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Guest editor:

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Executive Committee and Editor

Pedro Soares Neves, University of Lisbon Faculty of Fine Arts / Artistic Studies Research Centre (CIEBA/FBAUL)
Associate Laboratory of Robotics and Engineering Systems / Interactive Technologies Institute (ITI/LARSyS)

Contact and information

info@wisethorough.com
<http://vas-journal.org>



Introduction

Amale Andraos

The student research papers presented in this first issue of Visionary Architecture Studies are the result of a seminar taught at Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) in the spring of 2025. Entitled *49 Cities*, and expanding on the publication¹ by the same name, the seminar explored visionary architectural and urban projects as seen through an ecological lens. Bringing urban form together with urban performance, the seminar was intended to open up new possibilities for architecture and the built environment today, as well as critically and imaginatively expand the discipline's 'utopian canon' to include new models from which to inspire the future.

In an effort to move beyond purely technological approaches to sustainable design, and draw back together the possibilities for architecture and planning to work towards projecting new forms of living, each week, students were invited to present various utopian cities while also bringing their own reflections and models. Cities were examined comparatively through questions of scale, density, infrastructure, typology and form as well as ratios of building to rural and natural environments, amongst other. In particular, the seminar emphasized design research methods that bring a critical and designer's eye to drawings, data and images.

For their final research paper, students were asked to select a city or a topic – whether real or visionary – that built on the questions raised in class around the possibilities of urbanism and ecology to co-exist

and propose in-depth critical and imaginative analysis through a combination of architectural drawings, diagrams and text. As importantly, we were able to interact with Pedro Soares Neves throughout the semester, to exchange ideas about the students' paper topics and how they could contribute to the idea of Visionary Architecture today.

The result are six wonderful papers, which look back to look forward in varied ways: In "The City in the City: A Fractal Pattern Language for Self-organizing Urbanism," Thomas Gomez Ospina explores the history of pattern language of fractals "as a model for resisting urbanistic and capitalistic dogmas that govern contemporary city design." In particular, Ospina finds that fractal thinking can reconcile paradoxes found in contemporary cities and support the design of more adaptive and autonomous urban futures.

In his "Adaptive Ecologies: A Visionary Urban Layer for Post-Carbon Cities," Sebastián Domínguez conceives of a new kind of a visionary urban layer: "a modular, adaptive, and ecologically responsive stratum that overlays the existing urban fabric," responds to the climate emergency and reduces significantly the carbon footprint of existing cities. In particular, Domínguez advocates for visionary architecture as a form of engagement and a practical tool for ecological resilience and material circularity.

1 - Amale Andraos and Dan Wood, *49 Cities*, 3rd Edition, New York, Inventory Press, 2016.

In “Odds and Beginnings: A Speculative Waste Management Urbanism,” Claire Wolsk and Val Flânon set out to undo our assumptions around waste, historicizing the modernist conception of waste as ‘obscene’ or waste management as an activity ‘deprived of enjoyment’ amongst many such constructions. Building on these new conceptions of waste, Wolsk and Flânon then propose a new form of infrastructure for waste management, which would build on alternate models found around the world historically and today, to bring waste management to the heart of New York City – with all the surreal and surprising consequences that this radical move produces.

In “Situated Smartness: *Communitas* as a Framework for Aligned, Civic, and Speculative Infrastructures,” Holly Baker juxtaposes Percival and Paul Goodman’s critique of consumerist society found in their *Communitas: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life* (1947) with contemporary critiques of Smart Urbanism – “particularly its emphasis on efficiency, data-driven governance, and technological optimization at the expense of public space.” Inspired by *Communitas*, Baker proposes two retrofit smart cities to include ‘energy infrastructure’ and ‘public participation’ as a means to bring together technological innovation and democratic planning in the development of more equitable urban futures.

In “Reclaiming Identity: Colonial Imposition, Modernist Experimentation, and Cultural Identity in Indian Urbanism,” Brandon Jose Gil examines how cities are meant to be “innately related to their region and historical heritage.” With a focus on cultural identity and urbanism in India in particular, Gil sets in contrast the imperial plan of New Delhi to the smaller Indian cities he recently visited as part of his school studio travel, advocating for the importance of retaining core values of place, context and culture even in the face of inevitable and constant changes resulting from accelerated modernization and urbanization.

Finally, Yoel Halbert re-imagines Houston in his “Recapturing Houston for People” by examining a number of other models including Copenhagen and Melbourne, to propose ways to transform Houston from a car-centric, sprawling urban metropolis with little public transportation and significant problems with flooding and heat islands amongst other, to a pedestrian-friendly series of urban districts whose ‘lili pad’ mixed-use hubs can render the city more lively, vibrant and sustainable as well as more equitable and economically resilient.

Taken together these six papers propose very different approaches to the idea of Visionary Architecture – from the most pragmatic to the most radical – and yet with the common intent to engage with new possibilities for the design of cities and urban environments for a more creative, sustainable and equitable future.