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The Form of Dissent

There's been an elephant in the room for some time now. An unavoidably large elephant, as elephants tend to be, trapped inside a small and familiar space. The elephant grows with each passing day—efforts to the contrary notwithstanding— mired in public embattlement, avoidance, or outright indifference. Its invasive presence is likely to persist, in this room. This is a room divided, because the elephant takes the shape of a wall—a wall so omnipresent that it takes a definite article in both architectural and political discourse. It is *the* wall.

Some might say that the wall is not the responsibility of architects, that its workings do not pertain solely, or even directly to this discipline but rather to other more influential realms—legislators, politicians, international organizations. Others, such as Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman, have argued that this wall is not singular but multiple, replicated at different scales and sites, in tangible and imagined forms, throughout a nation confronting the fear of the "other." [1] Nonetheless, if architecture is indeed so deeply entrenched in the larger networks of power, economic systems, and social desires, which have enabled and supported the overwhelming presence of this wall, how can we, as architects, remove ourselves from such a suffocating and unending situation? Even if design is not called upon to deal with it, can we step aside? Should we?

This essay emerges from doubts regarding the possibility of political resistance in the practice of architecture. Following the series of events that led us to the current state of affairs, I find myself questioning whether there is such a realm within our discipline, and if so, what form might it take? In other words, if resistance or dissent are, in fact, instruments available to the architectural practice in order to avoid instrumentalization itself—by political regimes, ideologies, economies—how do they operate?

Somewhere, buried deep in Internet history, is a small polemic that circulated among architecture websites and social media in March 2016. The story goes like this: ArchDaily, the online architecture platform—and the "world's most visited architecture website"—approved and published a user-submitted post on March 4 that dealt with an architecture competition titled "Building the Border Wall." [2] Hosted by the Third Mind Foundation, "an anonymous collective of New York–based artists and designers," the competition's challenge read: "Design a barrier of architectural merit that is realistically priced to build and made of materials that will not only be effective in keeping out waves of illegal immigration, but that will also be relatively

[1] "The border wall not only divides the United States from Mexico, creating false perceptions of distance and antagonism, but it is also reproduced invisibly across the United States, from the grand scale of the national electorate to the microscale of our neighborhoods and communities." Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman, "Unwalling Citizenship," the *Avery Review* 21 (January 2017), link.

[2] "Call for Entries: Building the Border Wall?," *ArchDaily*, March 4, 2016, link.

inexpensive to maintain." [3] A few days later all hell broke loose as enraged Facebook users heatedly discussed ArchDaily's decision to publish the brief (other similar outlets decided not to promote the competition) and called upon the architectural community to #boycottarchdaily for promoting xenophobia, racism, and an exacerbated nationalism, all for the sake of likes. [4] The site responded by contacting the "anonymous" organizers, who then toned down the wording in the brief and added a question mark to the competition's title, thus addressing some of the multiple circulating concerns. [5] ArchDaily defended their position, stating that they "believe that decent, enlightened, and civil conversations can emerge from controversial statements," and that they "hope that architects will address this issue with ingenuity, with responses that draw on our creativity and expertise. It seems silly to have to spell it out, but we imagined submissions that do not show a wall, for example." [6] After receiving 152 entries from around the world, the competition announced its winners— many of them students—on Inauguration Day. [7]

  Many of the details and contradictions of this polemic have been discussed, and I won't repeat these arguments here. However, the AIA statement issued just a day after the election in support of collaborating with the new administration, and which came to garner much notoriety in the field, invested ArchDaily's apolitical politics with new meaning. In spite of varying campaigns to portray the AIA statement as a mere communications misstep, what remained after the succession of PR fires was more or less extinguished—little has changed at the AIA, vocal protests and counter-organizing notwithstanding—is the now-very-real possibility of a wall that we continue to confront. [8] "We won't build your wall," stated many architecture schools, faculty, and students across the country, but actions continue to be taken at an administrative level that bring it ever closer. [9] The government issued "an official pre-solicitation for design proposals" in February 2017, allowing a short fourteen days for interested parties—be they architects, designers, engineers, or contractors—to submit prototypes. [10] Hundreds of vendors expressed their interest. [11] The following month, the government launched the official solicitation for participation in a two-phase design-build process, the first of which was submitted on April 4, 2017, with some of its results surfacing now into public view. [12]

  The border wall poses a conflict for architecture that merits further discussion—not in the terms deemed valid by the "Building the Border Wall?" competition or by ArchDaily's reiteration of the same, and not by rethinking the wall itself "with ingenuity" and finding an "alternative solution" to a physical entity that offers no alternative but division. Rather it is important to critically question architecture's relationship to the wall, if there is ever going to be one. The idea of a two-thousand-mile-long border wall can be quickly refused from the onset, dismissed as an unreasonable, immoral, and unfeasible proposal therefore unworthy of consideration. However, as history has already proved, a large-scale border wall is not as fictional as our principled minds would like to think it to be.

