ARCHITECTURE AND THE POLITICS OF PISSED
(a micro manifesto)

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On June 8th 1972, Associated Press photographer Nick Ut captured the iconic image of a nine-year-old girl, Phan Thi Kim Phuc, running towards the camera naked and screaming, having been severely burnt by a South Vietnamese napalm attack. On June 5th 1989, photographer Jeff Widener captured the shot of "the unknown rebel," a Chinese dissident, standing defiantly in front of a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square, Beijing. On May 29th, 1913, Russian composer Igor Stravinsky debuted his recent composition, The Rite of Spring before a packed theater in Paris. So radical was the dissonant and unfamiliar performance that theater goers soon began to hurl vegetables and other objects toward the stage, leading to a violent street riot.

It doesn't happen very often, but occasionally, in just the right circumstances, an image or creative act can, against the stacked odds of cynicism and apathy, change the world. In these particular cases an image could galvanize an anti-Vietnam war movement in the United States, or illustrate to the citizens of China that another form of life was possible—one of peaceful resistance. Or a musical composition, lasting less than two hours, could prompt a riot that would open the minds of an entire generation to the possibility of entirely new forms of music.

While forgotten by many—architecture is, in fact, a creative act. And yet the power of architecture and its imagery to prompt political change exists only as architectural myth and ancient lore-- a power associated only with the Miesian gods of yesteryear— a magic no longer known or practiced.

Instead, architects today focus on simpler problems, more local problems, -- problems of context (it looks like the mountain in the distance), of program (put a Starbucks in the bathroom), of marketing-friendly animal metaphors (it's a bird), or how to consume a bit less energy (Look, Ma...LEED tin). Like a decrepit sorceress robbed of her powers, architecture sits mute in a world of technologically-enabled explosive possibilities—vaguely remembering having had, in the past, perhaps more respect, more prestige, and certainly a hell of a lot more power.

But change is coming—and architects are tiring of their clever diagrams, metaphors of buildings looking like animals, pretty Pollyanna pastel backgrounds that distract us from the crueler colors of reality, and the insistence that architecture is merely easy, or just fun, or "yes," or whatever the sound-bite-de-jour is. Any attempt to distill architecture into a smaller, bite-sized anything denies the reality of architecture's reach, complexity, and potentially vast cultural impact. Instead of becoming smaller, easier, or infantilizingly funner, we can reframe architecture to enter culture with a newer, fresher, sneakier and more technologically empowered form of political influence. Our school may not be the cause, but we can have a voice. A voice that is louder than diagrams, more confrontational than birds, more inspiring than LEED tin, and above all, serious about the emerging potentials of architecture to once again inspire shifts along the fundamental fault lines of culture. The sorceress awakens. And she's pissed. Are you?

In response to the outright dismissal and fear of entire populations in red states by many of my classmates, I refer you to what Townes Van Zandt once wrote: "Racism is a worldwide problem, and it's been like that since the beginning of recorded history and it ain't just white and black, *but it's always a little more convenient to play it with a Southern accent."*

"Racism took shape [in the 19th century]: it was then that a whole politics of settlement, family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life, received their color and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race." *(foucault, history of sexuality, vol. 1. 1976 p.149)*

"We cannot presume the enclosed and well-fed space of the polis, where all the material needs are somehow being taken care of elsewhere by beings whose gender, race, or status render them ineligible for public recognition. Rather, we have not only to bring the material urgencies of the body into the square, but to make those needs central to the demands of politics." *(butler, notes toward a performative theory of assembly. 2015 p.96)*

TECTONICS OF POWER

Arghavan Taheri & Aslan Taheri

700 years ago an Iranian poet said, "Human beings are members of a whole,
In creation of one essence and soul." Saadi, Golestan, 1292.

Today, Iranian students and many other aspiring scholars from various communities and countries fear that there is an unjust force standing atop the power pyramid; hindering foreign talents from joining their colleges to contribute to a society where the ultimate goal is to build a better world for everyone.

If there were an institution to embody such a power pyramid, what would its architecture look like? Whenever such an architecture is categorized by scale or typology, its reference point would be the human. This relation is so pivotal that the significance of scale or type becomes bound to the presence of the human. In this sense Architecture, perceived as the collective product of each and every individual, regardless of belief, gender, or race, is comparable to the world itself.

If the human were given significance in relation to architecture, what would be its respective scale? Would scale be defined in relation to the power of architecture? We believe that this subjective dimension of architecture, human scale, measures greater than any objective architectural counterpart.

In a maladjusted society, power is institutionalized and exclusive, just as in the ancient pyramid of power. This obsolete structure rules out individuals according to belief, nationality, and race, pushing and oppressing them, always to the base of the pyramid.

The body in this pyramid is the body in peril. Against such insecurity, there is a better formal order. We propose reversing the power organization to proudly elevate the most essential building block: each and every individual. The reverse pyramid rejects its despotic father. The form emphasizes the delicacy and far superior strength required to carry the weight of a great and diverse people.

So we ask: can Architecture reverse the pyramid of power?