

TWENTY FOUR

ARCHITECTURE 2.0

Gem Barton

It is 09.01 in the morning. Mr A is 54. He edges his way into the white acrylic box. He has been meaning to come in for some time now. The box is the size of a parking bay, with a sign above the door that reads 'Upgrades Available'. The sign glows, as does the box itself. It is externally lit, plunging all outside its limits into dark ambiguity. In the middle of the box lie two well-worn armchairs. They are not a matching pair. As Mr A ventures deeper into the box he sees a camp fellow dressed in black, perching contently, hands on knees, facing him. As Mr A walks towards Mr B, let's call him, he sees him slide his round rimmed glasses up his nose, and with a flick of the neck his hair jolts to the right. He nervously approaches the vacant armchair, sits, and his eyes lock onto the pink pocket square blinking back at him.

Mr A: Erm, excuse me, Sir, I think I need some help.

Mr B: Certainly, Sir.

Mr A: It's this old version of Architecture I've got, 1.0. I've had it for some time now, but recently it's being playing up.

Leaning inwards, Mr A pops his right hand into his inside left jacket pocket and gently lifts out his concerns. He places his hand palm up, fingers spread, worryingly close to Mr B's face. Mr B catches a glimpse of the threadbare inside pocket, the sign that Architecture 1.0 has been thoroughly well used, kept close to his owner at all times – this, he thinks, is a good sign indeed. Mr A uses his left index finger; he prods at the Architecture 1.0 lying in his palm: there is no movement, no response, he says.

Mr A: Look, it keeps sticking on this single setting. It chokes and then freezes. I'd like to exchange it please.

Mr B holds back a knowing smile. He has heard this complaint before and generally it doesn't end well, whether it is the freezing of Mr A today, the slow shudder of the Mr A from yesterday, or the spark, fire and fizzle of the Mr A from tomorrow.

Mr B: Very well, Sir, it is of course better to be safe than sorry. Might I take a closer look?

Mr B takes the choking matter into his own hands; he rotates it, blinks, and double winks.

Mr B: The issues you have observed appear to be consistent with those reported by others in the field. And from initial observations I can confirm that I am able to offer you an exchange for your faulty Architecture 1.0.

Leaning inwards, Mr B pops his right hand into his inside left jacket pocket and gently lifts out his prize; he places his hand palm up, fingers spread, worryingly close to Mr A's face. Mr A uses his left index finger, he prods at the Architecture 2.0 lying in his palm, it shifts slightly, and it slowly bobbles back – it is alive!

Mr B: In exchange for your choking Architecture 1.0 I can offer you this lively, intelligent, more flexible and intuitive model, Architecture 2.0.

Mr A: Can you tell me a bit about the new model? Is this one suitable for women and children? My family struggled to navigate the last one, you see; they said it felt a bit cold to the touch, but I can't say I noticed that myself.

This is Mr B's chance. He launches into the sales pitch. It flows from him: the passion and the sell.

Mr B: Of course, Sir. Excellent question. Architecture 2.0's new manufacturers, BYEBYEBINARY have been very keen to eradicate its previous reputation as a product primarily aimed at white, middle class males. Whilst they held record-breaking sales figures and an excellent international reputation, they wanted to work out the alpha bugs and respond better to a changing market, and to include women and children of course. As such, Architecture 2.0 now has a whole new face of dials and settings, with knobs and buttons and switches galore, suitable for all: men, women, children, unisex, intersex, no-sex, those with mosaic genes, lesbian, gay, straight, bi, trans, and of course the label-free and the as-yet-undecideds...

Mr B is 23. The hair flick is his dearest tick – it can make or break any social situation – and the urge comes as he sees Mr A is unsettled by the progressive nature of the improvements. He has seen this kind of reaction before. He doesn't blame him; it can be difficult for those born into black and white to begin to embrace rainbows, he thinks to himself. But he is here, he has made the first step, he now knows that a single choking setting is no longer satisfying his needs.

Mr A: How very... modern. But is there anything available that's a little more specific to me?

Mr B: I'm afraid not, Sir. In a valiant attempt at equality, BYEBYEBINARY are widening their approach, not reducing it. As such they are introducing an excellent feature called PLURALIS. PLURALIS is from the Latin...

Mr A: The Latin for... more than one?

Mr B: Indeed, Sir, you know the concept well?

Mr A: I believe I am familiar with it, yes, but I'm unsure how this new development would benefit me. I think, I think, maybe, actually... yes, my Architecture 1.0 might last me a few more months yet. Perhaps I could just take a leaflet and think it over?