  As we have heard before from Wendy Brown in *Walling States, Waning Sovereignty*, walling is often not just about a wall. Border walls such as the one that divides Mexico and the US—which, in fact, is already built in over a third of its length in one form or another—are more about the notions of bor-

[3] Vanessa Quirk, "Can We Please Get Beyond the 'Building the Border Wall?' Boycott?" *Metropolis*, March 21, 2016, link.

[4] The controversy started after Fabrizio Gallanti— Italian architect and co-founder of FIG architecture firm based in Montreal—published a post on Facebook calling to #boycottarchdaily for publishing the competition. See Nicholas Korody, "US/Mexico Border Wall Competition Provokes Controversy," *Bustler*, March 16, 2016, link.

[5] "To bring bold humanitarian solutions, creativity and innovation to bear on alternative ideas of a border wall, and in so doing, expand the boundaries and re-conceptualize the current debate beyond sound-bytes, statistics, unrealistic monetary figures and polemics." See "Issue and Challenge," Building the Border Wall link; "Call for Entries: Building the Border Wall?" *ArchDaily*, link.

[6] "Call for Entries: Building the Border Wall?" *ArchDaily*, link

[7] "Winners Will be Announced on Presidential Inauguration Day, January 20, 2017," *Building the Border Wall?* January 2, 2017, link.

[8] Read the Architecture Lobby's account of the events, "Project #notmyaia," the *Architecture Lobby*, link.

[9] It is known that Yale School of Architecture; Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation; Texas Tech Architecture; and Rice Architecture School have all reportedly posted "We Won't Build Your Wall" signs on their main building windows.

[10] David Foxley, "Looking at Trump's Quick Request for Border-Wall Plans," *Architectural Digest*, February 28, 2017, link; Also refer to the government's official pre-solicitation issued in February 2017, link.

[11] Until March 2017, over three hundred vendors had expressed interest in the call. The final number of vendors is not available. See Carolina Miranda, "Trump's Border Wall May be Controversial, but Some Southern California Firms Want to Build It," the *LA Times*, March 2, 2017, link.

[12] Refer to the government's official solicitation for solid concrete border wall prototypes, issued March 2017; also see Chris Isidore, "Trump's Mexican Border Wall: See the Proposals," *CNN Money*, April 8, 2017, link.

ders and nationhood rather than they are about limits and territory itself; about perceiving security and protection rather than actual safety; about an imaginary social landscape, indeed "a ritualistic performance." [13] As such, its physical impracticality, even its absurdity, are irrelevant when it comes to its political or ideological effects. Thus, the conflict is fundamental: how do we create enough critical distance to divorce architecture from such spectacle-building?

Architecture is a yes-or-no practice. This blunt understatement is put to work here for a specific reason. Confronted by a brief or commission, architects need to decide whether they accept or decline what is requested of them. As Cedric Price observed, architecture moves between *action* and *inaction*, where the *action* is defined by an architect's "response to requests from others," requests which are "not necessarily architectural in nature and are frequently in the form of a challenge, which does not necessarily suggest an architectural response." *Inaction* or "a clearly explained reason for no response at all," comes after careful consideration of what "other disciplines, activities and non-architectural products" can offer under the same circumstances, that is, when architects have "satisfied themselves that they are of no use." [14] Following Price's terms, the *action* would most respond to an agenda embedded in the language, scope, and aim of the brief in which architecture becomes then the instrument through which a field of political and ideological relations is configured spatially. If the *action* seeks to respond to the brief, i.e., to deliver, the agenda is unlikely to be subverted, destroyed, or overthrown. Thus, *inaction* would constitute the only alternative for disagreement: by declining to participate and thus, observe as bystander as the commission is fully deployed through others' work. As a brief, the border wall might demand radical *inaction* on our part, as the only ethical position possible in the face of its spatial mandate. Nonetheless, that does not erase the prospect that very positive *action* could indeed take place. The story (and this essay) could end right here, making a clear-cut distinction between those who, in the face of opportunity, granted and those who withdrew their professional participation on moral grounds.

