

Vassilis Sgoutas

A Journey with the Architects of the World

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Vassilis Sgoutas is a founding partner in Sgoutas Architects, a practice based in Athens, Greece; he is an architect who has been engaged with plenty of projects at all levels and scales of complexity. He is also a Past President of the International Union of Architects (UIA), which is of utmost importance for the meaning of his book “A Journey with the Architects of the World”.

UIA, a non-governmental organization founded in 1948 in Lausanne, Switzerland, is a global federation of national associations of architects (by now 124 countries), the goal of which is to unite, with no discrimination, the architects of the world around their common concerns in order to define and redefine the profession, its position and responsibility in the society, and to voice its aspirations. Taking the pulse of the profession worldwide, UIA is trying to set higher and shared standards for the architectural practice periodically challenged by various “crises”. This is the very forum where the ongoing problems of the architectural profession are imparted, debated, and transformed into guidelines and manifestoes expressing common goals for the good of humankind.

Vassilis Sgoutas’ committed engagement with this organization — his “journey” with the architects of the world — started in 1981, at the 14th UIA Congress in Warsaw, Poland. He was thereafter involved in UIA on behalf of his country, and accomplished the role of secretary-general until the year 1999, when he was elected president of the organization. The fact that the starting point of his engagement with UIA was placed under the theme “Architecture, Man, Environment” — the theme of the Warsaw Congress — is highly emblematic. Wherever he has activated — in the UIA or on several architectural bodies both in Greece and abroad — he was mainly involved with critical matters such as poverty and social accessibility, and, in close relation, with the recognition of architects who work for people below the poverty level. It is not a coincidence that, in 2007, the International Union of Architects (UIA) established a special triennial prize that wares his name. Since then, the Vassilis Sgoutas Prize celebrates architects or teams who have significantly contributed to the improvement of the living conditions of the underprivileged, thus testifying to the extent of the professional concern beyond the usual margins of the architectural design.¹

The book he recently published, *A Journey with the Architects of the World* documents in a special way — with deep involvement and also with detached objectivity, soberly and good-humoredly — moments in the evolution of the profession and its ethos over the last twenty years. The writings collected in the volume are not merely memoirs, although the author is present in every short piece, they are not critical essays either, although the author’s critical spirit is constantly alert; they rather recount and detail issues impacting on the architectural profession all along this time span, inviting us to revisit our profession and its recent history.

¹ The prize is awarded every three years and honours an individual architect or a team of architects „that have made a significant contribution to the improvement of the living conditions of the most destitute populations, to their habitat, their environment and their well-being“. Among the laureats, who implemented architectural solutions for reducing poverty and indigence, are the Egyptian architect Hany Hassan Mahmoud El Miniawy (2008), the Mexican team Espacio Maximo Minimo Costo (2011), the Spanish group Architects Without Borders (2014), or the Vietnamese architect Hoang Thuc Hao (2017).

I had the honor to speak on the launching of the volume in Seoul, on September 5th, 2017, on the occasion of the 26th UIA Congress, held under the theme “Soul of City”. The following lines are my very personal reflections on this book, starting with a powerful motto of Raymond Williams, Welsh academic, writer and critic:

“To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing.”

In this sense, Sgoutas’ writings are radical. As one moves through the pages of the book glancing at dates, names and places, at the guiding frame holding together ideas and theories, glimpses of manifesto shine through.

However, there is here an endearing richness so easily unfolding, so quietly weaving together considered and consistent views of the profession, that one gets a sense of professional connection spanning continents, people and initiatives. There is a deep humility and a consideration of our humanity in each other. In Skura Mthembu’s reflections on the writing,² that the author cites, there is a resounding undertone of “Ubuntu” — a zulu word for the humanist philosophy, translated as “I am because you are”. And this is what gives clue to the other story, the story beneath the story, or “rio abajo rio” — the river beneath the river.

Written by a practicing architect, this collection of articles, interviews, speeches and daily records traces the threads of architectural discourse over a number of years. The collection is part prophetic, part revelatory. Spanning twenty years, these writings trace the deliberations on and of the profession at a crucial pre and post millennial time. There is a call for an architecture of relevance — not one of deference. A call for practice where the architect is the agent and not the subject. There is a shift in focusing on “what” we do, rather than on “who” — even less on “which starchitect”.

Through my engagements with the UIA, I became more familiar with Vassilis Sgoutas’ influence and the causes he champions. Vassilis does not view architecture as an isolated practice delivering built solutions to singular briefs. And these shifts have happened in our common professional awareness. They were so well exemplified in the 2014 International Union of Architects Congress in Durban Congress entitled “Otherwhere”.³ In this congress, the widening of the professional areas of influence, as well as the responsibilities of the architects, formed an important part of the critical debate. This was highlighted in Hilton Judin’s opening speech from which I extract the key statements as follows:

“Architecture is political”;

“Architecture is cultural”;

“Architecture is social”;

“Architecture connects”;

