Interview with Andres Lepik*

*Conducted and/or edited by the Volume Editors.

Volume Editors: As curator, museum director, and professor for curatorial practices, what do sustainable cities and sustainable communities mean in your medium of communication to a larger audience?

Andres Lepik: My occupation with the idea of social sustainability relates to the simple question: How can architecture in the future be not only ecologically sustainable, but also more relevant to society? My interest in this topic started with the research for the exhibition 'Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement' at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 2010. Before this moment, I had observed various architects trying to produce a positive impact through architecture and design in underserved communities, either in cities or in rural contexts. But before 2008, I had not seen them as a group or movement, as these projects were scattered around the globe and the designers were hardly connected to each other. That was the starting point—to collect different projects from all areas of the world and present them as an ignition for a social turn in architecture. Another goal was to present socially engaged architecture not just as a form of development aid given from the industrialized world to the developing world, but rather as a different approach to planning that also occurs in the US and other countries of the Global North. In the last 10 years, social inequality worldwide has increased, and the number of people forced to migrate has gone up constantly. Architecture may not offer an immediate solution for this unjust situation because politics has to solve the major problems, but architecture can contribute through good examples and best practices that politics can grasp and maybe bring to a larger scale.

VEs: To what degree and on what scale do exhibitions influence the paradigm of sustainability in the field of architecture, and what responsibilities do curators have in exerting that influence?

AL: When I came to MoMA, for example, I was aware that this institution is a powerful platform for public discourse. It means that when you present an exhibition there, it will have a larger impact on a cause. It's a global institution with global outreach, so I reflected on my responsibility as curator, taking this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to present a topic there wisely. One aspect of my

thinking was the question of ethics, meaning the social relevance of a curator working in a privileged institution towards the non-privileged parts of society. In 2002, when the Venice Architecture Biennale was curated by Massimiliano Fuksas and titled 'Less Aesthetics, More Ethics', I disagreed with the title. As a reaction, the underlying motto for the show at MoMA was 'more ethics AND more aesthetics'; both aspects have to go along. Good design is part of the designer's responsibility, but this exhibition project also had other sources of inspiration. Take the 'Modern Architecture. International Exhibition' at MoMA in 1932, for example, which included one room on the question of "slum upgrading", curated by sociologist Lewis Mumford. Or in 1964, there was Bernard Rudofsky's 'Architecture Without Architects', which takes vernacular architecture as a counter-example to confront the excesses of later modernism at the time. Yet Rudofksy did not talk about contemporary architecture directly; he was just showing that there is beautiful, resourceful, and ethical architecture around the world. But there were no explicit lessons involved, e.g., how do we use these ideas of vernacular architecture in contemporary times? That was my starting point. I wanted to use the museum as a platform to show important and responsible projects around the world that take responsibility towards their respective communities and not only towards form.

VEs: Social engagement means engagement with society at large. Some architects, designers, and thinkers focus not on the physical object, but on processes that bring people together. Does this also have space within such institutions?

AL: From the 1980s, when 'Star Architecture' was born, the process of architecture was described as a top-down process, so there was the designer who was extremely powerful, and maybe the investor or politician who gave projects to the architect, but the communities were in most cases not involved in the planning. Take the so called "Bilbao-Effect" which was promoted to be a blessing for the city as it increased tourism and the local economy. The question of whether local people could afford the ticket to the museum was not asked. With the exhibition 'Small Scale, Big Change' that I curated in 2010, the idea was focusing on another form of design process, like "How can a community start, together with the architect, through participatory processes, to develop ideas and design?" This process may lead to buildings, but these buildings are not imposed from the top down; they're developed from within the community. Perhaps even the community will contribute to building the project themselves, strengthening the value of ownership. With my

exhibitions, I try to challenge these ideas about the role of the architect in general.

VEs: What aspects within discourses of sustainability have hard-to-reach museum directors and curators, in your experience?