Ines Weizman has written extensively on what she calls "the paradox of dissidence" in architectural practice, and the different forms dissidence assumes when operating within and against pervasive structures of power and state ideology. [15] Acknowledging that "architecture is the least likely of practices to articulate a dissident position," given that "an ethic of political courage seems unneeded given the contractual basis of a 'commission' or a pragmatic brief," she also states that it is "essential to attempt to outline a spectrum of the possibility for dissidence," in order to further mobilize architecture as a critical instrument under compromising ethical circumstances. [16] This "spectrum" of practices problematizes the action/inaction dichotomy. For Weizman, both the realms of *action* and *inaction*—no longer oppositional and closed entities— allow room within them for dissidence to occur; which "might just be a different name for the complex practice that continuously questions the relationship of the architect and political power, between client and service provider, between ideology and built form." [17] Thus, *refusal* or inaction—an uncompromising and unwavering oppositional stance—determines the most obvious form of dissidence in architectural practice. [18] However, as Weizman notes, drawing on Hannah Arendt: "doing nothing is the last effective form of resistance, and

[13] Wendy Brown, *Walling States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 91. See also "Chapter Three: States and Subjects" of the book.

[14] Cedric Price, "Action and Inaction," in *Cedric Price: The Square Book* (Chichester, UK: Wiley– Academy, 2003), 18.
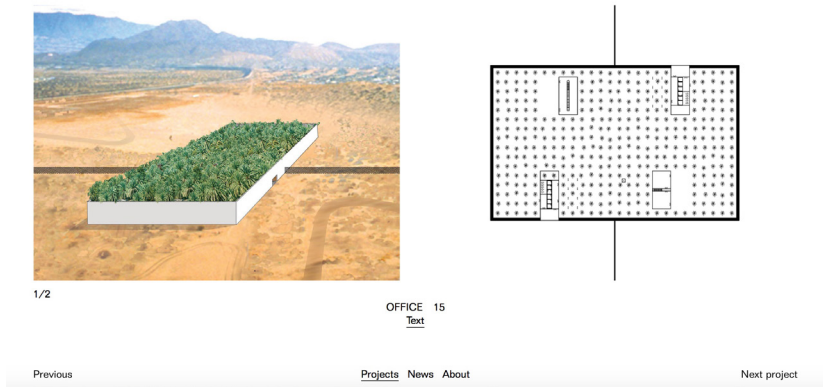
[15] Ines Weizman, ed., *Architecture and the Paradox of Dissidence* (New York and Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014).

[16] Weizman, "Introduction," *Architecture and the Paradox of Dissidence*, 6; Ines Weizman, "Interior Exile and Paper Architecture: A Spectrum for Architectural Dissidence," in *Agency: Working with Uncertain Architectures*, ed. Florian Kossak, Doina Petrescu, Tatjana Schneider, and Renata Tyszczuk (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 154.

[17] Weizman, "Introduction," *Architecture and the Paradox of Dissidence*, 7.

[18] Weizman, "Introduction," *Architecture and the Paradox of Dissidence*, 7.

the practical consequences of refusal are nearly always better if enough people refuse to participate." [19] Unless there is widespread agreement on the refusal of a wall, saying no will only leave us to observe the wall unfold right before our eyes.

But action can also be mobilized to serve a dissident practice. Weizman looks to cases in which practicing architects have overtly contested or resisted hegemonic political spheres through *subversion* or *retreat*, especially forms of dissident practice by architects under the regime of communism in the Soviet Bloc. [20] She identifies subversion as a path through which to interrogate "the norms and language of dominant/dominating architecture" and retreat as removing oneself from the public into "the private domain of paper architecture or hidden pedagogy." [21] These sites and modes of operation are critical to the establishment of autonomous fields of practice, where acts of resistance can be extensively deployed. By re-conceptualizing forms of action, alternatives can be envisioned, construed, and even publicly proposed, to resist hegemonic regimes.

