



FIGURE 01

*“...there is no reason why each one of us should not — in every instance — attempt change regardless, even provisionally, or incrementally, rather than demanding revolution, or failing that, doing nothing. And while this returns the discussion to Bloch, it also brings it close to Lefebvre as well, who ventured to believe that critical engagement with the banality of the given, of the everyday, could reveal cracks out of which the apparently impossible could be revealed as actually possible”<sup>i</sup>*

## **NEW UTOPIAN TRAJECTORIES WITHIN THE BANALITY OF THE GIVEN: GLOBALIZATION, ARCHITECTURAL AGENCY, AND THE UTOPIAN IMAGINATION**

### **Abstract:**

Globalization has transformed the utopian imagination in architecture and though the scale and complexity of its possibilities are seemingly limitless, previous generations have been burned by an enticing imagery that frequently failed to fulfill its promises. Both utopia and architecture are political acts and their central focus should be the communication of ideas and creation of visionary agendas that better peoples' lives at the immediate scale of the everyday. In this new global context, what role does the utopian architect now claim and how can their agency be most transformative pragmatically that incorporate new connections carrying unconventional opportunities for change?

### **Introduction:**

Architecture brings together many factors important to society such as the provision of shelter, the application of technology, art, ethics, science and more while also playing a central role in formulating the collective meaning of the “good life” within a community. In addition, it often mirrors a community's collective identity and aspirations in relation to its position regionally, nationally and even globally. Architecture then, can be understood as “a natural reflection of what is current socially, politically, and economically”.<sup>ii</sup> Given this, and in spite of the intentions of many architects, the architectural endeavor clearly falls within the realm of politics and its capacity to envision social change affecting the collective imagination aligns it another centrally influential force utopia.

Architecture and utopia have and always will be interrelated and though globalization is not a new process, its increasingly rapid expanse has increased the complexity of this connection. As Zygmunt Bauman describes: “For

everybody, though, globalization is the intractable fate of the world, an irreversible process". One that; "is also a process which affects us all in the same measure and same way. We are all being 'globalized' — and being globalized means much the same to all who 'globalized' are."<sup>iii</sup> The "new" in globalization is the realization that "no one" is in control, that the "globalized" are in a state of unintended and unanticipated consequences that feels like a "vast expanse of man-made wilderness....a "manufactured jungle" — the post-domestication wilderness, that has emerged after the conquest and because of it."<sup>iv</sup> This has brought about some massive economic, political, and environmental changes to modern life transforming it to unleash new potentially potent modes of operation with the hopeful possibility of influencing positive social change while also carrying the risk of contributing to the our contemporary chaotic state. More important to the ensuing discussion, globalization is "the intensification of worldwide social relations in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa".<sup>v</sup> These newly emergent local events with global ramifications are blurring traditional disciplinary definitions to open up new possibilities for innovation and a broadened purview of influence for the profession of architecture.

Much of the negativity surrounding globalization, architecture, and utopianism stems from their association with modernism and its penchant for rationality and progress based on particular building types in the international style such as hotels, malls and airports.<sup>vi</sup> This has skewed the scalar expectation for what constitutes an influential architectural project as the size of what is viewed as global and the expected level of exposure in the global architectural media has increased substantially over the last two decades. Architects have also focused much more on the aesthetic side of utopia, depicting huge transformations of entire parts of cities or the wholesale creation of new ones. As technology has advanced and it has become possible to actualize the once fantastic scale of utopian visions, increasingly cold and sterile environments divorced of their immediate context have emerged. Housing projects, corporate office parks, and transportation hubs promoting a modernist agenda aligning seamlessly with globalization's image of: "rationality, scientific innovation, progress and the end of tradition."; has allowed the connection to emerge where: "With globalization Modernism conquered the earth"<sup>vii</sup>. In some circles, this has caused a backlash that has ensnared both utopia and architecture as modernity itself became the flag bearer for all considered utopian and utopianism itself was increasingly seen as having suspect goals relating more to accumulation of power than the manifestation of a better world. Far from being the savior that many early modernists envisioned, architecture has become increasingly seen as the unwitting midwife to corporate greed and dictatorial regimes. The manipulation of architecture as a vehicle for the legitimization of power was simple because architects focused on aesthetics, overlooking the fact that any utopia especially when coupled with acts of building or graphic representation are essentially political acts involving a great deal of influence and risk.

