Cryptoarchitecture
ON SMART HOMES, PRIMITIVE HUTS AND THE POLITICS OF THE SAFE ROOM

Intermediate 14 is a design-driven unit with a fervent interest in the political implications of technology and its impact on architecture and the city. Distinguishing itself for a penchant for provocation, it is unafraid of tackling head-on the thorniest hot-button topics of our time: the breakdown of individual privacy, the creeping rise of ubiquitous surveillance, the corporate infiltration of the domestic sphere, the resurgence of the libertarian dream.

This year, Inter 14 sets out to explore the extreme frontiers of domesticity in the age of network culture. The utopian vision of cyberspace as a place of refuge for the anonymous, instant and endless sharing of knowledge has so far proven radically unfulfilled. It is, rather, the Net that has seeped into the spaces of everyday life, becoming more full-bodied, saturating the most intimate spaces of the home with smartness. As the distinction between the spaces of labour and domesticity blurs, the idea of ‘machines for living’ morphs into a factory of data: technology is the charismatic roommate from which there is no escape.

Nest thermostats, Dropcam nannycams… even the fridge is connected to the Internet… As sentient products seep into the domestic sphere, far from being a space of privacy and seclusion, our homes are quickly becoming the space in which we are most closely observed. And as the “sharing economy” comes to prevail, the very concept of the home is transformed: we drift from Airbnb to Airbnb like nomads in a neoliberal New Babylon. Uprootedness as a lifestyle choice.

These are the conditions to which Inter 14 will provide a speculative architectural response.
ARCHITECTURE AFTER PRIVACY

We kick off with a screening of *We Live In Public* (2009). Pushing back on the dichotomy between “public” and “private,” we suggest instead we should think of these conditions as a spectrum. Public is not just what can be viewed by others, but a fragile set of social conventions about what behaviors are acceptable and appropriate. Privacy isn’t a state of a particular set of data. It’s a practice and a process, an idealized state of being, to be actively negotiated in an effort to have agency. [1]

Once we realize this, we can begin to reimagine how to negotiate privacy in a networked world.

Perhaps what this summer’s Ashley Madison hack[2] — 30 million names, email addresses and private photos of subscribers to an online platform for extramarital affairs dumped into the public domain—does most of all is reinforce the argument that laws and systems that sharply distinguish “public” from “private” are out of date. In a world where anything can become public, we’re replacing the technical lack of privacy with an implicit social contract. It says, in essence, that just because something about you is knowable doesn’t mean it’s fair game. New social rules govern how public knowledge should be used and interpreted.

The very practice of privacy is all about control in a world in which we fully know that we never have control. As natives of the digital age, at a gut level, we know we can’t have control over who sees what, but we hope to instead have control over how that information is interpreted. And thus, we see our collective imagination of what’s private colliding smack into the notion of public.

*In this framework, “private” no longer means “secret,” but “personal.”*
PART I: SAFE ROOM/PRIMITIVE HUT

How, then, does this impact our understanding of the quintessential “personal space”, i.e. the home? In *Vers un architecture*, Le Corbusier defines the dwelling as a shelter—a place of refuge “from the heat, cold, rain, thieves and the inquisitive.” Privacy, in other words, is one of the defining characteristics of domesticity. What is the architectural expression of a culture that favors absolute visibility over seclusion? In order to test the possibilities latent in this condition, we turn to one of the archetypes of architecture, the primitive hut. As domesticity distilled to its most essential form, the Primitive Hut challenges us to freely consider that which is most essential—that without which architecture is no longer architecture—as embodiment of a new cultural order of things. As the most basic of envelopes, it is an invitation to hypothesize an environment in which a new set of values is laid out, in which priorities are clarified.

Our primitive hut must perform as a refuge, a *safe room* of sorts. Confronted with the need to achieve safety, we are forced to evaluate what, in the contemporary city, constitutes a refuge, a place of safety.
PART II: DATA IS THE NEW OIL

Traditional notions of privacy aren’t the only thing in rapid transformation. Concepts as familiar and fundamental as money, ownership, even the authority of the State itself, seem ripe for disruption.

In the words of Heath Terry, senior analyst, Goldman Sachs—

*The whole blockchain technology behind Bitcoin has massive implications for really any kind of asset — and the ability to transfer ownership of digital goods. It’s hard to see a world where the blockchain doesn’t end up changing the way we think about asset ownership.*

In such a scenario, one could even ask: *What if homes could own themselves?*

Throughout the second term we will revisit the concept of the “primitive hut”, siting it the realm of a near-future urban environment in which sharing economy megaliths such as Airbnb have been disrupted by networks of autonomous, self-owning residential units, each running itself as an algorithmic, blockchain-regulated micro-entrepreneurial operation. Students will develop prototypes, considering the architectural implications of various possible business models:

❖ The “Free as in Facebook!” model, in which the occupant receives free accommodation in exchange for 24/7 rights to harvest and sell user data;
❖ The Safehouse model, in which absolute privacy is offered as a luxury or status symbol;
❖ Others, tbd…
We check availability and proximity for any desirable service.
PART III: CITIZEN LUDENS

Technology has always been a primary shaper of cities. In his seminal vision for the transnational megalopolis of New Babylon, Constant envisaged the city of the future as an infrastructural “layer” floating above the current city in which 80% of space is public, and the primary activity of its nomadic inhabitants is play. Reality turns out to be somewhat more prosaic: the transnational infrastructures that stitch our present-day New Babylon together—Uber, Airbnb, etc—are entirely immaterial, and largely originate in Silicon Valley. As venture capitalist guru Marc Andreessen put it, “software is eating the world.”