In this light, can we then observe the submissions to the "Building the Border Wall?" competition as forms of *action* that seek to *subvert* the possibility of the wall into something other? To *subvert* its division through an "irrigation wall" that accumulates water in order to serve the region and the water crisis of the near future, or an "inflato border," an inflatable wall that allows for "shared interaction as neighbors" inside a cushioned atmosphere. [22] Or could we understand Office KGDVS's "border garden" project, in collaboration with Wonne Ickx, as a form of radical paper architecture—midway between *subversion* and *retreat* if we follow Weizman's terms—a critical proposition that prematurely envisions a dissenting alternative to borderland division? The winning entry of an international design competition that asked for a pedestrian crossing at the US–Mexico border, Office's project enclosed the fence break between four nine-meter-high white walls, delivering a palm-tree-shaded oasis to the checkpoint facilities within, "evoking a purely spatial, phenomenological experience that the paperwork itself fails to provide." [23] [24] Far from controversy, the project was awarded the first prize in recognition of its "aggressiveness" in proposing "a utopia in the form of a walled garden." [25] Thus, given the framing of each case, the first two being immediately discarded as a ridiculous exercise in the absence of validated disciplinary guarantors—i.e., recognized, star-system critics, jurors, and participating architects—opposite

[19] Weizman, "Introduction," *Architecture and the Paradox of Dissidence*, 5.

[20] Weizman, "Introduction," Architecture and the Paradox of Dissidence, 7; Weizman, "Interior Exile and Paper Architecture: A Spectrum for Architectural Dissidence," 154–164; Ines Weizman, "Citizenship," in *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory,* ed. C. Greig Crysler, Stephen Cairns, and Hilde Heynen (London: SAGE, 2012), 107–120.

[21] Weizman, "Introduction," *Architecture and the Paradox of Dissidence*, 7.

[22] Read both first-prize-winning project statements (in a tie) "Second Wall of America" and "Inflato Border," link.

[23] The 7th International Arquine Competition organized by Mexican architecture magazine Arquine in 2005, with 467 entries worldwide. Christopher Calott, "Frontera/Border," in *Arquine: Revista Internacional De Arquitectura y diseõ*, no. 32, ed. Miquel Adrià (Summer 2005): 90–97.

[24] Read Kersten Geers and David Van Severen's project description for "Office 15," link.

[25] Calott, "Frontera/Border," 91.

the latter, understood as a viable form of critique operating under the rubric of accepted (and desirable) disciplinary culture, it is easy to forget that what we observe are comparably possible propositions toward the same problem.

Compliant with the constrictions, determinations, and hyper-normative language of the official solicitation, the few submissions to the government's call that have managed to surface into media outlets after a first round of bids set the tone for a prospectus wall that is far from critical reinterpretation. [26] Mostly by non-architecture firms with experience in barrier-building, security technologies, engineering consultancy, and even war, these visualizations portend a strong will to see the wall through. [27] Among such steel, plexiglass, fiber-optic, and other anti-immigrant, explosive-deterring, tunnel-blocking constructs, only a few proposals can be found that narrate dissenting positions. MADE collective, for example, "a cross-disciplinary bi-national team of Architects, Builders, Designers, Engineers and Urban Planners from Mexico and the United States," has submitted their proposal titled "Otra Nation" to both governments. [28] They have also initiated a change.org petition to the presidents of both countries to select their proposal for a "Regenerative Open Co-Nation and Bi-National Socio-EcoTone," a territory with its own legal and economic framework, ID status, and infrastructure. [29] Eradicating the presence of a wall, as ArchDaily once suggested, a revised borderland zone structured by an elevated transportation system armed with new mechanisms of control—"non-intrusive" biometric checkpoints, e-residency smart chip— defining a here and there. [30]

Perhaps contingency demands we reconsider our principled modes under new frameworks. Do we declare ourselves useless, as Price suggested? If the sole idea of a wall is what we can't tolerate—and rightly so—on ethical and moral grounds, how then can we observe others willing to carry it out? How can we hope to subvert dominating political forms if our tools have been already co-opted to fit other aesthetic visualizations? Even under the most subversive of terms, can the architectural form help shape resistance? I'm not sure.

[26] Isidore, "Trump's Mexican Border Wall: See the Proposals."

[27] Isidore, "Trump's Mexican Border Wall: See the Proposals."

[28] "MADE Collective," *Otra Nation*, link.

[29] Memo Cruz, "President Trump and President Nieto: Select Otra Nation to Replace the US/Mexico Border," *Change.org*, March 2017, link; "Otra Nation: The Ultimate Frontier, A Regenerative Open Co-nation and Bi-National Socio-EcoTone," *Otra Nation*, link.

[30] "Otra Nation: The Ultimate Frontier," *Otra Nation,* link.