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Against Time...

'Moving from person to person, practice to practice, place to place, we everyday experience an archipelago of overlapping time zones. Time travelling in this way, we may not always know if we are moving forward, backward or in circles. How do we know that the past will not turn out to be the future?'

Jonathan Hill, 'Time Travel in Circles and Lines,' in *Architecture is a Time Machine*, (Unpublished Manuscript), 2023, p.29.

Against Time is a story of Jonathan Hill's unfinished book, on which he had been working for over three years until his death in November 2023, exploring the inherent and complex relationships between architecture and time. During his scholarly career developed over 35 years at the Bartlett School of Architecture in London, Jonathan pioneered investigations of the relations between the design and experience of architecture, reframing the nature of architectural authorship. Time was inherent to these explorations and the questions that they posed—particularly, 'how can an expanded definition of architectural authorship—to include the weather as well as the architect and the user—enable buildings that co-exist with their immediate and wider environments?'¹ For Jonathan, that co-existence was defined by different temporalities, the relationship between the past, present, and future, as well as his understanding of history as 'spatial rather than linear'.²

Time was also key to a certain spatiality of ideas that characterised Jonathan's own work. In 2006, in his book *Immaterial Architecture* he wrote: 'For many an architect or writer, ideas and concerns evolve over time, from project to project. Strategies, forms and materials that first appear in one design, develop and mutate in another. Characters, narratives and events that first appear in one book grow and change in another.'³ Anyone who is familiar with Jonathan's mode of working, will know that he would always start writing a new book while finishing the previous one, allowing for that growth by unfolding interrelated themes and offering expanded and, at times, contrasting interpretations of some of the same ideas. In many ways, the nature of Jonathan's work resembled that of gardening, which he enjoyed so much in his Norfolk home, and which he wrote about, considering gardens and landscapes as rewarding models for architecture. As Jonathan suggested: 'An architecture that is conceived as analogous to an ever-changing landscape is more temporally aware than other buildings and will require constant re-evaluation, encouraging

¹ Jonathan Hill, CV, Jonathan Hill's archive.

² Jonathan Hill, *The Illegal Architect*. Black Dog Publishing Limited, 1998, p.42.

³ Jonathan Hill, 'Introduction,' in *Immaterial Architecture*, Routledge, 2006, p.2.

particularly questioning and creative relations between objects, spaces and users at varied times, scales and dimensions.’⁴ Such was also his work: temporally aware, cyclical, questioning, and ever-changing.

Although Jonathan’s death was unexpected, his cancer diagnosis, made him often think that time wasn’t on his side. While working on the manuscript, some chapters crystallised into lectures, unit briefs, and papers, including Jonathan’s final contribution closing the 440-page exhibition catalogue of the 2023 18th Venice Architecture Biennale *Laboratory of the Future* curated by Lesley Lokko—published under the same title as the new book: *Architecture is a Time Machine*.⁵

One could argue that the reference to the time machine and Jonathan’s concept of ‘time travelling in circles (and lines)’ have in the context of his book a dual meaning.⁶ On one hand, from multiple perspectives and through different examples, the book explores how ideas, forms, and materials travel in time, rendering buildings as temporal assemblages and palimpsests, ‘extending architectural authorship to include the time before, during and after design, construction and use’, and acknowledging ‘the significant authorial voices of the climate and the weather and the light and the dark.’⁷ Transporting us to many times simultaneously, Jonathan proposes to see a building as an archive—‘an evolving collection of ideas, materials and lives, with the capacity to acknowledge the histories and timeframes of related disciplines, whether thousands of archaeological years, or millions of geological ones.’⁸ On the other hand, through writing that turns from theoretical investigations to personal accounts—some more recent, others distant in time going back to Jonathan’s formative years—the book extrapolates on the ideas which Jonathan explored in his previous publications.⁹ Ruination; Authorship; The Material and the Immaterial; Weather and Climate; Light and Darkness; Piranesi, John Soane, Robert Adam, Sverre Fehn, Louis Kahn, Denys Lasdun, Alison and Peter Smithson, Arata Isozaki, James Turrell—are some of the key protagonists and themes that travel in circles too. In this sense, the book acts as a time machine, allowing the reader to revisit Jonathan’s ideas that have shaped a unique geography of thoughts since the beginning of his career.

As Jonathan’s wife, I had a privilege and pleasure to follow the unravelling of the threads of these ideas. After his death, inspired by precedents of other posthumous publications such as *The Projective Cast* by Robin Evans (1994), or Italo Calvino’s *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), I have decided to travel *ahead in time* and imagine his book finished. While most of the chapters are almost completed, others were left as a work in progress, with evolving ideas awaiting final visits to key places and archives that Jonathan and I were planning for Spring and Summer 2024. This includes Andrzej Wajda’s Archive, which holds material on Arata Isozaki’s Manggha Centre (now Museum of Japanese Art and Technology), a place we visited many times in Kraków.

⁴ Jonathan Hill, ‘The Ruins of the Immaterial’. *Immaterial Materialities. Interstices Journal of Architecture and Related Arts*, edited by Sandra Löschke and Desley Luscombe, No. 14, 2013, pp. 81-93: p.84.

⁵ Jonathan Hill, ‘Architecture is a Time Machine’, in *The Laboratory of the Future*, La Biennale di Venezia, 2023, pp. 406-409.

⁶ Hill, ‘Time Travel in Circles and Lines.’

⁷ Jonathan Hill, *Architecture is a Time Machine* (Notes to the Unpublished Manuscript, 03.10.2022).

⁸ Hill, ‘Architecture is a Time Machine,’ p.407.

