



**DAVID BURNS, ADRIAN LAHOUD,
SAM SPURR (N)**

To See the City

2012 | *Past Futures, Present, Futures*

Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York

This project examined the role that radical planning proposals in the maturation of a city and how these historic proposals can be reimagined for the 21st century city. Initiated in 2012 by Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York, the exhibition *Past Futures, Present, Futures* assembled 101 architects, artists, theorists, and designers to respond to a series of radical proposals for New York City from the past 100 years. Each commissioned designer was asked to respond to a unique proposal, creating a new visual and text-based project.

Our project was a response to the 1916 visionary plan for New York City by engineer T. Kennard Thomson. His project called for the damming and draining of the East River to create valuable new real estate for the rapidly growing New York Metropolitan Area. Our project re-imagined the proposal as a response to the outbreak of polio that terrorized the city in 1916.

Storefront for Art and Architecture is the leading gallery for experimentation and research in spatial design. *Past Futures, Present, Futures* presented a past and future historiography of novel ideas to open discussion about relevant actions in the city, their vectors of desire, methodologies, limits, audiences and agents. Curated by Eva Franch, the exhibition included leading contributors to the field such as: BIG (Bjarke Ingels), Snohetta and Geoff Manaugh & John Becker.

To See the City
by N

DAVID BURNS
To See the City

Exhibition designed by Leong
Leong



DAVID BURNS
To See the City

Exhibition designed by Leong
Leong



Since 1928

Search Domus...

Like Alex Crowe, Min Kang and 405,866 others like this.

domus

Italiano
Sign up / Log in

CHECK OUT » **DOMUS** DIGITAL EDITION

[Architecture](#) / [Design](#) / [Art](#) / [Products](#) / [Domus Archive](#) / [Shop](#)

Contents [News](#) / [Interviews](#) / [Op-ed](#) / [Photo-essays](#) / [Specials](#) / [Reviews](#) / [Video](#) / [From the archive](#) / [Competitions](#)

Magazine [Current issue](#) / [Local editions](#)

Network [Your profile](#) / [RSS](#) / [facebook](#) / [twitter](#) / [instagram](#) / [pinterest](#) / [LOVES](#)



Author
Jacob Moore

Published
10 January 2013

Location
New York

Sections
[Architecture](#)

Keywords
Alfred Ely Beach, Chialin Chou, dpr-barcelona, Elizabeth Woods, Eva Franch i Gilabert, exhibition, Greg Barton, Leong Leong, Project Projects, Snøhetta, Storefront for Art and Architecture

Network

[Like on Facebook](#) [Share on Twitter](#)

[Pin to Pinterest](#)

By including the exhibition *Past Futures, Present, Futures* in its thirtieth anniversary celebration, New York's [Storefront for Art and Architecture](#) is marking its sustained presence in the city somewhat surreptitiously. In the show, curator Eva Franch i Gilabert along with fellows Greg Barton and Chialin Chou have smartly taken the opportunity to populate Storefront's unique platform with over 100 historical and contemporary imagined architectural futures for the city – articulating the gallery space in general, and theirs in particular, as the appropriate amplifier for forward-thinking visionaries within the profession.

The premise is clear: the curators presented a past vision of this city's then-future (such as Elizabeth Woods's 1961 *Design Loitering* essay or the Pneumatic Transit System proposed by Alfred Ely Beach in 1870) to a contemporary designer who was asked to reimagine its central terms for an altered future (such as [dpr-barcelona's](#) *Altocumulus-Data-Structure Over Manhattan for 2035* or [Snøhetta's](#) *Parks over Parks for 5012 [1]*). Multiply these pairings by 101, add in a growing collection of audience-generated visionary content, place everything within the powerfully affective prismatic space designed by [Leong-Leong](#), and *Past Futures, Present, Futures* is "complete." The physical manifestation of these projects' representations as well as the links between them require notable effort to unravel – with QR-coded links and "Random Contextual Information" panels scattered throughout the disorienting space of densely-packed reflective blinds, staggered video screens, and background audio tracks. While the logic of each of these pieces could be described in more detail, I'd rather take this opportunity to think through the general strategies of this exhibition in its present institutional context, especially given the fact that each passer-by isn't privy to the same explanatory walk-through by the curator that I was allowed.

Past Futures, Present, Futures, Domus, Jacob Moore
<https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2013/01/10/past-futures-present-futures.html>

DAVID BURNS
To See the City



Past Futures, Present, Futures installation view at Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York. Photo courtesy of Cameron Blaylock

As both reflection of and commentary on today's oversaturated media landscape, "overdoing it" has become a common curatorial tactic. *Past Futures, Present, Futures* certainly ascribes to these methods, though it critically leverages the overwhelming nature of the large amount of "content" by further complicating access such that a definite commitment is required to negotiate even a small piece of the body of information. Though frustrating, this elusive clarity works to the exhibition's advantage by constantly forcing participants to extrapolate whatever "conclusions" they choose. Without being directly handed an overarching explanation, every visitor's attempt to articulate his or her own fosters the same kind of creative invention found at the heart of the included projects' architectural optimism — even if it nevertheless reinforces the absence of their constructive realities, along with the absence of many of those realities' intended effects.