Architecture inhabits a middle ground between the utopian imagination and the structures necessary for social change making it an effective vehicle of communication and representation within the political realm. Frequently, it is the material representation of existing social, political, or economic power structures and lends legitimacy to these structures through the meaning that societies place on architecture's spatial language as communicated through styles, spatial scale, and materiality. It reinforces the narrative of how individuals see their historical connections to their culture and founds the collective identity of a given culture. This begs the question: How does this intensified connection affect the role of the architect and what medium is affective in communicating the intentions of a culturally influential avenue such as utopianism? The spirit of utopianism itself is usually not the issue nor are the political structures it seeks to align with or undermine, it is frequently the scale and the hyper focus on creating a complete environment *tabula rasa* that seems overly problematic.

Given this, the purpose here is not a traditional exploration of utopia as a critique or fantastical image depicted in the form of a perfected social condition, but a reevaluation of the potential relationship of utopia and architectural agency as they follow parallel transformative trajectories within the context of globalization. In addition, this mapping of potential will not be at the scale of iconic projects such as Libeskind's Berlin Museum, but at the grass roots level of "small" projects influential at the localized scale that can both secure and build a stronger collective identity at the community level. By exploring the changing conceptual topography of this relationship, new avenues of openness towards the potential role for architects outside architecture's traditional boundaries can be mapped acknowledging both architecture and utopia as political activities demanding care when utilizing their transformative potential. For precedent, the discipline must take clues from other areas of expertise more familiar with this type of engagement such as political philosophy. "Small" becomes as important as "large" in the creation of innovative processes of design with the latter is referencing the contemporary architect's influence in a design process envisioned as a more unified progression including finance, community mobilization, and integrated project delivery in the construction of a "project." When conceptually aligned with this process, Utopia can be seen to operate on multiple scales from its manifestation at more modest scales materially, to influencing social attitudes to enlarge the potential impact of design within both its immediate and global social context simultaneously.

“...Arguably, the greatest value of Utopia for architecture resides in its contribution to the social and the political dimensions of architecture.”<sup>viii</sup> In this light, Samuel Mockbee’s Rural studio depicted as a utopian vehicle for architecture as an agent of change because its goals of directly influencing and perpetuating community well being through the introduction of young architects and students to the power of radically rethinking possibility within a given context no matter the scale or aesthetic is especially pertinent to this conceptual exploration. It is an illustration of the positive spirit and intention of the utopian imagination at its best. Globalization has caused many of the conditions the Rural Studio seeks to overcome as well as provides the means for students of diverse backgrounds to come together to address them.<sup>ix</sup> A key aim then is to understand how the utopian spirit operates in this type of climate — one created by globalization — to envision how the architect moves beyond building, to engage all the processes included in the construction of even the smallest of projects, but potentially some of the most influential as vehicles of hope. In short this study will be undertaken to glean a critical understanding of the potential of utopia and its relationship to agency in regards to envisioning design agendas in the spirit of the utopian tradition while transforming its conventional content and purpose to address local conditions within the greater global context. Architects are still builders, but must also become researchers, politicians, fundraisers, and community organizers so architecture can then become more than just constructing shelter to become a mobilizing agent for community identity at a variety of scales.