⁹ Jonathan’s authored books include: *The Illegal Architect* (1998), *Actions of Architecture* (2003), *Immaterial Architecture* (2006), *Weather Architecture* (2012), *A Landscape of Architecture, History and Fiction* (2016) and *The Architecture of Ruins* (2019); he is also editor of *Occupying Architecture* (1998), *Architecture—the Subject is Matter* (2001), and *Designs on History: The Architect as Physical Historian* (2022); and co-editor of *Critical Architecture* (2007).

Jonathan discusses it in the chapter 'Time Travel in Circles and Lines', revealing contrasting conceptions of time, and calling for a more flexible and sensitive appreciation of differing cultures and histories. Another visit was planned to Kilmahew Castle Archive near Cardross related with St Peter's Seminary designed by Gillespie, Kidd and Coia, which Jonathan visited in 2022 during the field trip with his Bartlett students. Described in the chapter 'The Living Ruin', St Peter's Cardross represented for Jonathan 'a rewilded architecture', reflecting 'the coproduction and cohabitation of multiple authors, whether human, non-human or atmospheric', and the layering of one time on another.¹⁰ A further travel was also to include the Met Cloisters in New York—another temporal assemblage—originally conceived as an immersive museum of medieval art and architecture designed by sculptor and collector George Grey Barnard, which Jonathan first visited in 1977. In the chapter 'Medieval Manhattan', Jonathan traces its evolutionary timeline, presenting The Cloisters as a 'creative reconstruction of the past', discussing a multilayered and endless process of spolia—from the quarried from the Earth stone to multiple sizable medieval fragments, 'each torn from a distinct time and space, and their dialectical juxtaposition in a new time and space.'¹¹ During that time in New York, Jonathan also experienced the blackout of Manhattan, which provides an evocative scenery for the chapter 'Architecture in the Dark' exploring questions of perception, the sublime, light, darkness, and shadow. Interestingly, it was the last document that Jonathan worked on, and in which he poignantly wrote: 'Life begins in the darkness of the womb and ends in the darkness of death'.¹² Yet, if we think of time, as Jonathan suggests, as 'travelling in circles (and lines)', death can be seen not as the end of something, but the beginning of something new, and the context of this workshop is a unique opportunity to start this journey against time to bring Jonathan's project back to life and light.

The idea of the new beginning takes us, however, back in time again. In his first book, *The Illegal Architect* (1998), Jonathan expanded on Roland Barthes' 1967 essay 'The Death of the Author', proposing 'The Death of the Architect'. Demanding a more critical, sensual, and temporal relationship between architecture, the user, and the environment, Jonathan suggested a new model for the architect—one who questioned the boundaries of architecture, acknowledging its incompleteness and instability. It was a manifesto for an architecture understood as a 'physical but fluid presence', defining a liminal space between the permanence and the impermanence, the material and the immaterial, the processual and the experiential, construction and ruination.¹³ It was also a call for a critical revaluation of the relationship between the architect and the historian, challenging the 'false division of theory, history and design' and advocating for a nuanced dialogue and cross-fertilisation between different cultures, practices, times, and places.¹⁴

These ideas—which would continue to evolve in Jonathan's subsequent books, provided a thematic framework for his PhD under the title *Creative Users, Illegal Architects* (2000). In it, Jonathan proposed 'a theory of montage, in which the gaps [we]re as important as the fragments.'¹⁵ Such a 'montage of gaps' aimed to 'remain unresolved, to be remade by each user'

¹⁰ Jonathan Hill, 'The Living Ruin,' in *Architecture is a Time Machine*, (Unpublished Manuscript), 2023, p.18.

¹¹ Jonathan Hill, 'Medieval Manhattan,' in *Architecture is a Time Machine*, (Unpublished Manuscript), 2023, p.4.

¹² Jonathan Hill, 'Architecture in the Dark,' in *Architecture is a Time Machine*, (Unpublished Manuscript), 2023, p.6.

¹³ Hill, *The Illegal Architect*, p.38. p.40.

¹⁴ Hill, *The Illegal Architect*, p.42.

¹⁵ Jonathan Hill, *Creative Users, Illegal Architects*. PhD, The Bartlett School of Architecture, 2000, p.4;.

and reflected Jonathan's interest in making 'unexpected non-linear connections between diverse ideas.'¹⁶

Although the literal gaps in the unfinished manuscript were not intentional, the idea of the 'montage of gaps' can still be applied to the structure of the book, in which each chapter 'is a distinct piece of work that can either be considered on its own or in relation to other fragments and the gaps between the fragments'—a return to a narrative strategy adopted by Jonathan in his books: *Actions of Architecture. Architects and Creative Users* (2003) (which evolved from his PhD thesis) and *Immaterial Architecture* (2006), in which the 'chapters are best understood in parallel rather than in sequence.'¹⁷

Over the last few months, I have been mapping this collection of fragments and ideas and the constellations they create throughout the manuscript and Jonathan's oeuvre, tracing conceptual linages and exploring their journey through time and space. In this process, reading the manuscript has become a different kind of time travelling for me. It has involved searching for hints, notes, recollecting conversations that we had about the book during various stages of its development—resembling an archaeology of what is yet to come. Whether moving 'forward, backward or in circles', my intention is to take you on this journey—piecing fragments together and uncovering gaps that reveal the speculative potency of the unfinished work. We will travel against time, delving into the past to reimagine its alternative future.



A Living Ruin: St Peter's Seminary, Cardross. Crypt. Photo: Jonathan Hill (2022).

¹⁶ Hill, *Creative Users, Illegal Architects*. p.4; p.18.

¹⁷ Jonathan Hill, *Actions of Architecture. Architects and Creative Users*. Routledge 2003, p.4; Jonathan Hill, *Immaterial Architecture*. Routledge, 2006, p.2.