

What is Architecture?



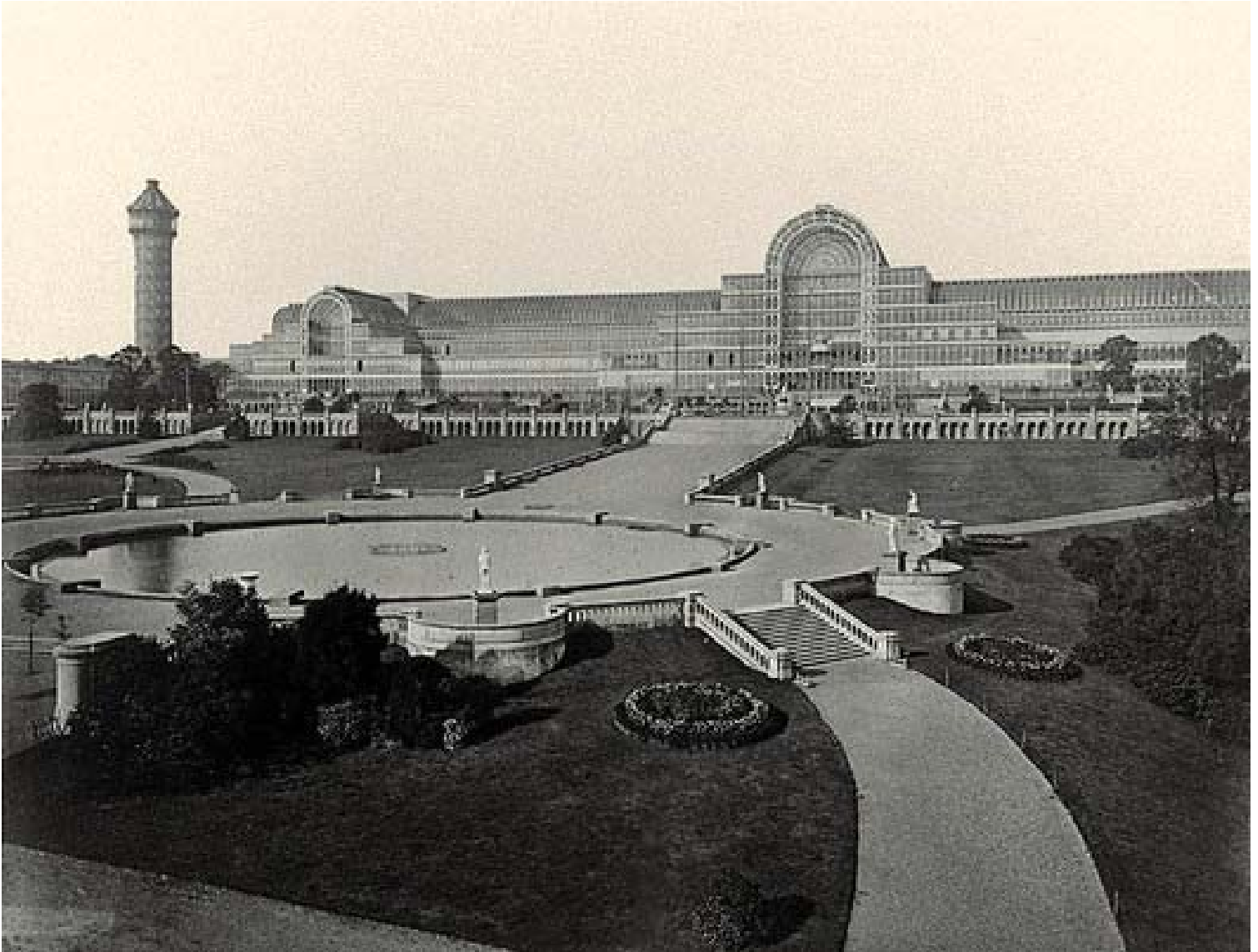
"Buildings are the most important traces we leave behind as people". Image © Flickr CC user onthego tours

Short answer: The built image of ourselves.

Long answer: In a world of fluid, virtual values, architecture endures. The images that you, your work, your city, and your country create by building will more than likely outlive you. Buildings are the most important traces we leave behind as people. Old ones were here long before we arrived and the new ones we make will be here long after we're gone. Architecture is a collective selfie. It's a status that can't be updated.

At ArchDaily, we've been asking architects the question "what is architecture" in our [AD Interviews](#) for years, so we were excited to learn of Rasmus Wærn & [Gert Wingårdh](#)'s new book, "[What is Architecture? And 100 Other Questions](#)." Over the following week, we'll be sharing seven short excerpts from the book - keep an eye out for a new one each day. "[What is Architecture? And 100 Other Questions](#)" will be on sale starting September 1st.

Who Decides What Architecture Is?



"The antiquarians defend the tracks of history, while the architects want to make new tracks". Image © Philip Henry Delamotte via Wikimedia Commons

Short answer: The trusted, the elected, and those with the money.