FIGURE 02

To illustrate this possibility, the introduction of the political concept of “the nudge” as a means of translating and broadening the influence of the architects’ traditional skill set to engage the community at large through a utopian agenda will be undertaken followed by a discussion outlining specific examples of how this process might manifest to change both the practice and pedagogy of architecture in ways that more readily adapt it to a world where a multitude of “locals” affect the global on a continual basis. These examples are projects by students and instructors at the college of architecture and planning, the university of Colorado Denver and are located in Colorado in the cities of Denver and Ridgeway, as well as another residential project located in Bluff, Utah and illustrate how the next generation of architects might engage with how:

“The utopian promise will emerge out of the education of desire that goes hand in hand with an expanded conception of architecture, equally bound up with notions of agency, of citizens and architects alike, as with the recuperation of the social and political dimensions of architecture, and thus its purpose (beyond aesthetic adornment of capital and power alike).”<sup>x</sup>

How this promise can frame a broad re conceptualization of architectural agency into a more open and effective design attitude adept at navigating the transformative topography of colliding local/global scales focused on the grass roots level will guide this study. These projects are only early indicators of this new potential of agency for contemporary architects where architects choose to not only construct in the spatial and material sense, but also build the founding visions of “worlds” that are pragmatically within our reach. Add to this condition the fundamental skill set of defining concrete strategies of execution basic to architectural education and the “playing field” for the architect is ripe to be broadened. In the “no where” of this new global realm, where the material and virtual are increasingly blurred to forge new networks and operational infrastructure at all scales, how is the utopian architect defined and what medium will be the operative choice? The potential for a broadened agency proposed here is in part utopian because it demands speculation on new possibilities contained within existing conditions.

### **The Utopian Imagination and The Politics of Speculative Architectural Agency**

The human spirit desires to transform its immediate surroundings and demands purposeful interventions directed towards the future while simultaneously criticizing the present. It is this multi-temporal existence incorporating the empirical knowledge of the present with speculative visions involving potential futures that enables our intentions to have a greater impact on our surroundings through a refined ability for abstract thought and speculation.<sup>xi</sup> Human

reality is not only multi-dimensional in the spatial sense, but in the temporal one as well. Our consciousness inhabits past imagery, present perceptions, and a future of imagined possibilities simultaneously. As Yves Zarka explains, human imagination is at its most powerful when:

“The spirit of Utopia becomes a way of thinking about becoming as opposed to what has become; what is emerging, as opposed to what is fixed and static. Bloch wrote: Expectation, hope and intention, directed towards the possibility which has not arrived, constitute not only a fundamental property of the human consciousness but also, provided they are rectified and grasped in their concrete aspect, a fundamental determination at the heart of objective reality itself.”<sup>xii</sup>



FIGURE 03

This imaginative capacity to conceive of our surroundings as fluid interactive systems ripe for change can be the basis for formidable achievements towards the manifestation of a better community. However, this capacity also contains negative connotations because historical disastrous events have been unleashed that resulted in contributing to an atmosphere of disillusion and cynicism instead of enlightenment. This is the paradox<sup>xiii</sup> the utopian imagination carries with it because of its dual capacity for conveying visions for positive change by endowing the mind with the power to critically analyze contemporary circumstances to imagine positive future possibilities, while conversely this visionary potential can also damage the very social psyche the utopian seeks to inform by proposing fantastical images divorced from any real possibility for change that could emerge out of existing circumstances. If this circumstance

arises, utopian speculation is left as a flagging social force, largely impotent in bringing about necessary social and political change.<sup>xiv</sup> Paul Tillich sums up the energetic nature of its advocacy for future potential as: "The bearers of utopia are those who have sufficient power of being to achieve progress.... those who are able to transform reality, and it is in them that the power of utopia is anchored."<sup>xv</sup>

The exercise of the utopian imagination must overcome this exaggerated wishfulness and channel its desires from the realm of fantasy to that of critical analysis of the authentic parameters for positive change. A culture must create its aspirations through such a process, or be forced to accept the ones fabricated by others. When a social structure trades experimentation to challenge entrenched systems for a security that limits risk but also freedom, social vitality is lost and atrophy begins to set in.<sup>xvi</sup> The potential of any utopian movement for actual change relates to its credibility in delivering on the realization of goals that often carry as much risk as reward. Critics like Karl Popper envision the utopian endeavor as a form of social engineering fostering an obsession with perfection with the central intention being the reconstruction of social structures utilizing determinate plans portrayed as rational and scientific.<sup>xvii</sup> In addition, the aestheticism inherent in majority of utopias is partly the cause of their irrationality, because they advocate simplified paradigms where social structures are conceived as blank canvases radically transformable by visions of abstract perfection. This causes utopianism to seek to instill a hope in political miracles, but its images of perfection can emerge only by shedding the very rationale claimed as their basis.<sup>xviii</sup>