Meanwhile, blockchain-based technologies like Ethereum and Bitcoin introduce new models for peer-to-peer trade, governance and ownership in the city, raising the possibility that the centralized institutional models we know will begin to crumble. Central banks fade away; telecoms are replaced by peer-to-peer communications networks; even the energy grid falls into disuse, disrupted by local power generation and high-efficiency battery storage.

In this context Inter 14 raises once again the question of urban form. Given the redefined understanding of privacy and personal space implicit in the domestic envelope we have so far developed, what is urban form consequential to this? What is the nature of public space take in this “new New Babylon”, if it even exists? What are the spatial demands that structure social interaction on a societal level? Starting out with a study of precedents in the design of social spaces ranging from the radical visions of 1960s utopians such as Superstudio to the speculations of sci-fi authors such as Neil Stephenson (Snow Crash) and Bruce Sterling (Shaper/Mechanist series), we will examine the possibilities for a lighter, more malleable infrastructural layer and its interface with “legacy” urbanity.
FIELD TRIP: VARANASI, INDIA

Like the Tor “Varanasi is a city of circuits. Devoted pilgrims carrying food, faith and age-old stories circle the city following the 16 codified sacred paths. The city is shaped like an onion: circuits within circuits leading to the centre where the great temple of Lord Shiva resides…” [3]

Varanasi is also the first of 15 Indian holy cities that have been chosen for a major “Smart City” facelift, to be executed by Japanese giant Hitachi. The unit will take it as a site of negotiation between past, present and future
THE WALL

Architecture has long relied on the wall as the fundamental device for the production of privacy. This expectation has largely been limited to performance on the spectrum of the visible (light) and audible (sound). In both the physical and digital environment, the wall (or firewall) is a constructed element tasked with filtering, concealing and manifesting of identities; mediating the relationship between the personal and the public; and, increasingly, hoarding and guarding information. In an age of signal-based communications in which the vast proportion of social interactions are distributed across a much broader portion of the spectrum, the wall’s role is fundamentally different. Having explored the configuration of the architectural envelope, working in close collaboration with the Technical Studies program, students of Inter 14 will take a step back to study and reconsider the broader architectural potential of the wall as a mechanism for the mediation of messages, identities and social transactions—a distillation of their broader vision of domesticity and the city.
NOTES ON PROCESS

Inter 14 is a research-driven design unit that deals with highly speculative scenarios which are nevertheless grounded in the observation of the present.

✦ The unit will work closely with graphic designer, artist, and filmmaker Simone Niquille (@technoflesh) to develop ambitious film and animation-based projects throughout the course of the academic year and to coordinate the presentation of work in the final exhibition. A broad range of media and technologies will be explored including 3D scanning, infrared photography, Python, Grasshopper, and others. Emphasis will be placed on the study and production of film/animation as a narrative device. The use of camera/stabilization equipment, post-production software such as Adobe AfterEffects, experimental 3D capture techniques and the preparation of a script will be part of the unit’s coursework.

✦ Given the topics that will be addressed, the unit seeks individuals unafraid to embrace controversy, willing to take risks, and motivated by an interest in architecture’s ability to achieve social and political impact through the production of ideas. In order for these ideas to achieve impact, they must be effectively communicated, and therefore the development of a compelling narrative is seen as central to the unit’s work. The unit places great importance on communication and presentation, viewing it as a fundamentally important moment in the design process.

✦ Internal presentations will be frequent; juries with invited external critics will take place at the end of each term; students can expect to present in front of internationally renowned figures in the fields of the visual arts, design, technology, urbanism, media and activism as well as architecture.
Bibliography

♦ Snow Crash / Neal Stephenson

♦ Homo Ludens / Johann Huizinga

♦ Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects / Dunne&Raby

♦ Crypto Anarchy, Cyberstates, and Pirate Utopias / Peter Ludlow

♦ Wall / Rem Koolhaas, AMO, Harvard GSD

♦ Rethinking Technology: A reader in architectural theory/ William W.Braham & Jonathan A. Hale

♦ Italy: The New Domestic Landscape / Emilio Ambasz

♦ An Essay on Architecture / Marc-Antoine Laugier

♦ TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone / Hakim Bey

♦ Future Crimes / Marc Goodman

♦ Bruce Sterling / The epic struggle of the internet of things