

# FOUR WALLS AND A PROOF

Will the money, development, tools and knowledge given to architecture change anything or do we need to consider whether it is architecture or our framing of it that needs changing. I believe the honest answers to these questions will create a paradigm shift in architecture as it is today. If we decide to frame our perception of architecture differently and shape it to work within the planetary boundaries I believe that will not create 'restrictions' but a new type of growth for architecture. Giving our profession new values to design by and new frameworks and methodologies to design from will create new architectural expressions that are not restricting but are new and exciting and which create new and exciting possibilities for architecture.

Making modest gains will not solve the problem. Creating 'greener' tools that are just more optimised versions of what we are using now will still lead us to overshoot the planetary boundaries and keep society on the path of climate destruction. Instead of focusing on smaller interventions - these still being worthy and part of the solution - we have to first redesign the foundation and overall system of why we design, how we design and who we design for in order to give the smaller interventions and changes a better possibility of succeeding. Because if we still design within a system that is designed for and driven towards limitless growth there is no possible way that any restriction we place on our work will have any meaningful or significant enough impact to make a change. As Audre Lorde says, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

As a profession, our focus on architecture equating to buildings has commodified architecture where buildings are viewed as mere commodities to trade. Mary McLeod in *Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era*, states "Architecture's value no longer lay in its redemptive social value," and she argues, "but rather in its communicative power as a cultural object", highlighting how this power has significant value in the economics of that era and to this day. If we view buildings as more than just objects of architecture and instead focus on the consequences of architecture and their redemptive social value we can shift our understanding of our work and capabilities from being about space alone to the processes of its production and space as a social construction. As Peter Cook says "When we are presented with a problem that we are told is architectural, the solution may not always be a building." We can turn this restriction of primarily designing buildings into opportunities to design more than buildings and instead design the way we work, design policies to reduce demolition waste, design toilet buildings that improve the health of communities, design new ways of working together and we can design new forms of growth for a new paradigm of architecture that is in line with planetary boundaries.

We need to invest in the vehicles to get to the solution as much as the solution itself. For too long architects have considered the problem of 'how' to do things solved once and for all. If we stop focusing simply on 'how' we do things and instead focus first on 'why' we do things and then 'how', the architectural profession can be instrumental in limiting our building consumption and bettering our housing standards and settlement culture. Asking 'why' first forces us to look at the foundation of our practice and how this lays the groundwork for everything that is to come and which sets us up for a successful or failed attempt at tackling the climate crisis. Our foundation for achieving these goals can be built up with these four tools:

1. Choosing why we work;
2. Choosing architecture's public;
3. Choosing how we work and;
4. Choosing an architecture of maintenance

**1. Choosing why we work** can be as simple as joining Architects Declare. Making this public commitment to have a positive commitment on the environment may not be binding but if as a profession we decide to stick to the points elaborated in the declaration we can contribute to a society that can achieve the 1.50C pathway set by the IPCC. A demand, such as Architects Declare can be considered a creative tool which allows the architectural practice to begin to think of new ways of practicing. If we look at other demands such as the demand for an eight hour workday we see how powerful a demand can be in changing societies beliefs, goals and the way they function. Giving the profession a framework to get there - one that can be gradually built upon and updated with the changing needs of the climate and society - such as the declaration, is a good starting point for such a complex and multifaceted issue. Choosing to follow a declaration could mean that we have to reconsider things such as not working for clients who are actively engaged in practices that are making the climate crisis worse or collaborating with engineers, clients and contractors to design out waste. Making these decisions makes us question how architecture distributes its time, knowledge and resources and instead of distributing it to the projects that are contributing to the problems of climate change we can use architecture to distribute mass, space, materials, privilege, access, meaning, shelter and rights to projects that are working towards climate positive solutions.



The first toilet designed by Healthabitat in rural Nepal that has improved the health of a whole community. They choose a public that is in great need of architecture's services.

**2. Choosing architecture's public.** The urban theorist Mike Davis writes “The cornerstone given to the low-carbon city, far more than any particular green design or technology, is the priority given to public affluence over wealth.” This choice of designing for the wealth of the whole of society and not just the 1% or for the pure goal of profit will affect resource consumption as it will change our values from being financially focused to ecologically focused and force us to think about not what can be afforded in a financial sense or what makes the most profit but what can be afforded in an ecological sense. It will force us to view risk not through the frame of finances and endless economic growth but through the frame of ecological risk. In a 2023 report, Oxfam stated that “The richest 1% bag nearly twice as much wealth as the rest of the world put together over the past two years.” Changing architecture's public to that of the 99% and choosing to redistribute the wealth of the earth in an equitable way will bring an end to architecture as the means for ferocious economic speculation and cutting our ties to the unfettered growth and extraction machine is a clear and logical way to keep within the planetary boundaries and limit the construction industry's resource extraction.

**3. Choosing how we work** can involve a tool such as a constitution. The Melbourne architecture practice, OFFICE, is an NGO who operates their practice by the following constitution:

(A) to use the tools of design, architecture and research to assist in the design, development, construction and development of projects with a public benefit;

(B) educating and engaging in public discourse about design, and issues related to it, through research, exhibitions, public lectures and publications;

(C) educating and mentoring students of design, architecture, and visual arts;

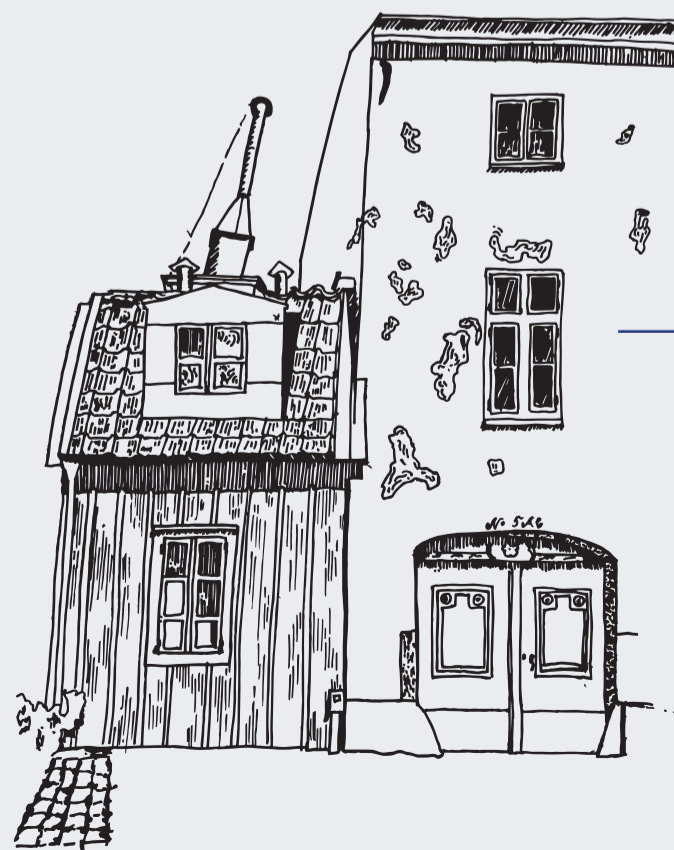
(D) supporting organisations and assisting with projects that promote the art of Indigenous Persons and other Specified Cultural Forms.

Binding how we work to a constitution forces the architectural practice to think first ‘why’ and then ‘how’ we do things. It forces our profession to view and decide things by our values. A constitution can also be legally binding which can hold our profession accountable for our negative contributions to the climate crisis. It will make sure that architects - who are among those responsible for decisions made about resource extraction and redistribution in the construction industry - fairly represent both the public opinion and the health of the earth when making these decisions. This tool and being held accountable to it can be liberating as it provides the profession with a clear purpose of what our role can be in society and can strengthen our collective will to achieve the goal of limiting our professions impact on the climate.

**4. Choosing maintenance.** Choosing to design with maintenance as a core, driving value in our work is to acknowledge that the built environment emerges from and is kept alive and operational by construction, cleaning and maintenance. Designing buildings and environments that do not hide these processes would spell an entire cultural shift in both the material culture of construction and the way we live with buildings. Embedding the concept of maintenance in the culture of architectural thinking and practice will change our perception of materials and could transform architecture towards more positive environmental practices. Materials such as thatch and their continual repair can create liberating and new expressions of maintenance and the architecture of maintenance can be used as a communication tool to circulate knowledge about built environments in an open and informative manner. Reimagined buildings could inform users of the entirety of the materials, labour, knowledge and time that have contributed to its existence. Choosing maintenance can give architects other forms and tools to work with that define architecture and which create new social and environmental connections.

Growth has not only a rate but also a direction and as architects we can choose to grow the profession along a responsible path. Questioning the beliefs and practices that create the foundation of architecture and designing and implementing interventions that positively reshape the foundation of architecture will allow architects to be instrumental in building a system that reduces our resource consumption and is adaptable and regenerative in a changing climate. The above four tools will help to form a foundation and system that will better and more easily support the new growth strategies that we will need to place on our industry to keep within the planetary boundaries and for architects to be able to continue to create the best possible living conditions for society. They show that we can simultaneously design four walls and a roof and design proof for a new path for architecture.

The engagement with these tools and processes should not be seen as a means to an end but as the manifestation of our collective values and can be liberating and desirable. They not only limit what we do and how we do it but they provide strong and liberating frameworks for new forms of practicing and ways to tackle the problems of our building consumption and climate change. The four tools make architecture's skills and knowledge more relevant to a broader section of society and so open up many new frontiers for where we can take our skills and knowledge and allow our work to be instrumental in limiting our building consumption. They may entail us to challenge the frameworks set by power structures and we may have to place restrictions on ourselves in that respect but if the risk of not doing it is climate and ecological breakdown then surely it is worth it.



Architecture in Sweden showing the beauty of inventiveness and the possibilities for an architecture of maintenance.