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Fragility

Editorial

Fragility: Foundations for a Regenerative Architecture

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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A subtitle has been added to this document.

- 1 In a time where global crises are rapidly multiplying, fragility emerges as a pervasive, planetary condition. Fragility rattles our perception of continuity and development by rendering visible the interdependencies that sustain our shared environment. It exists as an uncertain and formative condition where everything vibrates, collapses, and changes in coinciding and untimely manners. It brings into view a network of relations across materials, social systems, ecological forces, and temporal shifts, each actively shaping how buildings come into being, evolve, and persist. It frames conditions of openness in which architecture is constantly composed and recomposed through processes of transformation. Fragility articulates this embeddedness and makes balanced interdependencies and transient temporalities present to us.
- 2 Through this attunement to interdependency, fragility activates a sense of hope. As argued by theorist Steven Jackson's proposition of "Broken World Thinking", fragility inspires renewed involvement and commitment to our shared environment (Jackson, 2014). This ecological mindset advances iterative actions of care, adaptation, and repair, directing attention to the stewardship of ecologies, the preservation of value, and the significance of the individuals whose labour sustains them. Coupled with Jackson's (2023) assertion that hope is a driver of meaningful action for change, Broken World Thinking expands as a prompt for transformation. Hope resides in the capacity to remain engaged, to respond to damaged conditions, and to imagine continuity within shared worlds. When linked to fragility, hope becomes a situated method, anchored in responsiveness.

- 3 In this issue of “Ardeth”, we begin from a shared, hopeful proposition: that fragility is not a limitation but a (re)generative condition of architecture. Architecture, with its unique multi-scalar situation, from the individual to the global, has under-utilized potential to support transformative change for improving our well-being and our planetary outlook. The first step in capitalizing on that potential is to address fragility as an inherent condition of building. We open up the discussion around the vital relationship between architecture and fragility to challenge the typical conception of buildings as static constructs through a novel emphasis on process, repair, and the overall delicateness of architecture’s design dependencies.
- 4 In this issue, fragility is uncovered from the infrastructural to the elemental scale. The precariousness of our coexistence with fundamental elements – light, water, and air – is revealed through explorations of the interventions that sustain and preclude these relationships. Investigating the function and dysfunction of public service infrastructures alludes to a fragile background through which the potentialities for architecture can be enhanced or impaired. Fragility is also demonstrated to be the impetus for processual engagement and reparative practice. The acts of remaking, rebuilding, and reconsidering architecture are markers of its integration into practice. By reconceptualizing architecture through the lens of inherent fragilities, this issue aims to expand architectural frameworks to inspire change. The shared condition of living with fragility provides a communal platform from which to work. And hope, with its call to actively reimagine our positioning, is the provocation that divulges that, paradoxically, incorporating fragility into architecture can encourage strength through interconnection. We propose that time and value are points of entry to collectively expand the depth and breadth of our architectural frameworks through considering the regenerative potential of fragility, which extends past a conventional understanding of sustainability.

Fragility and time: Deepening architectural continuity

- 5 Fragility offers a renewed foundation for engaging time in architecture. As buildings are understood as fundamentally fragile, it foregrounds the incorporation of reparatory and care-driven action. In this way, fragility shifts the focus away from design and building completion as fixed endpoints, instead positioning architecture as embedded within a continuous process of becoming. Buildings endure through the actions that sustain them: from cleaning, repairing, and maintaining to replacing and reconstructing. These practices, present across all structures from the celebrated to the ordinary, align architectural temporality to an enacted experience of time. This experience of time is not linear or predetermined, but relational and responsive, shaped by the specificity and situatedness of the human and more-than-human actions that affect change. This change includes both degradation, as materials disintegrate or decompose, and renewal, as actions of repair and reconstruction are performed. Fundamentally shaped by environmental conditions, material behaviours, and the rhythms of reparatory action, architectural time unfolds as an interwoven response to the shifting and irregular demands of buildings as they are lived with and lived through.
- 6 The emergence of circular design frameworks during the last thirty years has embedded many of these concerns. By conceptualizing a hierarchy of cascades moving

across the practices of retaining, repairing, refitting, reconstructing, and recycling, these models challenge us to develop a new material understanding rooted in continuity. Yet many circular design frameworks remain structured by mechanistic and deterministic logics. Emerging from the field of Industrial Metabolism, material flows are presented as predictable sequences governed by planned systems. In this light, fragility enables an expanded view, sensitive to the correlations that these practices embody. At the same time, circular design allows us to scale the implications of fragility beyond the single building. It opens questions about how materials move across multiple lifespans, how components are reclaimed and reused between structures, and how reparatory actions might extend across a distributed network of buildings. In this view, circularity is grounded in the lived conditions of the built environment. It is in itself metabolic, driven by continuous cycles of change and punctuated by unexpected events to reveal the underlying fragility of the world.