Popper claims that to be effective, utopias must be more intricately aligned with real social contexts and be implemented more incrementally. Any changes to the institutional structures of a community must occur over time due to the complex nature of their interaction and the fact that human aspirations and visions must be guided by experiences gained through smaller scale experimentation. This is in the spirit of an authentic scientific methodology and must be the basis for complex undertakings such as the reformation of communal infrastructure or social constructs where the inevitability of mistakes can only be overcome by more modest and cautious adjustments. This more 'piece-meal' process of transforming social constructs allows knowledge to be gained through small-scale experiments compiled to form a continuous process of reformation calibrated to the immediate needs of those involved simultaneous to the collective visions of a community. This technique is better prepared to accommodate social, political and economic fluctuations because of the space allowed to address mistakes as they arise and make the necessary adjustments over time. Not traditionally considered 'rational' by the conventional standards of utopian idealism it does however, contain the greatest chance of success in complex social and political circumstance.<sup>xix</sup>

The utopian imagination is an inherent part of the complex of ideals that simultaneously orders a community while projecting the possibilities guiding its necessary and perpetual transformation. This conception does not envision utopian thought as the antithesis of the existing order, but as an intrinsic part of the continual process of civil maturity. It provides critical suggestions indicating requisite reforms for the maintenance of the collective consciousness of a

community and strengthens communal ties. Though its form, context, and language may be imaginative or seemingly visionary at times, the essential character of the changes it seeks to evoke must arise from the existing context any real possibility of transformation is to emerge.

### **Architectural Agency and the Potential of the “Utopian Nudge.”**

What if the architect truly embraced the potential for utopia as a critical process, one that both connects and guides economic, cultural, and political interrelationships to broaden the influence of architectural in more than just the material and constructive sense? What if new overlapping infrastructures that have emerged in the wake of globalization at a local scale are embraced and architects begin to take on more non-conventional roles such as researchers, community organizers, or environmental activists? Also, what if these realms are seen in a contemporary utopian light with the potential to address issues on both a more pragmatic and localized level, but inevitably those caused by global integration and the challenges it brings about? Architects have always, intentionally or not, dealt with the institutional structures of communities by creating material lending legitimacy and meaning to their authority and image. What if architects began to see their agency linked to creating structures or organizations — communal, political, material, or otherwise — not just as constructors of buildings outside the political process, but as agents whose activities are immersed in the definition of the design process on a multitude of fronts within the complex process of constructing? How might the conception of architectural agency change to meet these challenges and opportunities?

A possible example of how this might occur can be found within the discipline of political philosophy in a theory currently being debated in policy circles called “libertarian paternalism”. The idea comes from a book by Thaler and Sunstein entitled *Nudge*.<sup>xx</sup> The text proposes a way for government agencies and private institutions to influence individuals to make decisions that would ultimately benefit them, yet would not limit their freedom to choose in any way. Its foundational idea proposes to frame both the definition and number of choices people have involving certain issues where individuals are told specifically what to do or think, but their frame of reference involving a particular issue is shaped or influenced.<sup>xxi</sup>