Long answer: It would be nice to answer that we all do, but it's really not that simple. In many contexts, there is someone who finally decides. Municipalities have antiquarians and architects who draw up the outlines for what deserves to be preserved and what can be permitted for construction. Despite their learned expertise, these two groups often come into conflict with each other. The antiquarians defend the tracks of history, while the architects want to make new tracks. Hopefully, both are acting in the public interest, but the architect's reasoning is always more abstract. The challenge of coming to an agreement about what is architecture cannot compare to the question of what can become architecture. That is the core of the architect's expertise.

Is Architecture Necessary?



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Short answer: No. Some people will always be strong enough to make it anyway.

Long answer: We can be uplifted by a beautiful and harmonious view of a city even though we know that, just like every other city, it is full of wretched, bickering, greedy, and dishonest people. But the shortcomings of its inhabitants do not spoil the joy of a divine urban scene. Likewise, you can grow up in an impoverished environment and still be an outstanding person. And even the most well-designed environment provides no guarantees about the quality of life. To believe otherwise is a form of determinism. As Winston Churchill said, “We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.” Luckily, this is not always true. We push back, suppress the dreadful, mask over it, or we rebuild. If the architecture isn’t there from the start it will come, as long as people get the chance to make their mark.

What Is the Worst Thing About Architecture Today?



"Ceilings have devolved from being the focal point of a room to being a zone for mechanical equipment". Image © Nico Saieh

Short answer: Ceilings.

Long answer: [Ceilings](#) have devolved from being the focal point of a room to being a zone for mechanical equipment. In all the world's greatest spaces we've always looked up in awe. Where our gaze was once met with fantastical vaulted ceilings, remarkable truss structures, or distinctive decorative treatments, today we typically find acoustic tiles, ductwork, and fluorescent strip lighting. Having abandoned the ceiling as a canvas for creativity with the dawn of the technological era, we've had a hard time taking it back. Today, it's hard to compete with all that mechanical equipment when all you're arguing for is a blank white surface. But a compelling vision of a space designed to make the ceiling its primary feature can enchant even the most pragmatic minds. There is good reason to be stubborn: since we seldom rearrange or redecorate the ceiling the way we do the rest of a space, what we create overhead lives a long life.

Is the Architect an Authoritarian?



"Alvar Aalto had become a fixture in the architectural firmament, but fell hard to earth when the society that had held him aloft suddenly turned its back on all establishment figures". Image © Nico Saieh

Short answer: No. Don't confuse the responsibility of proposing solutions with the power to execute them.

Long answer: Few things have changed the role of the architect as radically as when many people lost faith in the idea of authority in the 1970s. Nothing was the same after that. Numerous star architects born around the turn of the last century, such as [Alvar Aalto](#), had become a fixture in the architectural firmament, but fell hard to earth when the society that had held him aloft suddenly turned its back on all establishment figures. The revolt against the status quo changed the rules of the game for architects and politicians in particular. And the loss of authority soon led to the loss of self-confidence, but that's nothing to grumble about now. The days when an architect could lead the way by pointing are long gone; now it's essential to be enthusiastic and encourage everyone to come together. That works best if architects believe in themselves

Can't We Design Buildings to Look Like They Used To?



"Once we've learned to really understand old buildings and cities, we can recreate their qualities in other forms". Image © Andy Spain

Short answer: Sure we can. But everything will always bear the mark of its own time.

Long answer: **Sticking with something that we know works is a good strategy. Lots of old buildings and cities function extraordinarily well. As a rule it's dumb to replace them with something else. And modern times don't necessarily demand modern buildings. In many cases it's easy to live a modern lifestyle in a renovated building. The problem with creating new buildings and cities that look like old ones is not imitation per se—we've learned to deal with much bigger lies than that. But the charm of old cities runs deep below the surface. Once we've learned to really understand old buildings and cities, we can recreate their qualities in other forms. Buildings are resources; projects are opportunities.**

How Long Will Modernity be Dressed in Glass?



"Glass buildings are as tangible as others and must be treated as such". Image © Flickr CC user Wally Gobetz

Short answer: As long as you can claim that glass is almost nothing.

Long answer: Ever since the Gothic era, glass has scored points for its invisibility. Walls of glass are often described using words such as openness, transparency, and participation. But those words are more compelling than the reality. In practice, a glass building can be just as forbidding as a blank wall. Glass buildings are as tangible as others and must be treated as such. We used to rely on window muntins to give form and substance to glass, weaving together the wall across the window opening. If glass is going to make up the whole wall on its own, it also has to be able to be *something*. That requires more than just wanting to be nothing.

This short excerpt was taken from [Rasmus Wærn](#) & [Gert Wingårdh](#)'s new book, "[What is Architecture? And 100 Other Questions](#)." This week, we're sharing seven questions from the book, with one new excerpt released each day. "[What is Architecture? And 100 Other Questions](#)" will be on sale starting September 1st