Past Futures, Present, Futures installation view at Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York. Photo courtesy of Cameron Blaylock

But more broadly at Storefront, especially recently, "overdoing it" has lost some of its own — already elusive — criticality. While I appreciate the political skill required to consistently lure fundraisers, participants, and a constantly changing public in today's New York, I haven't appreciated the short-sighted tactics that seemingly lack any direction other than *bigger* audiences and *more* projects. Discourse for the sake of discourse doesn't lead anywhere in particular. And from my

Past Futures, Present, Futures,
Domus, Jacob Moore
<https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2013/01/10/past-futures-present-futures.html>

perspective, an only slightly modified discussion that starts firmly rooted on one side of a well-articulated argument is no less of a discussion than one that begins in more "neutral" territory. In spite of their divergent opinions, I think most of Storefront's large audience would nonetheless agree that "fair and balanced" approaches to representation are not only impossible but also undesirable. Accordingly, a space that hosts a platitudinous chat with starchitects one evening and a hastily-organized Occupy event the next is, for me, ultimately a space that does more to distill the tenuous focus and commitment to change in our professional community than to enliven it.

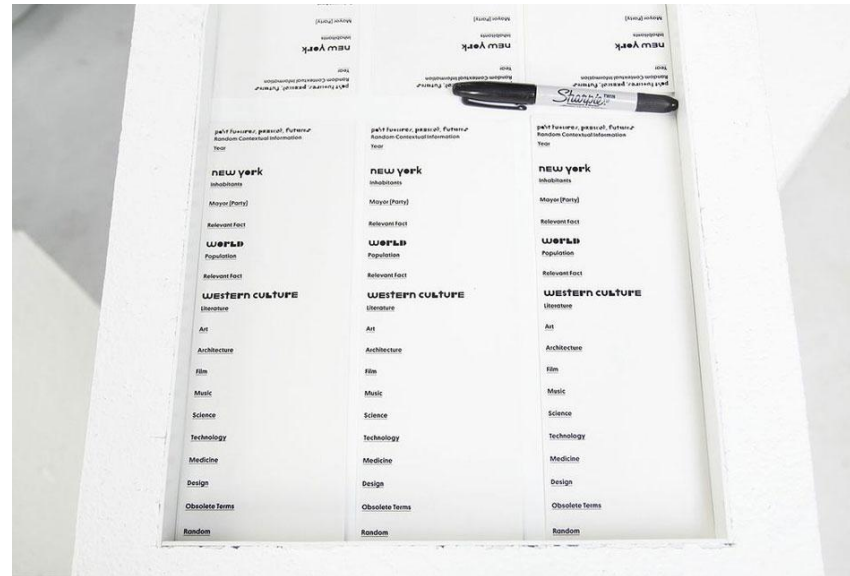
Franch i Gilabert told me that her curatorial strategy here was to frustrate any easy "consumption" of the projects within the exhibition, and my experience of this frustration was indeed surprisingly thought-provoking

In this context, *Past Futures, Present, Futures* somehow appropriately nods to these recent unproductive excesses while offering hope that change is coming. Franch i Gilabert told me that her curatorial strategy here was to frustrate any easy "consumption" of the projects within the exhibition, and my experience of this frustration was indeed surprisingly thought-provoking. I only hope that this is a strategy that can solidify, basing outreach on well-developed, progressive content, and not simply on thirty years of rich history and a full schedule. These are frustrations I have with many cultural institutions, but Storefront, to its credit, holds a special place in New York's architectural heart. Thinking about the city's and the profession's past futures and present futures through this lens, I'm cautiously optimistic that the most important projects will be given prominence, and that the conversation might find a path forward instead of staying hidden behind its own reflective blinders. *Jacob Moore (@jacobrmoore) is a New York-based critic and editor whose experience in international development informs his perspective on architecture's power to affect substantive change at many scales.*

Past Futures, Present, Futures,
Domus, Jacob Moore
<https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2013/01/10/past-futures-present-futures.html>



Past Futures, Present, Futures installation view at Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York. Photo courtesy of Cameron Blaylock



Past Futures, Present, Futures installation view at Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York. Photo courtesy of Cameron Blaylock

Notes:

1. The examples chosen here were not explicit pairings themselves, but rather were chosen to represent the variety of themes and historical moments addressed broadly within the exhibition. The curators left the specific links between each "past future" and "present future" in the background, and I've chosen to treat them similarly.



Past Futures, Present, Futures installation view at Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York. Photo courtesy of Cameron Blaylock

Through 12 January 2013
Past Futures, Present, Futures
 Storefront for Art and Architecture
 97 Kenmare Street, New York



Past Futures, Present, Futures installation view at Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York. Photo courtesy of Cameron Blaylock

'Past Futures, Present, Futures' Exhibition

06 SEP 2012

Events Exhibition mini Quotes
 New York New York City
 Storefront for Art and Architecture
 United States



Visionary Palimpsest, New York. Past Futures, Present Futures, Storefront for Art and Architecture, 2012

Storefront for Art and Architecture is opening up its fall exhibition season starting September 25th with 'Past Futures, Present, Futures'. The exhibition, which will be up until November 17th, presents 101 unrealized proposals for New York City, with 101 reenactments by invited artists, architects, writers, and policy-makers to create alternative visions for the present and future of the city. The exhibition is curated by Eva Franch and designed by Leong Leong. An opening reception will take place on September 25, 2012 from 7pm to 9pm. For more information, please visit [here](#).

Cite:

"Past Futures, Present, Futures' Exhibition" 06 Sep 2012. ArchDaily. Accessed 21 Dec 2014. <<http://www.archdaily.com/?p=270057>>

DAVID BURNS
 To See the City

1. Past Futures, Present, Futures, Domus, Jacob Moore
<https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2013/01/10/past-futures-present-futures.html>

2. 'Past Futures, Present, Futures' Exhibition, archdaily
<http://www.archdaily.com/270057/past-futures-present-futures-exhibition/>