AL: It would be absolutely necessary one day to talk about failure in architectural planning. Typically, at the end of design and planning processes, you see the final product and its success, either in the media, in publications or exhibitions. But we never talk about the failures, about the problems in the process, or about the projects that were rejected after completion by a community. I think that's a topic that needs expression—one that we need to handle more openly. Of course, we know about successful technical solutions. We know a little bit about how to manage participative processes, but there's always a danger that something will fail, and then you should talk about it so that other people can learn from such failures as well. But if you plan to bring it up openly in exhibitions, nobody wants to contribute. No architect likes to show the failures of his career.

VEs: If we look over the last 10 years since your exhibition at the MoMA, we're in a very different paradigm. More than ever, it is clear that sea levels are rising, and we can't leave people behind. From the museum exhibition perspective, what is next?

AL: Architecture as a profession has to fundamentally reinvent itself. That's the next step. I remember when 'Green Architecture' was discussed in the 1990s, and it was mainly about technical improvements such as triple-glazing windows, thermic insulation on façades, and solar panels on roofs. But the main problem was not addressed clearly: the new construction itself requires too much energy; the solar panel on top was not an adequate solution. Still, an estimated 40% of global carbon dioxide production is due to the construction business. If some architects do passive housing, it simply doesn't solve the large-scale problem that we have. The discipline of architecture is still trying to keep its traditional system intact which is largely depending on the idea of endless growth. Architecture has to redefine its goals and its social relevance to defend its role towards the global challenges that we have.

VEs: It sounds like the profession in itself is too complacent; people rely on the idea that they cannot change the system. But if changing the profession comes through education, then we would have to destroy our own model to allow for something new. Do you think this is true?

AL: At my university, it is the students challenging the professors not to organize excursions for which you would need to fly. It's kind of the Greta Thunberg effect; it's the next generation that challenges the system, but the system itself is very self-defensive.

VEs: What can we do to better align discourses of sustainability and mechanisms to both assess and communicate them?

AL: My professional platform for communication and activism is the museum; through exhibitions, I can try to engage the audience with the topics we present. In the current year, we had about 120,000 visitors per year. My goal is to change awareness for the future challenges of architecture. Every single individual has a responsibility for the change needed to save this planet, and we all know what is coming if not. I feel architecture also has a role to play in this. With exhibitions, I can't change the planet, of course, but I can change awareness for the right questions. This is where I feel my responsibility—to use my platform to reach people with urgent topics so that they may take the next steps.

VEs: The exhibition is an abstraction of reality; the study of imaginaries and designed perceptions; disengagement with the built project; and the redesign of what we would actually need to achieve this re-invention of the profession. How do you teach that?

AL: I believe in the power of exhibitions because they work as public events; even in our digital age, people attend them because of the physical and social experiences related to them. The success started basically with the World's Fair in 1851, when public exhibitions became such a powerful instrument on a broad scale. You can see that even now, even though there is so much information available in digital form, people still go to exhibitions in large numbers. Exhibitions are a platform that addresses professionals and the public at once, so if you use it intelligently and integrate participation into your exhibition design, you can use it as a transfer from the academic world to a larger audience.

VEs: In the context of sustainable cities and communities, is the city the larger audience you're referring to, and if so, are you stepping out of the museum to reach this audience?

AL: Yes, I started with some experiments, mostly through workshops that are related to my exhibitions. The Goethe Institute traveled with one exhibition of mine called 'Think Global, Build Social' to 28 venues all over the world, and in some of the venues, we organized workshops with local architecture students. The workshops were given by architects or myself, trying to engage the students with the related questions of the exhibitions. For example, they should address social issues in their cities in order to think about the question, "What would be your answer as a designer in the spirit of this exhibition to the local knowledge that you have?" In some cases, the workshops translated into additional exhibitions designed by the students. In the future, I also want to get more teachers and their students from the local schools in Munich to visit my exhibitions and to engage them in discussions about the future role of architecture in a world at high risk.