



Delft University of Technology

## What is Populism?

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## Introduction

# What is Populism?

Salomon Frausto and Léa-Catherine Szacka, editors

This number, the twentieth-ninth, of *Footprint* explores architecture's intersection with media, politics, and aesthetics through the lens of populism. In recent years, the link between architecture and populism has resurfaced in the form of heated polemics. In 2017, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) stoked fury when releasing a three-minute video in which images of grand neoclassical buildings were interwoven with shots of modernist towers spectacularly collapsing into dust.<sup>1</sup> A year later, the reconstruction of Frankfurt's old town provoked an outburst in German architectural circles when architectural theorist Stephan Trüby associated the project with right-wing extremism.<sup>2</sup> And in the Netherlands in 2019, Forum for Democracy leader Thierry Baudet, in his general elections victory speech, denied climate change and attacked energy transition by proclaiming his disdain for modern aesthetics, particularly the use of architectural devices such as wind turbines and solar panels.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Donald Trump's plea for 'Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again' provoked a forceful response from the Society of Architectural Historians who, in an opposition letter, stated: 'We nonetheless remain convinced that the dictation of style – any style – is not the path to excellence in civic architecture.'<sup>4</sup>

The concept of populism remains evasive insofar as it is used to define political and economic phenomena reaching from far right to far left. In that sense, it is, to use the words of political philosopher and historian Jan-Warner Müller, 'obviously a politically contested concept' that may be said to put into question the traditional binary division between left

and right altogether.<sup>5</sup> And if the term populism is often used as a synonym for 'anti-establishment', being critical of the elite may not be the ultimate criterion of populism. Indeed, populism also implies forms of conflict and polarisation, and other attitudes that can easily translate into particular spatial and aesthetic features.<sup>6</sup>

With this issue of *Footprint*, we are committed to explore new interpretations of the architectural ramifications of populism, understood as a political approach and strategy that strives to appeal to 'common' men or women who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elites and intellectuals. On the one hand, we aim to explore how right-wing populism contributes to reshaping architecture's elite aspirations, cementing the distinction between high and low cultures, while at the same time also using highly communicative and seductive images. On the other hand, we are interested in investigating other forms of populism, such as commercial populism – here Las Vegas can be seen as the paradigmatic example of an architecture commissioned by rich and powerful clients to appeal to 'the people' – and welfare-state populism, or examples referring to spatial and architectural articulations of anti-austerity and anti-establishment initiatives. Ultimately, we are hoping to downplay the traditional opposition between left- and right-wing populism, to reframe and reconceptualise the architecture of populism. From the start, there was a desire to explore the relation between architecture and populism as a triangulation of three poles: media, politics and aesthetics.

This exploration into the architecture of populism ties in with the work published in *Footprint 8: Defying the Avant-Garde Logic: Architecture, Populism and Mass Culture*.<sup>7</sup> *Footprint 29*, however, proposes a different approach to populism, opening the topic to a wider conceptual and temporal framework. As a point of departure, we asked the following questions: What are the possible links between architecture and populism, given that both are abstractions emerging from and referring to different historical, social, and geographic contexts? What are the spatial and material realities of right- and left-wing populism in politics and architecture, in both a historical and contemporary perspective? What are the mechanisms of stylistic appropriation – such as po(pu)larisation – and how are forms of architecture populism mediated? How has architecture been instrumentalised for the sake of populist agendas and, in turn, how has populism been used and articulated within architectural projects? Is populism (mis)used in order to obtain important commissions, to position the client in an architectural field driven by the globalised forces of finance? Not only does this issue seek to examine the context relating to architecture and populism, but it also looks at how architects change their design language in relation to changing social, economic, and political determinants.

As expected, given our editorial desire to expand the notion of populism to other vantage points, the response to our call for contributions went in many directions. The variant definitions of media, politics, and aesthetics have drawn expansive lines, and case studies from past and present, offering many perspectives from which to think about what an architecture of populism is today.