Mr A begins to feel as though he is being taken for a ride. Is he falling for the sales pitch? He is beginning to question why he came here in the first place. And why, today of all days, when he has back-to-back meetings all afternoon and has to be home on time? As he withdraws his hand and begins to place his Version 1.0 back into his left inside jacket, Mr B interrupts his train of thought.

Mr B: Well, as I was saying, PLURALIS comes as standard in Architecture 2.0 – it is natural progression, Sir, I do hope you understand. As proprietors of Architecture, ultimately we are Agents of Space and it is our responsibility to the past to engage with the future. Wouldn't you agree? Version 2.0 has been under development by a specialist team of progressive analysts. They've been collecting social and technical data from the last century of Architecture 1.0 sales, returns, complaints and registered bugs. It is top of the range research employed through equality portals and tested only on inanimates.

Mr A nods knowingly but Mr B can see this might be a stretch too far.

Mr A: Umm...hmm.

Mr B: And what's more, PLURALIS itself is a unique operational feature. It behaves independently for each active user. You could say it is adaptive to personal backgrounds and conditioning.

Mr A: Gosh, that is quite the upgrade. How does that work exactly? Is it hard? What do I have to do?

Mr B has got him back. He is elated; second chances are somehow sweeter.

Mr B: Well, Sir, upon booting up you will be asked a number of questions, which must be answered honestly. For example: age, ethnicity, location of education, degree of education, political views, marital status, hometown, inside leg, identity of unit master, exposure to literature, name of first pet, parental occupation, sexual orientation, number of friends in high places, gender, etc. The answers to these standardised questions enable Architecture 2.0 to calibrate the cultural conditioning of its user and as such determine suitable and appropriate readings for spatial sequences, cultural arenas, and professional endeavours, all of which are unique to the user.

Mr A once again begins to fidget; he pulls at the neckline of his shirt and runs his hand around the back of his neck, wiping away the particles of sweat that have been collecting. Mr B thinks he is uncomfortable at the thought of the self-critical analysis and its personal codification abilities. He wonders whether Mr A has ever really given any thought to his own relationship to Architecture 1.0.

Mr A: Let me get this straight: it has the capacity to re-code my perception of space, change my view of the world?

Mr B: Changing your view, dear Sir – that doesn't come close! It doesn't just change your view, it finally opens your eyes!

Mr A: What's wrong with my eyes? What are you trying to say? That I'm narrow-minded? That I'm not paying attention? Well, my eyes are open, I can already see. What's wrong with what I see now?

Mr B: Sir, please, please do not take this personally... You said yourself that your model is sticking, choking, freezing... If Sir thinks the new developments to be unnecessary, then I believe the single setting function of Architecture 1.0 to be better suited to your requirements.

Mr A: Ok, right, well... Can I see it? What does it look like?

Mr B: It's not... How do I explain this? It's not as simple as its predecessor; it's so much more than aesthetics, Sir. You see, it's not about what it looks like anymore. It's about how you use it!

Mr B can read the signs: he can see that Mr A is afraid of being left behind but has never been asked to take such a leap before without certain guarantees.

Mr A: Well can I see a sample, have a trial at least?

Mr B begins to laugh but he thinks better of it and follows through with a fake cough; he gets away with it.

Mr B: I'm not sure that Sir fully understands the concept of the new intuitive model. Architecture 2.0's existence is not a material practice but rather a set of discourses, new ciphers by which architecture and our cities can be re-coded. This cannot be sampled; it is a one-way research construct. Which brings me to the final conditions of the upgrade, which I am duty bound to advise Sir of. There are strictly no returns and no guarantees. Upon being awarded the upgrade, one cannot go back to version Architecture 1.0. Sir must embrace the new intuitive model and all its added extras. Architecture 2.0 is just the beginning...

Mr A interrupts. Actually, he totally loses his cool. This rarely happens; his cheeks flush and the rage wrinkles on his brow. It comes out. All of it.

Mr A: Just the beginning... Just the bloody beginning? And you'd know about that wouldn't you, being so young, so current. You sit here telling me about the future, about learning from the past, about new languages. Don't you think we have all been here before? I was once in your shoes, you know, fighting against the chipped-shoulder soldiers, asking people to believe. Don't you think I see the problems?

Mr B: Sir, please, what we have is what we have, it's the same, its different, its changing – but what we do with it, how we use it, how we let it impact us, that is all up for grabs. We are more than passive lemmings: we have vision, and we have ambition for betterment. We can take control, we can de-bug, we can write new code, new language, to recalibrate our relationship with our cities. This is the scope of opportunity that Architecture 2.0 offers us. So, Sir, would you like to upgrade?

Mr A: What's the cost?