

**MANIFESTO: THE ROLE OF THE MENDING ARCHITECT**

**to be a mending architect is to...**

**TO ENGAGE IN DIFFICULT CONTEXTS**

We are born into a home that our parent(s) have prepared for our arrival, into a neighbourhood that people have built over time, into a city that has been planned through policies, into a world that has known tension, conflict, war, reconciliation, regeneration. We live in the traces made by the people before us. In the era of the anthropocene and of capitalist growth, the physical traces left by the architect, the developer, the policy maker, are scars of exploitation, extraction, destruction and injustice.

There is too much harm done in building for extravagance and excess, and there is far too much injustice in the way some communities live, notably those seeking refuge, in spaces of conflict, in incarceration, in homelessness and those at risk because of the climate crisis. Those with most privilege are able to build for their own luxury, while those who have their human rights violated are being denied their basic needs. There is also injustice in the way the constructions of today have impact on future generations - whether it is through the conditions created by the architecture itself, or through the environmental impact that has been negated through construction. The carelessness of our current world, one where resources are being depleted at the cost of the environment, and where humans are being reduced to resources, is exemplified in the current practice of the architect. The architect should have an ethical responsibility not to engage in these structures of accumulation and extraction: to do so should be considered malpractice. Instead, she should work with the more vulnerable communities. The mending architect tries to be conscious of the scars produced by its industry, to recognise them and to mend them. She wants to engage in the difficult, the more vital, urgent, conditions of living.

These contexts are highly complex: architecture is one of many participants in the injustice that exists. To engage in these contexts is demanding, but the gravity of these situations is of urgency for the mending architect.

## **TO ANALYSE SPACES FOR INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE**

When physical traces affect future generations negatively, one can think of intergenerational injustice. The spaces we have designed are participants in influencing the way people live in them. Architecture is also a participant in this state of the climate crisis, in what Anna Tsing would describe as a state of precarity. We must stop building new altogether, and work with what exists, all its scars and flaws. We have social and environmental responsibility for the spaces before us, and even more so the ones that we further create.

The act of mending involves working with something that exists and is in need of repair. To work with and learn from the past, and not simply carry it on as it is, the mending architect must carry on extensive research at multiple levels: the political, the environmental, the sociological, and examine how these current conditions and behaviours are reproducing harm and violence onto the future human and non-human generations. The mending architect does fieldwork, carefully studies the site, its communities, and the current efforts made towards mending. She recognises relations between the spaces and the people. She identifies patterns, structures, influences and forces which create harm.

## **TO ENHANCE THE MINOR VOICES**

In *Towards a minor architecture*, Jill Stoner describes metropolitan areas as “the landscape of our constructed mistakes”. The mending architect aims to repair/mend those mistakes of the past by working with the current conditions and existing buildings. Repairing/mending these mistakes can be intended in the physical sense, to renovate a building back to a state of functionality, instead of demolishing and building new; or in a socio-environmental sense, in how these constructions are acting in supporting a society and a structure of power that is harmful/destructive, and how repair/mending would involve modifying the interactions with the built space towards a way of life that is less harmful.

Minor architecture puts forward the idea of the minority, of the sometimes unseen, unperceivable, repressed, and to reproduce it inside the current major structures to subvert them. To do so, the mending architect must tune in to those minorities, in what Anna Tsing would call the Art of noticing: “The curiosity I advocate follows such multiple temporalities, revitalizing description and imagination. This is not a simple empiricism, in which the world invents its own categories. Instead, agnostic about where we are going, we might look for what has been ignored because it never fit the time line of progress.”

In difficult, contested contexts, noticing those temporalities hidden by the hegemonic order is one of the practices of the mending architect, to see other possibilities emerge in these existing spaces. When existing buildings and spaces are associated with a specific use, or with a certain connotation, the task of the architect is both to reinterpret space and change the current perception associated with the space, to show possibilities of another way of living within the current reality. This involves embracing uncertainty and contingency. To accept that things could be different in a multiplicity of ways, to put forward all those possibilities and visions, and to expect this contingency in design.

## **TO CREATE FLEXIBLE AND DIALECTICAL DESIGN**

How do we ensure that our work in producing minor architectures is not equally perpetuating the reproduction of intergenerational injustices and of extractive power structures? One approach of the mending architect is that the changes we make to existing spaces could be progressive and potentially reversible. That change can happen easily, with few resources, and if it needs to be reverted, it would be without harm: lightness in the interventions helps them to be implemented and removed if needed. The mending architect tests, receives feedback, and readjusts direction. The design process is not finite: it is rather cumulative, where ideally diverse types of knowledge add on to each other to shift and change the direction. It also implies design for maintenance and disassembly. Flexibility in the design is also to be accounted for contingency – can it be used elsewhere? for another use? can it be taken down/apart? The mending architect uses flexibility to embrace uncertainty and to let go of control.

If constructions are to be made, the design should be mindful of materials and resources, to use found objects, and be dialectic. When design is hidden, one is less likely to know how to repair or care for their things. By making the construction evident, one gets a better understanding of how to repair, maintain and care for it. This also involves making the user part of the construction, to have memory of construction is helpful in repair, but also to have emotional attachment to our physical world, to care for it a little longer.