### On Media

Today, it is impossible to separate forms of populism from their representation in media, be it traditional mass media or new social media. As our democracies are defined more and more as 'media democracies' or 'audience democracies',

the circulation of a large quantity of words and images – both real and imaginary – plays a crucial role in the constant dialogue with 'common' men and women.<sup>8</sup> Analysing the market imbalance between supply of and demand for housing through popular aesthetics, Jesse Honsa, in his research article 'Call and Response: Popular Media and Architecture in London's Historic Housing Crises', considers the operative nature of the term 'housing crisis', along with related terms, through architectural publications and popular media from the nineteenth century to the present. Drawing from this two-hundred-year arc, he provides a context for the shift of London's housing question from quality to quantity. Rachel Julia Engler, in her essay 'End Times and Architectural Style on the Christian Campus', examines the futuristic and neo-vernacular idioms found, repeatedly, in the design of building projects by American television evangelists Pat Robertson and Oral Roberts. In particular, she sets up a theoretical framework for thinking about building through the notions of permanence and durability.

In 'Trump's Aesthetic, Spatial and Architectural Dramalities', Sophie Suma examines both media and politics and argues that Donald Trump's dramatisation participates in a populist architectural strategy. Suma explains how, starting with the real estate mogul's appearance on the reality TV show *The Apprentice*, Trump use the media of television to convey a new form of 'dramality'.

### On Politics

Undoubtedly, media, politics and aesthetics are, more than not, intertwined with various populist strategies and actions. In 'Cedric Price's Pop-Up Parliament: A Role Model for Media Architecture and Data Politics', Dennis Pohl touches upon both media and politics to describe how Cedric Price's Pop-up Parliament of 1965 dealt with the media-technical condition of politics, while proposing that architecture was an integral part of the media network of governing. Price's project is paradigmatic

of the 1960s, a period when the media operations of information compression, prediction, and audience targeting became more decisive for politics than the content of debate. This analysis allows us, on the one hand, to problematise conventional definitions of populism towards a media-based concept, and on the other, to further our understanding of architecture as a political medium operating directly with media such as documents, television, and computers. Pohl argues that the advent of digital media calls for a different architectural history of populism, one that engages with the operativity of media and cultural techniques, rather than relying upon the symbolic representation of ideology in architecture.

Moving from symbolism to facts on the ground, Gabriel Cuéllar and Athar Mufreh, in their essay entitled 'Virtues of Proximity: The Coordinated Spatial Action of Community Land Trusts', examine the phenomena of property scattering and spatial patterns of community land trusts (CLTs) – one of the foremost models of resident-led development whereby land is claimed and used by a community without a landlord – to reveal the politics of a popular architecture. Owen Hopkins complements this essay in his contribution 'There and Back Again: Council Housing, Right to Buy and the Politics of Architectural Pluralism', where he looks at the role played by British council housing in populist politics from the postwar to the present, looking more particularly at Margaret Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme. Hopkins shows that the polarised and asymmetrical nature of this debate conflates questions of aesthetics, typology and planning, and tenure type, all typical of a populist politics. Finally, these articles are complemented by Nina Frolova and Elena Markus's visual essay 'Cult of War: The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces', which puts on display the recently completed, Dmitry Smirnov-designed cathedral dedicated to the resurrection of Christ, an exemplar of post-Soviet populist ideology today.

### On Aesthetics

Populism can hardly be detached from certain recurrent aesthetic strategies. In the last decades of the twentieth century, it was strongly associated with certain forms of postmodern architecture that freely and shamelessly mixed popular references with historical and often classical language. In "New Classical" Contemporary Architecture: Retrotopia Trends and Phantasms of Tradition', Pierre Chabard looks at the genealogy of ideas within the new classical movement of Anglo-Saxon architects. He explores how this architectural doctrine emerged in the 1980s at the height of the debates around postmodernism, and with the support of some important political allies – notably in the United Kingdom, Prince Charles – alongside institutional frameworks and specific commissions, all of which helped develop this movement outside the mainstream of the contemporary architecture scene. Chabard places this movement beyond its style, arguing that its protagonists' desired return to traditional building techniques and craftsmanship is a desire for a 'retrotopia', borrowing a word from philosopher Zygmunt Bauman.

