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New Geographies 1: AFTER ZERO

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Established in 2003, the main aim of the Aga Khan Program at the GSD is to study the impact of development on the shaping of landscapes, cities, and regional territories in the Muslim world and to generate the means by which design at this scale could be improved. The program focuses on the emerging phenomena that characterize these settings and on issues related to the design of public spaces and landscapes, environmental concerns, and land use and territorial settlement patterns. The process entails a study of their current conditions, their recent history (from World War II to the present), and, most important, the exploration of appropriate design approaches.

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CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER 13

CHAPTER 14

CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 16

CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER 21

CHAPTER 22

CHAPTER 23

CHAPTER 24

CHAPTER 25

CHAPTER 26

CHAPTER 27

CHAPTER 28

CHAPTER 29

CHAPTER 30

CHAPTER 31

CHAPTER 32

CHAPTER 33

CHAPTER 34

CHAPTER 35

CHAPTER 36

CHAPTER 37

CHAPTER 38

CHAPTER 39

CHAPTER 40

CHAPTER 41

CHAPTER 42

CHAPTER 43

CHAPTER 44

CHAPTER 45

CHAPTER 46

CHAPTER 47

CHAPTER 48

CHAPTER 49

CHAPTER 50

CHAPTER 51

CHAPTER 52

CHAPTER 53

CHAPTER 54

8	Editorial: After Zero <i>Stephen Ramos and Neyran Turan</i>
10	Ex Nihilo Urbanism <i>Albert Pope</i>
24	Risk Society's "Cosmopolitan Moment" <i>Ulrich Beck</i>
36	Architecture as Framework: The Project of the City and the Crisis of Neoliberalism <i>Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Jattara</i>
52	The Zero-Ground of Politics: Musings on the Post-Political City <i>Erik Swynghedouw</i>
62	Cable <i>Keller Easterling</i>
78	Mimetic Utopias: Themeing and Consumerism on China's Suburban Frontier <i>Thomas J. Campanella</i>
90	Siteless Geography <i>Francois Blanciai</i>
98	Arabian Tabula Rasa: Abu Dhabi's Urban Imaginary <i>Yasser Elsheshtawy</i>
110	Starting Points: Gilles Clément and the Recuperation of Space <i>Matthew Sandy</i>
120	Recovering "The Future": A New City in the Gulf <i>Behrang Behin</i>
130	Meltdown: Thawing Geographies in the Arctic <i>Lola Sheppard and Mason White</i>
138	Homogeneity: From Scratch, Retrofitted <i>Joseph Grima</i>
146	Geography and Planning: A New Version of an Old Story? <i>Peter Hall</i>
156	Contributors

After Zero

*Stephen Ramos
and Neyran Turan*

Design disciplines are challenged by the condition of the zero point. "Zero-context," "cities from scratch," "zero-carbon" developments all force designers to tackle fundamental questions regarding the strategic relevance and impact of a design intervention. As much as the zero point presents naïve innocence and embodies contradictory notions—such as crisis versus redundant abundance, or context versus model—it also creates a ground for doubt, self-critique, and rejuvenation for architecture and urbanism.

Our discussions for the volume started with the scale and absurdity of the recent mushrooming of the "new cities" phenomenon—as the built manifestations of "wealth management" and the bluntest symptom of the zero point—throughout the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia, where diachronic urban processes have been temporally flattened for delivery. As projects, indeed, entire cities, are built before they can even be imagined, and then repackaged and replicated as models for any context, our initial questions were: What do these projects suggest for the design disciplines? Rather than reductive aestheticization, or total rejection, what are possible critical ways to reflect on this condition? Who are the new actors involved as well as the envisioned new citizens who will inhabit these "new cities"?

In addition to the issues raised by "cities from scratch" such as the Masdar "zero-carbon city" of Norman Foster in Abu Dhabi, Waterfront City or Ras Al Khaimah Gateway City of OMA, and Dongtan Eco-city of ARUP, strange initiatives such as the Ordos 100 in Inner Mongolia, China, or Next Gene 20 in Taiwan have recently appeared as caricatures of architectural struggles within an apparent zero-context condition. Beyond a possible focus on the vast scales and ambitions of these projects—in relation to the provision of infrastructures, new technologies/techniques of expertise, resource efficiencies, and density—it is important to see them as symptomatic of a much broader condition within contemporary architecture and urbanism. As much as the idea of zero point connotes urban models to be experimented with on a "desert site anywhere in the UAE's seven emirates," as in OMA's Ras Al Khaimah project, or provides a testing ground for "pure form" as in the case of the Ordos Desert, this condition clearly marks the need to seriously explore fundamental inquiries regarding form and context (physical, social, political), as well as design's capacity to shape cultural imaginaries and spaces of publicness. The ambition of our volume is to explore new agendas in relation to the specificities of these emergent spatial conditions.

Along with the challenges inherent in the zero point, perhaps more meaningful are the provocations regarding the AFTER ZERO condition. The idea of an AFTER ZERO is crucial for us; not only to assert the need to reflect on the future following the zero but also in acknowledgment

of the release of our first *New Geographies* volume AFTER our previous volume, titled ZERO. If the zero condition presents crises of form, context, and social relevance for architecture and urbanism, perhaps one way to deal with this is "to redefine crisis, not as crisis but more simply as symptoms of larger urban trends whose logic is revealed only when judgment is suspended," as Albert Pope writes. While preparing the volume, the global financial crisis has made our questions even more relevant. If we assess the current moment of crisis as a zero point, how can we think about the social, political, and formal significance of design after the Meltdown? After an era of willful reality mapping or redundant iconic formalism, the volume aims to investigate possibilities AFTER crises, AFTER mapping, and AFTER signature architectures.

In parallel to the idea of crises as symptoms of larger issues, Ulrich Beck suggests in his article that contemporary circumstances present both risk and crisis, but at the same time place us within a larger global "cosmopolitan moment" where the two contradictory views within modernity—self-destructiveness and the ability to begin anew—merge. Beck's call for a "non-nostalgic, new critical theory to look at the past and the future of modernity" moves us to zero, not without history but not subservient to it either, to then reimagine, or as Behrang Behin suggests, "recover" the future. The contributions to this volume, both speculative and reflective (such as Peter Hall's account of the interconnected histories of planning and geography), share this underlying motive.

All contributions to this volume take strong positions on the possibilities of the degree zero. One underlying theme is the new parameters that the zero suggests regarding the ideas of form and context in architecture and urbanism. For example, while Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara conceptualize an architecture AFTER neoliberalism, which "only follows itself" rather than "function, program, technology, climate, clients, finance, values, etc.," the "siteless, 1,001 building forms" of Francois Blanciak—which can be applied not only to any context but also to any scale—suggest the idea of form AFTER formalism. For Pope, it is the possibility of an urbanism of space AFTER an urbanism of form. The regional specificities related to resource extraction, infrastructure, and suburban replication, as portrayed in the articles by Thomas Campanella, Keller Easterling, Yasser Elsheshtawy, Lola Sheppard and Mason White, are also essential to problematize the concept of "from scratch" through particular manifestations and histories. The complexities of "from scratch" are conceptualized further with the notion of retrofitting, expressed in Matthew Gandy's exploration of *délaissé* spaces, Joseph Grima's work on homogeneity, and Erik Swynghedouw's focus on vacant spaces of the "post-political" city.

The double signification inherent in the idea of zero (symptomatic versus projective) is suggested in the graphic structure of the book: a double itinerary is established via a parallel line of "inserted spreads," which act as provocations or ghosts in conversation with the contributors.

Without relying on totalizing narratives, naïve morality, or escapism, AFTER ZERO is an opportunity to imagine alternative futures and a revitalized project for the city.