The realm of potential choices and their context are defined by what the authors describe as a “choice architect”. This individual is responsible for setting the background or context where people make their choices so they act in a predictable manner without forbidding any options per se. The ultimate goal is not to necessarily benefit or punish those being “nudged”, but to encourage individuals to move past acting purely in self-interest to make decisions benefiting the larger community in the longer term.<sup>xxii</sup> Though powerful in the abstract there is a real potential for negative affects. Like utopianism, this “shaping” could become a form of soft manipulation and under the guidance of a gifted exploiter with malevolent intentions could become a paternalistic power play. Choice as depicted here is more about the intention and influence of the “choice architect” removing or placing obstacles in the process rather than the actual decision of the individuals being affected. Supporters of this concept counter that though this is likely true within a single unified culture, that in the complexity of our globalized world with its many cultures and technologies vying for influence and resources, the breadth of possibilities for this strategy to emerge and be tested adequately, makes this a less likely scenario.<sup>xxiii</sup>

A similar idea to “nudge” is called the “think” strategy and is based on the concept of deliberative democracy where “free and equal public deliberation has an educational effect as citizens increase their knowledge and understanding of the consequences of their actions”.<sup>xxiv</sup> The key difference from the nudge theory is the aspect of public deliberation that can eliminate irrational preferences through a process where self interests and perspectives are discussed openly and aired in public. Within the public realm, there is a clear desire to forge a more civic orientation that calls into question irrational beliefs based on faulty empirical evidence. This view is often criticized for being too utopian (in terms of its idealism that is seemingly disconnected from the immediate context) in its ambition to shape a political process based on mutual respect and understanding. It also would not be very effective in influencing short term contemporary issues. To address this criticism many democratic deliberative theorists have sought to define various forms of empowering participatory governance attempting the institutionalization of the normative features of deliberation.<sup>xxv</sup>

Due to the effort demanded by the individual in the deliberative process, political theorists, Peter John, Graham Smith, and Gerry Stoker proposed that both ‘Nudge’ and ‘Think’ strategies could be utilized depending on the context of the operative process. Nudging can be more direct in its approaches to influence decisions. In relation to the goals of this study, the ‘choice architect’ for “nudge” must be seen more in the role of an expert, with the ability to not only envision objectives, but also design the steps encouraging the decisions and enthusiasm needed to make them feasible. Within the “think” strategy, there needs to be an open mindedness on the part of the organizer as well as a willingness to organize and support the informational process encouraging citizen investigation and education. They

must design and facilitate not only the institutions that encourage this type of participation and deliberation, but also the follow up strategies for the desired actions and goals outlined during the group deliberation.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Architects are trained to envision potential projects and lay out clear strategies manifesting their objectives. What if the organizational and communication skill sets necessary to successfully construct buildings were utilized to envision larger realms of operations and modes of communication for designers and architects as community organizers or advocates? The design disciplines' strengths are their capacity to engage ideal worlds and merge them with the pragmatic strategies founded on rigorous analysis addressing the complexity of economic and political contexts both in the short and long terms simultaneously. In addition, architects also have the skill set necessary to communicate these strategies to a larger public through graphic mediums. If architects can set aside the aesthetic realm of architecture, (and utopia for that matter,) to become open to the exploration of unconventional mediums and messages, they can again play a central role in affecting real social change at numerous scales. Though many contemporary ideas may be categorically utopian at their inception, globalization and its technological sophistication has made their manifestation even in the remotest locales potentially feasible. Architects with "open" attitudes towards engaging these modes of operation could bring this potential even closer and extend the reach of architectural agency and influence.

### Transforming Agency: Colorado Building Workshop:



FIGURE 04

In the last chapter of his book *Architecture Depends*, Jeremy Till presents a metaphor of the contemporary architect akin to the earthbound angel in the Wim Wender's movie "Wings of Desire". He imagines contemporary architects as:

"Angels, androgynous imaginers of possibility, with dirty faces, which are always engaged. Angels, the original messengers, with dirty faces, human and slightly flawed. Architects modestly bound to the earth but with the vision, environmental sense, and ethical imagination to project new (social) futures on

behalf of others."<sup>xxvii</sup>

With this, Till is arguing for a utopian architect grounded in the necessary pragmatism of the banal whose imagination is transformative yet not above engaging the complexity and restrictions of real sites and political processes. He describes an individual whose imagination creates visions projecting new futures while accepting that they will inevitably be riddled with faults and dangers. In contemporary globalization the architecture project is seen as writ large to become the site for openness and curiosity, but only for the contemporary architect willing to filter the chaos of a real context to make sure their "intent is guided by the aspirations to reform space in the name of others."<sup>xxviii</sup>