In her visual essay titled 'Architectural Antiquisation', Mari Lending comments on Norwegian artist Espen Gleditsch's powerful photographic series *Who's Afraid of the Neo-Neo-Classical?*, shot in Skopje and shown in Oslo in the spring of 2019. What she calls antiquisation ('antikvizacija') is, as she describes it, 'the fabulist nostalgia of nationalistic identity politics ... architecturally expressed in the covering up of the facades of brutalist buildings with columns, porticos, tympanums, and cupolas in polyurethane and plaster.'

Finally, as a way to close the issue, we have asked architectural historian and theorist Mary McLeod to revisit, through a conversation with us, her seminal 1989 *Assemblage* article 'Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism'. This text is an incontestable reference for anyone who wants to study the relationship between architecture and politics. We

were curious not only to go back to that text, and her reflections more than thirty years later, but also to discuss her thoughts given the current state of emerging populisms – left and right – worldwide and how contemporary media, politics, and aesthetics are changing the architecture of populism.

Together, these contributions do not aim to simply provide a clear definition of populism, but rather to shed more light on a debated concept, showing its multi-faceted aspects in relation to space and aesthetics. If we may say that we are now living in ‘an age of populism’ dominated by a continuous critique of the elite, what does that mean for the future of the disciplinary and professional boundaries of architecture?

## Notes

1. *ArchitectureMMXII*, UKIP campaign video, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0EkIahdooM&t=4s>.
2. See, for example, Rowan Moore’s article ‘Is Far-Right Ideology Twisting the Concept of “Heritage” in German Architecture?’, *The Observer*, 6 October 2018.
3. On this, see Bart-Jan Polman, ‘A Masochistic Heresy’, *The Avery Review* 40 (May 2019), <https://averyreview.com/issues/40/masochistic-heresy>.
4. Andrew Ferguson, ‘Trump’s Beautiful Proposal for Federal Architecture’, *The Atlantic*, 20 February 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/the-case-for-making-federal-buildings-beautiful-again/606829/>. The document, ‘Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again’, was a draft for the subsequent Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture passed on Monday 21 December 2020, just one month before President-elect Biden took office. The order stated that new US government buildings must be ‘beautiful’.
5. Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 9.
6. Ibid., 4.
7. See Dirk van den Heuvel, Tahl Kaminer, ‘Defying the Avant-Garde Logic: Architecture, Populism, and Mass Culture’, *Footprint: Delft Architecture Theory Journal*,

issue 8, Defying the Avant-Garde Logic: Architecture, Populism, and Mass Culture, Spring 2011, 1-6.

8. Ibid., 43.

## Biography

Salomon Frausto directs the Berlage Center for Advanced Studies in Architecture and Urban Design, formerly Berlage Institute, at TU Delft. Originally trained as an architect at Columbia University, Frausto has been contributing to the public discourse on architecture through education, publications and public programmes for two decades. Reflecting his long-term scholarly interests in cross-disciplinarity, institutional architecture, and graphic representation, he is currently completing a book-length study on the divergent career of the South African-born British architect and designer Theo Crosby.

Léa-Catherine Szacka is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in Architectural Studies at the University of Manchester and, since 2018, visiting tutor at the Berlage. Over the past decade, Szacka has published and lectured extensively on the entanglement of postmodern architecture and media. Among others, she authored *Exhibiting the Postmodern: The 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale* (Marsilio, 2016) and co-edited *Mediated Messages: Periodicals, Exhibitions and the Shaping of Postmodern Architecture* (Bloomsbury, 2018). With Silvia Micheli, she is currently completing the manuscript of *Paolo Portoghesi: Architecture Between Media, History and Politics* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming).