architecture of Prosperity" needn't be read as a new promise of enlightenment - after all, it won't be long before new prophets endowed with a vision for the future take this role.



"Text Catalogue was founded by Ella Fleri Soler & Andrew Darmanin to work on a variety of research projects within Architecture, both locally in Malta and internationally, some of which in collaboration with other independent researchers or institutions."