### **TO DEMOCRATISE SPATIAL CHANGE**

By involving the user in construction, we open up the opportunity for people to have agency in changing/modifying the spaces around them. The mending architect accepts that change in space and architecture is not limited to only architects. She shares the knowledge for communities and minorities to effect change in the environment.

Sharing skills is important. Architecture skills - reading spaces and understanding how it affects and is affected by the way we live - are skills that can help democratise change and therapy of the city. Architecture does not only involve pouring concrete, or curtain wall details; it also involves the minute articulations in our environment - to know where the sun rises and sets, to know how to clean our windows or remove the mould in the shower, to understand that space can affect behaviour and behaviour can affect space. To teach these space reading skills, and to share our visions and interpretations of space and suggested uses and interventions, is to share our ability to create change in the physical world. It also becomes an invitation for other skills to be taught to the mending architect.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING AS HEALING**

Both my parents came to Canada as political refugees, and have suffered from the Vietnam War as children. Still today, I know very little about their upbringing. I haven't been to Vietnam and my parent's and grand-parents have never returned. There are many things that I have hesitated to ask about my parents' past. Things that might be difficult to hear, things that we don't want to imagine anyone having to talk about - conversations that are really challenging to have when your parent might be recalling a memory that might make them relive difficult and emotional situations. I do not know which territories are off limits. It is like an unknown jungle, you don't know what you are stepping in, so it is simply easier not to engage at all. I believe that is part of the intergenerational trauma.

But over the years, I have gotten to know them a little more through the different skills they have taught me. The passing down of knowledge has always felt like a safe field to learn about their past. It is a space where I am ready to receive, and they are ready to share their story, second-handedly, through the teaching of another thing. It would open up before me a vision of their younger selves learning those same skills, and what situation came about where they were intrigued or where they needed to learn those skills, sometimes a context that was informed by their difficult past.

Whenever we walked in gardens, my mother would point, name out, and educate us on all the plants and flowers that crossed our paths, knowledge she got when she did her one year of university in biology. She didn't get into dental school like my grandparents had wanted her to, and she had to study hard for a year to try again the following year. That showed me the reality of the hard life of the immigrant. But that also taught me perseverance, and to have hope, and that all knowledge is a blessing.

My mother taught me how to sew. She showed me the dresses she made for her bridesmaids for her wedding, instead of buying them. She learned sewing from my grandma who's first job when they came to Canada as political refugees was

as a seamstress. That showed me the reality of the hard life of the immigrant. But that also taught me the value of patience, of hard work and the beauty in the handmade, the personal, the imperfect.

When we talked about having my own architectural practice, my mom told me, looking back, she wouldn't have started her own dental office again. She said she was naive and didn't know better, but that was expected of her and what needed to be done. That showed me the reality of the hard life of the immigrant. But that also taught me to be brave, to embrace uncertainty, to dare to engage in the difficult.

My mother taught me how to knit, and said she couldn't really remember from when she was young, so she got me a book, and she went over it with me. Through that I carry her in every knit stitch. I have learned many skills through my mom, but more importantly, I have learnt the most about her upbringing through those skills. To learn from her has allowed me to enter part of her world, not only to learn about the negative, difficult, traumatic parts, but importantly, the positive; the resilience, how those skills enriched her life and allowed her to overcome life's hurdles. When learning skills from our parents or elders, we remember where we come from, but we also are giving ourselves the gift of knowledge, growth, independence, and agency for change for the future, to gain access to a different way of living that is less reliant on sometimes exploitative structures. When we teach our children a skill acquired in our own lifetime, we share a part of our past, and make a space for the emotional recognition of our hardships. To pass down skills from parents to children is one way to heal from intergenerational trauma. To engage in the difficult is how we start to heal and mend and care.

The mending architect, by sharing its skills, informs on how we have hurt the earth - humans and non-humans, and how we can navigate the coming hardships with tools, and care for our world better.





## **TO DEDICATE EFFORT AND TIME TOWARDS CARE**

The mending architect tries to infuse care into her interventions: in the design of the new uses, new spaces, old spaces, in her knowledge sharing, and in her communications with communities. She also practises care in the daily: she cleans her home for longevity, she helps her communities out of love, she has empathetic interactions with friends, co-workers, teachers.

To care for something involves the physical bodily action. Repairing, maintaining, providing assistance, being responsible for someone's or something's health.

To care about something involves the emotional. Feeling empathy, supporting values, having concerns about a matter, providing emotional recognition.

The mending architect values care in order to shift the prioritisation of it in the bigger structures she interacts with: the academic, economic, and political contexts. When talking about how the current economic system deprives us from prioritising it, feminist activist Emma Holten mentions the Care Pay Penalty, where people “are penalised for caring” and where “there is a systematic cheapening of human relationships and care to make profit”. The mending architect recognises that much of the violence in the architecture field is due to a lack of care for people and the environment. Revaluation of care is central to the mending architect in her designs and her practice. The mending architect tries to provide a safe space and to create opportunities where we are allowed to care, to participate in a more empathetic world, where decision making is more careful.