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**2017
Graduates**
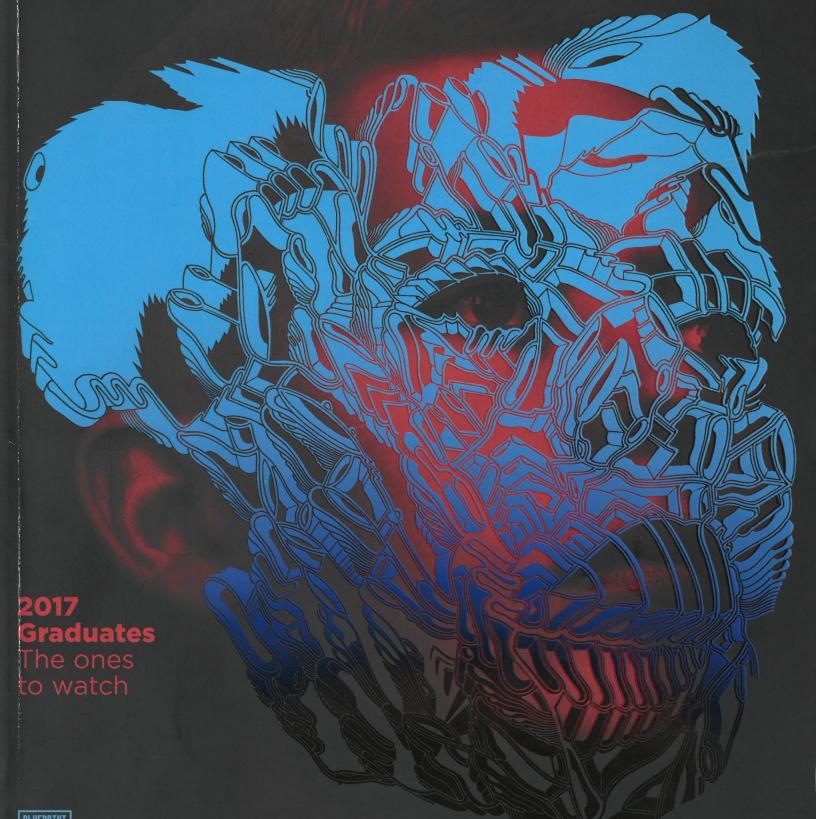The ones
to watch

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COLLABORATION

Exclusive interviews with Norman Foster and Craig Dykers

Nader Tehrani

IN A DRAMATICALLY CHANGING WORLD, ARCHITECTURE EDUCATION NEEDS TO CRITICALLY ENGAGE WITH
CURRENT AFFAIRS TO UNDERSTAND ITS ROLE

The challenges of **architecture education** are many and varied, ranging from the conceptual and cultural to the practical and technical. In the context of the **Irwin S Chanin School of Architecture**, I have inherited not so much a school of thought, but rather a school dedicated to the question of pedagogy itself. As such, we are not only prompted to impart knowledge of different kinds, but more so to create an environment of learning, to experiment with distinct architectural predicaments, and to test the limits of architectural ideas, even to failure.

The emphasis has been on critically challenging the conventions of representation, re-envisioning the canons of architecture through evolving analytical techniques, and developing research through 'making' as a centrepoint of inquiry. While much of this work has become emblematic of the ethos of the school, the culture it has produced has also become the foundation of a transformed investment in allied areas of study that include digital fabrication, the incorporation of big data in the analysis of cities and regions, and the adoption of the **Cooper Union** archives as part of its work on history and theory, to name just a few areas of expansion.

With the dramatic changes happening worldwide over the past two decades, we have had to adjust our agendas to respond to emerging debates, evolving techniques, and current urgencies. Consider the events of just the past year — the presidential election in the United States, for one — and how they are a recognition that the changing demographics of the country between the urban and the rural is somehow an index of the disparity, not only in wealth and poverty, but ultimately in education.

This has all happened in an era when the internet has made information accessible with unprecedented ease; while that fluidity has come to democratise access to data, it has also marked the end of the master narratives that have driven knowledge prior to this era. Gone is the authority of the enlightened institutions that curated knowledge, but also absent is the very control that gauged facts from fiction, or science from misinformation. That we are struggling to keep up with the daily toil of events, most of which are the result of misinformation, is a testament to the critical agenda that education may need to serve in this era: to effectively internalise it, decipher it, and critically evaluate it.

On the one hand, students have infinite ability to engage with sophisticated software, technologies and tools to produce new forms of knowledge at a very early moment in their intellectual evolution; on the other hand, they also have an unprecedented need for understanding of how to channel this potentiality through critical filters, to better assess what they are doing, and to engage with their medium in more judicious, discerning and self-conscious ways. This is a time when the role of the humanities, by way of philosophy and critical thinking, may also take on renewed importance if we are to gain a better appreciation of not 'what' we can do, but 'why' we should do them.

For architecture education to be relevant, at a minimum we will need to constantly revisit the state of current affairs, if only to better understand the urgencies of the day. At the same time, in order for architecture to demonstrate its agency,

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it will need to identify how its core instruments, as distinct from other disciplines, have critical ways of giving specification to forms, spaces and materials: that is, those architectural devices that embody the built environment as an intellectual construct.

There are broadly three thematic arenas within which we are re-evaluating our focus at Cooper Union in response to evolving phenomena that are impacting design at large: the relationship between representation and fabrication to better oversee our engagement with the industry through the means and methods of construction; architecture as a situated discipline to better evaluate our relationship to the city, the environment and global sustainability as an ethical commitment; and the opportunities of interdisciplinary advancement between architecture, art and engineering as allied disciplines. While the history of our architecture programme has thrived for many decades from critical thinking, the current predicaments we face as a discipline offer new philosophic and metric hurdles to be addressed. For this reason, part of the evolving environment of the school of architecture is to pose the question yet again: what does it mean to be critical in this day and age?