- 7 The expanded view of time introduced by fragility gives architecture and sustainability a distinct temporal depth. This depth is formed through the accumulation of relationships and the layered engagements between materials, users, environments, and all those who contribute to the ongoing work of building. Architecture becomes co-produced – influenced by many agents and conditions – and embedded within the wider worlds it participates in. It enters into a longer process of continuity shaped through responsive material use and sustained attention. Fragility brings this process into focus by showing how buildings endure, not through permanence, but through involvement.

Fragility and value: Broadening architectural responsibility

- 8 The project of revealing fragility in architecture is an interdisciplinary endeavour that combines conservation theory with contemporary sustainability discourse. Fragility, far from being merely a structural or material condition, imbues architecture with an ethical imperative to respond attentively to vulnerability. In this way, fragility supports a novel understanding of the fundamental value proposition of architecture. Instead of cementing a preset and predetermined value defined by its perceived producers – the owner, the entrepreneur, the architect – value in buildings is understood as fluctuating and interdependent, changing with the socio-ecological relationalities that sustain them. It builds on the care-driven methods and ethical sensitivity towards cultural continuity present in established preservative and interventionist practices for historic buildings. In doing so, it expands these methodologies with a new consciousness towards ecological balances while widening the field of their application. Here, ethical questions are not just acknowledged but activated, compelling architecture with a heightened sense of responsibility towards the environments that will physically accommodate it, the beings who will socially inhabit it, and the more-than-human agents that contribute to its space.
- 9 Fragility also shifts our understanding of value towards wider ontological and normative dimensions. It reveals the multiplicity of value sets in all built structures, not only in canonized buildings with assumed cultural importance. The broadening of our relational responsibility foregrounds the ways in which architecture always is ontologically integrated with human existence: how we inhabit the world, recognize

ourselves across time, and negotiate meaning. At the same time, fragility also has a normative orientation. As it invites us to consider not just what buildings are, but what they ought to be, it retains the future orientation of architecture. In addition, the normative dimension is enhanced by the care-based and reparative practices that contribute to constantly reshaping the identities and meaning of buildings. Awareness of these practices instigates a new acute sensitivity to the everyday yet evolutionary and iterative meaning-making actions of building.

- 10 When fragility engages with an expanded relationality, simultaneous shifts on the ontological and normative levels occur. Consequently, these shifts enable a design that is regenerative in nature through its strategic, situated, and ethical properties, advancing, not only the circulation of materials, but also the reconceptualization of value through a broadening of architectural responsibility.

Towards a regenerative model of sustainability

- 11 Working with fragility affords a unique opportunity to increase the depth and breadth of practice through a necessarily more intense consideration of time, relationality, and value. The far-reaching breadth in relational connectedness of the architectural world becomes evident when socio-ecological worlds are acknowledged as both users and co-producers of the built environment. At the same time, understanding the constant dynamic temporal transformations the built environment is subject to provides a depth to engagement by integrating the richness and inevitable variation of the past, the present, and the future. This enhanced view of the building - exposing its intricate and expansive connectedness - provides the foundation for moving beyond sustainability. While sustainability is oriented towards minimizing damage, engaging fragility means more than preventing breakages. We must *work with* the cracks, the changes, and the messiness that constitute a persistent state of fragility in order to effectively engage with the world. Integrating fragility into practice means embracing, through the activation of hope, a pro-active approach for restorative and responsive world-making. Regenerative principles, which are oriented towards improving our relations and acknowledging our holistic relationship to the world, have room to emerge within a fragile model of architecture. Working with inherent fragility supports this “regenerative paradigm” (du Plessis, 2011), where value setting, dynamism, and complex ecologies provide opportunities for improvements.
- 12 Fragility opens architecture to the uncertainty of continuous change, encouraging attunement to the conditions and capacities that shape our built environments. It positions architecture as an active ecological participant, capable of facilitating renewal and contributing to the endurance of shared worlds. Fragility is both ontological and normative. It questions what architecture is, how it persists, and through what forms of relation and responsiveness it comes to matter. In this issue of “Ardeth”, we propose fragility as a vital condition for architectural practice – one that redefines value through regeneration, reimagines permanence through responsiveness, and approaches buildings as living ecologies sustained through care, adaptation, and continual transformation. This framework does not seek to resolve fragility or minimize breakages, but instead it works through it by engaging its (re)generative potential.

- 13 du Plessis, C. (2011), *Towards A Regenerative Paradigm for the Built Environment*, “Building Research & Information”, vol. 40, n. 1, pp. 7-22.
 - 14 Jackson, S.J. (2014), *Rethinking Repair*, in T. Gillespie, P.J. Boczkowski, K.A. Foot (eds), *Media Technologies*, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, pp. 221-240.
 - 15 Jackson, S.J. (2023), *Ordinary Hope*, in D. Papadopoulos, M. Puig de la Bellacasa, M. Tacchetti (eds), *Ecological Reparation*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, pp. 417-433.
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