Through the preceding discussion concerning globalization, the utopian imagination, and architectural agency, the metaphor proposed by Till works well with one addition: that the potential of what is considered "a project" for an architect must broaden immensely. This new utopian architect has to be willing to leave the familiar reality of the conventionally defined architectural project and engage in the political process directly. The key skill sets that are both translatable and necessary for success are organization, communication, and the ability to analyze and interpret data. At times these skills may be exhibited through projects that are architecturally conventional because they involve the construction of a building or similar, while other times "building" might be concerned with consensus or rigorous analysis of contextual issues rather than aesthetically pleasing depictions of beautiful buildings or perfect societies.

This new "utopian" must be the master of the political nudge and/or the think strategies discussed in the previous section, willing to act in a myriad of mediums and the simultaneity of scales demanded ranging from the purely political to implementing an integrated project delivery process during the actual construction phase. Many opportunities to manifest utopias at a pragmatic scale that presently exist or are emergent will take audacious and creative individuals to critically analyze issues found in this new reality to propose strategies that pool existing resources and garner support from a wide range of constituencies. Though fearless, they must also be responsible, inherently understanding the necessity to align bold



FIGURE 05

visions with the mundane details of the everyday in ways that are flexible and accepting of change over time. The potential for what can be considered the legitimate practice of the architect must move from a solely formal spatial venue to the direct engagement with the complexity of the economic, political, and social context surrounding “projects”. Utopias exist nowhere in particular in the material or geographic sense, but everywhere regarding our potential to engage our surroundings towards positive change at simultaneous scales ranging from the local to the global.

There are many ways these activities can manifest and there are texts that highlight these such as *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism and Spatial Agency*<sup>xxx</sup> and *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*.<sup>xxx</sup> Though these do not confront the utopian question directly, they do embrace the call for more incremental and socially engaged modes of practice questioning the absolute necessity of architecture and architects.<sup>xxx</sup> Samuel Mockbee’s work with the Rural Studio has also been well documented and has spawned similar programs across the country. The Rural Studio model has the greatest potential for cultivating a utopian spirit while broadening the purview of architecture through a greater incorporation of the social processes that support and build community. Introducing this potential to students and young professionals before the conventional conception of architectural practice becomes ingrained is critically important. Another more recent example of how this condition could manifest is the Colorado Building Workshop supervised by Rick Sommerfeld, the Director of the Design-Build Certificate program and a faculty member at the College of Architecture and Planning, the University of Colorado Denver. The projects of the Workshop vary in size, have an impressively diverse client base, are of high aesthetic quality, and impact the surrounding communities to a far greater extent than one would imagine given their modest scale and budgets. They range from affordable housing on the Navajo reservation in Bluff, Utah, a community performance space in Ridgeway, Colorado, and an outdoor educational classroom in Jefferson County, Colorado.



FIGURE 06

The workshop stresses the importance of being open towards the conception of agency in the building and design process. It sets out to create experiences that provide students with the knowledge and skills to re envision the potential of design and imaginatively engage the real needs and interests of communities. In this real world laboratory, they are exposed to developmental concerns, the importance of risk management, the creation of pro formas, design strategies that foster community support, and construction processes utilizing Integrative Project Delivery systems. There is also coursework and class time set aside to cultivating the skills and confidence to represent their clients in community hearings and planning commission meetings so they leave the program with the ability to organize community meetings to build public consensus, understand the complexity and risk involved in any project, and work through legal issues that will be encountered. The skills and confidence gained also allow these future practitioners to be able to resist the push by developers only interested in profit to advance the cause of good design that can better people lives. According to Sommerfeld, a central aim is to have participants in the process leave, “Armed with the theoretical and practical research skills that will enable these future architects to become a real part of the discussion about development, not merely a subcontractor of architecture producing drawings for developers. If architecture is to once again claim its place as a profession that leads and shapes communities it is imperative that we give the students skills to be leaders.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

FIGURE 07



From the community side of the design equation, this process encourages not for profit organizations and other groups to entertain projects they normally could not afford through funding sources such as material donations through private/public relationships cultivated by the workshop. Since the design services and labor costs are donated by the design build program, the college is a stake holder in a community process that spawns working relationships with subcontractors and other various private groups which affords student insights into the degree of marketing and networking necessary for a successful outcome in any building process, especially those within the public domain. This allows students to move beyond the traditional conception of architectural

education found in many institutions that places an unbalanced weighting in their curriculum on the conventional view of design as manifested in the studio setting. This broader view of the design process provides insights into opportunities regarding the unique and direct impact design can have. This type of clarity is often elusive to other disciplines as well as to their peers in more conventional architectural educational programs. Each project is unique in scope and the relationships made with the stakeholders, allowing students to have a fulfilling experience in each semester while bringing new images and ideas of what constitutes a project that can carry over from semester to semester. As an illustration of the richness of this continuity, three specific projects are significant.

WEEP is a bird-banding pavilion for the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory and Denver Audubon Society. The landowner was Denver Water and there were several meetings between the users and the landowner to discuss program, design intent, site impact, and construction delivery methods. Students ran the community meetings and responded to questions from the user groups while researching codes and the permitting process. They ultimately guided the project through site approval and attained the grading, flood plane, fire, and building permits. Representatives from the various stakeholder groups ranged in expertise from a biologist, a county recreation manager as well as civil and structural engineers. There were also roofing specialists and steel fabrication consultants lending their expertise to the process. Given the make up of these groups, the students had to definitely take a “think” strategy position and served as discussion facilitators to create an interdisciplinary atmosphere of dialogue and expertise exchanges.

An example of a more “nudge” type of interaction was the Ridgeway performing Arts stage where students met with the city mayor, a special music committee, and general community members from the town of Ridgeway, Colorado. Students were required to set the agenda for every meeting as well as supervise the question and answer sessions. To prepare them for this experience, the instructor gave lectures and critiqued the presentation of the issues and possible choices surrounding the project in a graphic format that communicated ideas, research, and design intentions in a clear manner comprehensible to each representative group as well as the general public. The final example stems from a partnership with the University of Utah’s Design Build Bluff program, the Navajo Housing Authority, Navajo Trust Fund, and other various donors. Students were involved with Navajo families to secure funding and apply for home site leases, demanding a combination of the nudge and think strategies. They presented their ideas to Navajo Chapter houses to request funding, met with governmental agencies such as the Bureau of Land Reclamation and NREL (National Research Energy Lab) to discuss water catchment issues and to undertake energy modeling and testing for the designs of several homes.



FIGURE 08

In the context of this exploration of the utopian capacity for pragmatic and positive change if implemented incrementally through political concepts like “nudge” and “think”, the WEEP project seems an especially good example of how the skill set of architects can communicate and frame discussions about what constitutes a “project.” It is considered one of the workshop’s most successful endeavors with the initial goal being the creation of a modest outdoor classroom for educating the public about the surrounding landscape. It turned into much more for both the client and the workshop team members. The Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory and Denver Audubon Society initially envisioned a simple wood structure resembling a standard picnic pavilion — not necessarily the stuff that architects or architecture students might usually consider architecture or even interesting. After extensive research into the unique qualities of the surrounding environs, watershed requirements, and programmatic needs, the design team determined that the local fire department would not allow the use of wood for structural members, the flood plain requirements would restrict structural possibilities, and any roof drainage would shed water in the summer and ice in the winter making the entire reason for the structure — the creation of an educational space — impossible to utilize. The design group immediately became an advocate for the “Birder” groups and began meeting with county planning and building departments to research code and planning restrictions as well as to inform them as to the project’s educational agenda and the user groups’ desires. All of these issues were framed within the limitations of a tight budget to create alternatives that better met the programmatic needs of their proposed educational space. The final solution incorporated a roof drain system serving the dual function of moving water from the roof as well as being a central educational component for the construct. The design of the drain allowed stringent flood plain requirements to be met while creating an educational space far more responsive to the release of birds captured for education and research. The “clients” were so impressed with the material outcome as well as the discussions and analysis surrounding the project that another project is planned for a second facility.





FIGURE 09

With this, the potential of the “nudge” emerges clearly. If the next generation of architects can begin to see their role expanded to move beyond a project being conceived only in terms of its being “building” in the conventional architectural sense and if utopia is seen less in terms of its traditional conception of a blueprint for perfection and more for its “power” to envision the conditions bringing about positive change latent to our everyday lives and surrounds, the statement: “we can only imagine what is already imaginable, because we find ourselves inevitably situated within a field of restricted possibilities defined by our given historical moment.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> has renewed meaning. Instead of architects feeling their role as envisioning and constructing perfect societies wholesale, the emphasis for the discipline and the education of future professionals should be the cultivation of an imagination that see possibilities within existing social frameworks, much as the Colorado Building Workshop examples illustrate.

If the architectural endeavor was seen as a research activity utilizing the imaginative skills of architects in dealing with complexity and change rather than an exercise in building construction, then the potential that the definition of “project” for architects could move farther afield from conventional disciplinary conceptions to realize new possibilities fostering real innovation. This would go some way in the profession’s attempts to more seamlessly adapt to the changes that globalization is demanding at all scales. Architecture’s rather dismal record, especially in regards to modernism, that frequently defaults to the projection of flawless imagery

calling for a table rasa mode of operation could be offset by a more incremental approach accepting that both architecture and utopias are, first and foremost, political acts undertaken in complex and fluid circumstances. Though substantial change may occur at a slower pace, odds of its success in instigating positive change will greatly increase. If mistakes are made or speculation is wrong, then the course can be adjusted before irreversible damage is done and entropy founded a sustained collective cynicism set in. Hope is the greatest constant for the cultivation of positive change and therefore our social collectives must be vigilant in ensuring its existence. The cultivation of this attribute and the creative agency it supports is a condition where the utopian imagination has few rivals. In our present globally charged atmosphere, the trick is to be able to be successful in this endeavor at both local and global scales simultaneously.

### Figure Credits

Figure 01: Nakai House, Navajo Nation near Bluff, Utah; (Photo Courtesy of Rick Sommerfeld and the Colorado Building Workshop).

Figure 02: Community Performance Stage, Ridgeway Colorado (Photo Courtesy of Jesse Kuroiwa).

Figure 03: Community Performance Stage, Ridgeway Colorado (Photo Courtesy of Jesse Kuroiwa).

Figure 04: College of Architecture/University of Colorado Denver DesignBuild Students constructing Community Performance Stage, Ridgeway Colorado; (Photo Courtesy of Jesse Kuroiwa).

Figure 05: College of Architecture/University of Colorado Denver DesignBuild Students constructing Community Performance Stage, Ridgeway Colorado (Photo Courtesy of Jesse Kuroiwa).

Figure 06: Roof Drain, WEEP: Birding Pavilion, Jefferson County, Colorado (Photo Courtesy of Rick Sommerfeld and the Colorado Building Workshop).

Figure 07: WEEP: Birding Pavilion, Jefferson County, Colorado (Photo Courtesy of Rick Sommerfeld and the Colorado Building Workshop).

Figure 08: Nakai House, Navajo Nation, Bluff, Utah (Photo Courtesy of Rick Sommerfeld and the Colorado Building Workshop).

Figure 07: Structure in Context WEEP: Birding Pavilion, Jefferson County, Colorado (Photo Courtesy of Rick Sommerfeld and the Colorado Building Workshop).

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