

## **Building Visions: Theology and Architecture in Deep Time**

Collaborative Research Project between Prof. Susanne Hauser (Berlin University of the Arts), Hannah Strothmann (Berlin University of the Arts) and Dr. Tim Middleton (Regent's Park College, University of Oxford)

### **Project Summary**

How do we imagine the built environment in the long-term future? How do theologies inform, or even constrain, our architectural anticipations of the future? – This project explored the double meaning contained in its title. On the one hand, we were interested in visions of buildings — the practical details associated with the architecture of the future. On the other hand, we also wanted to explore how visions are built — what worldviews, political assumptions, and social imaginaries lie behind specific suggestions of how things might be. The aim of this project was to explore novel interdisciplinary thinking at the intersection of theology and architecture. In particular, we were interested in investigating how both theologians and architects envision built environments in deep time and pursued thinking on ‚architecture after the Anthropocene‘.



A conceptual and literal entry point to ‚Building Visions in Deep Time‘: The tunnel entry of a nuclear waste depository in Finland; Foto: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tunnel\\_end\\_Onkalo.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tunnel_end_Onkalo.jpg), Wikimedia Commons

### **I. Workshop in Oxford (12th and 13th June 2025)**

In an initial workshop in Oxford in June 2025 we shared literatures, read across disciplines, and generated ideas and motifs which were to guide us through the next months of continued research. The first day of our Oxford workshop was therefore reserved for a conversation between us three project leaders. We evaluated literatures as well as chosen case studies which illustrated our thoughts. On the second day, we invited researchers from the fields of architecture and theology to discuss our initial findings. We were joined by Dr. Charles Howell (Theology/

Architecture, University of St Andrews), Dr. Timothy Howles (Political Theology, Associate Director, Laudato Si' Research Institute, Campion Hall, University of Oxford), Dr. Tobias Tanton (Theology, Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford), Dr. Eleanor McLaughlin (Theology, Ripon College Cuddesdon, University of Oxford) and Guy Sinclair (Architecture, Ravensbourne University London) who responded to our initial ideas with insightful and though provoking comments.

The debate began with three presentations by the project team: Drawing on three case studies, we explored widely differing perspectives on temporal phenomena that span long periods of time. Tim Middleton presented reflections on architecture, time, and eschatology, referring to the so-called 'cathedral-thinking' and drawing on the example of church architecture. Hannah Strothmann examined a landscape architecture project on the coast near New York City, a project designed to help replace, over a period measured in centuries, the oyster beds that were destroyed there and restore their role in coastal protection. Susanne Hauser presented the structure and construction of the world's most advanced repository for high-level radioactive waste in Finland, which is designed to remain unchanged for several hundred thousand years and protect the biosphere from radiation damage.

In the very lively debate that followed, topics soon emerged that concerned all participants. These topics included the concept of entanglement as understood in current biological, sociological, and epistemological perspectives: thinking in relations, including any possible agency, seems both unavoidable and promising. Further reflections focused on human abilities, particularly the role of the senses, sensuality, and imagination, as well as their potential and limitations in light of the temporal dimensions under discussion. This raised the question of human responsibility and led to a debate on criteria for failed or successful action. The question of attitudes came up - especially the idea of "care" in light of the conditions of the Anthropocene was discussed - a question with both theological and architectural dimensions.

## **II. Workshop in Berlin (16th and 17th October 2025)**

Building on our discussion in Oxford, the second workshop in Berlin in October 2025 involved further conversations and a site visit. In a first meeting summing up the ideas of the workshop in Oxford the three members of the project exchanged further readings. In the afternoon we set out to visit the *Organism Democracy* initiative in Berlin-Wedding: On a small overgrown plot at Osloer Straße, the initiative led by the artist group Club Real, experiments with establishing a democracy that takes the interests of each plant and animal species on the site into account. In this rich environment, we discussed how the interests of more-than-human lives can be taken into account when thinking about deep time futures.



Site Visit at Club Real's Organism Democracy; Foto: Hannah Strothmann

For the second day we had prepared a workshop together with the architects Elisabeth Broermann (guest professor at Technical University Berlin and part of the Architects 4 Future initiative) and Saskia Hebert (head of subsolar\* and former professor of Transformation Studies at Technical University Brunswick). We had circulated an open call among the students of architecture at UdK. Fifteen students, all engaged in environmental studies in architecture and in the development of sustainable planning and design, some of them also members of the self-organized teaching- and research-project ‚Klima-Klasse‘.



Workshop in Berlin, Day 2; Foto: Hannah Strothmann

As we were interested in the reactions of an audience mainly consisting of architects also this workshop was opened with the three project-presentations, supplemented by a film by two students of architecture, Firas Tokdemir and Justus Voigt. They presented a design for the long-term communication of environmental hazards thus relating to the question of how contact with future generations can be established.

The main issues discussed concerned the role of architects and their possible impact on design with respect to long-term perspectives. The importance of materials and their economy was highlighted. The present options for architects were seen as widely defined through investment decisions - but the two practicing architects also observed that these decisions were not in any case motivated through short-term financial effects. In architecture and architectural discourse the interest in processes that may run over longer periods rises, also the interest in adaptability and options for frequent adjustments. The interest in times beyond one's lifetime and the lifetime of the next generations seems to grow - and this changes common ideas on architecture and time.

Both workshops proved to be extremely fruitful and sparked further research and exchange between us and the various participants. We were especially happy to have been joined by students in Berlin who contributed their perspectives on how to design and build for futures in deep time. At the moment, we are preparing a co-authored publication which will synthesise our collective findings.