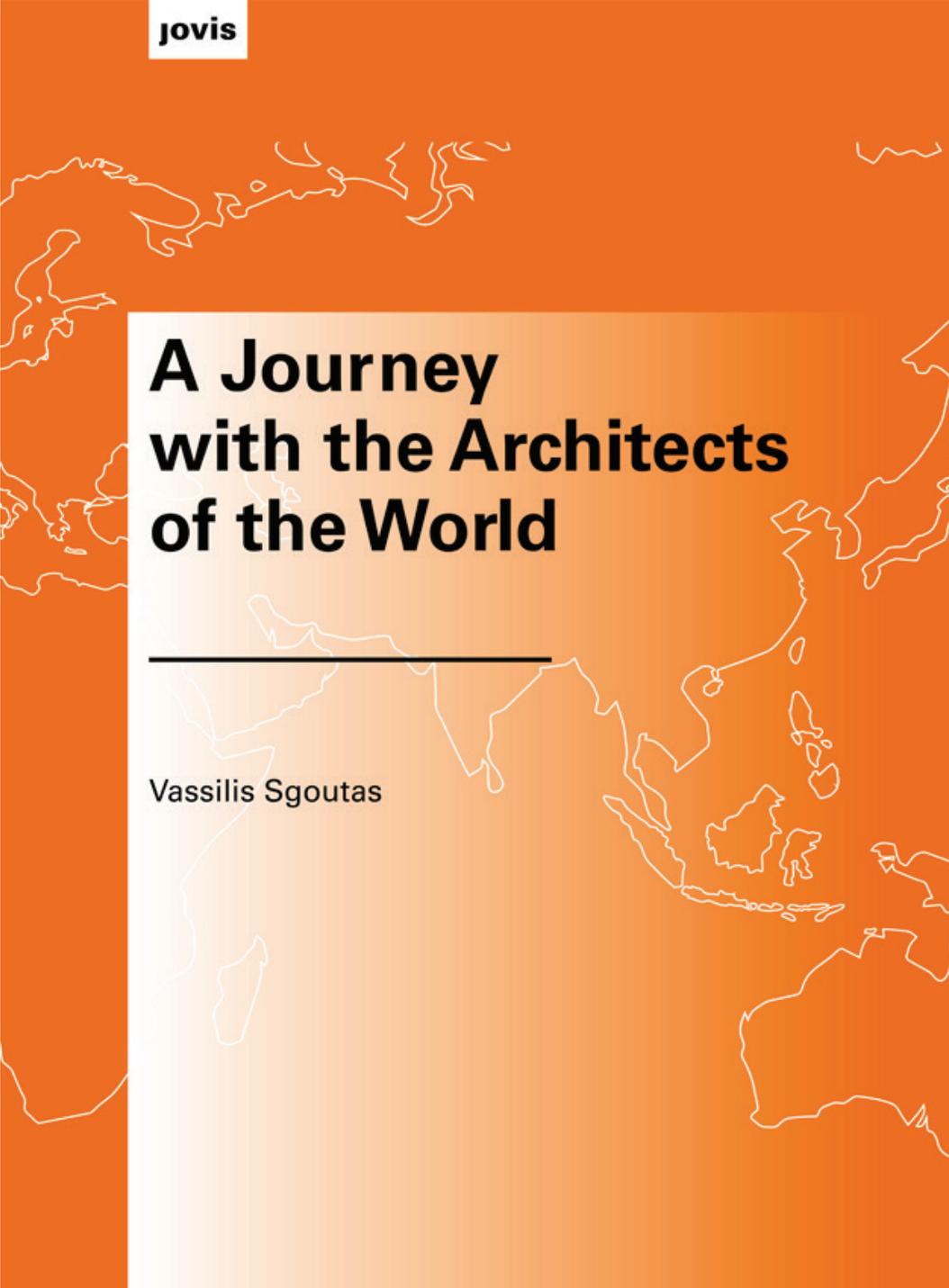
“Architecture activates”.⁴

Architecture is not a profession apart from politics, culture and social issues. It is a profession that has the power to connect worlds, people, places, many points of view, and also to activate

2 The South African Institute for Architects representative on the UIA Young Architects Committee.

3 One of the foremost ambitions of the 2014 UIA congress in Durban was to promote the idea that the city is an ecosystem at the service of all segments of the population. By exploring architecture *otherwhere*, in other regions, other contexts, other social structures, through other practices, one would gain a better understanding of others in order to finally better understand one’s self. The three sub-themes of the scientific papers reflected these purposes: *resilience*, in terms of poverty alleviation, space, geo-political economies; *ecology* encompassing the notions of time, evolution, systems, and environment; *values*, notably those related to professional practice and architectural education.

4 The twenty-fifth UIA World Congress was held in Southern Africa for the first time, and it was taking place at an important moment: the celebration of twenty years of democracy in South Africa. This highly important issue, as well as the opportunities of collaborations between the developing and developed worlds became recurring themes for all speeches, the opening one included. Having the intention to acknowledge the build environment as a major force towards a better life for all, Hilton Judin urged delegates to look for gaining a completely different perspective on architecture.



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change. The new responsibility of professionals to address disparities and inequalities is echoed in this Journey with the Architects of the World, and also in the Vassilis Sgoutas Award, as it is in the Barefoot Architecture movement.⁵

The broader expectations of the profession, so evident in Vassilis' book, is captured so nicely by the quote Louise Noelle extracted on the night of the book launch:

“Letting development take their course, with us being no more than onlookers of an ostensibly predetermined course, would be negating our existence. Society needs us, society needs architects. I do not think we have the luxury to be fatalistic”.

For younger practitioners this volume represents a guide for a professional practice rooted in values which respond to a greater good. At the UIA 2014 Congress one reporter asked me why this was necessary, and my response was, and still is: “because it is the right thing to do”. From early on in this volume there is a call for a practice of social inclusivity, one which advances economic justice and one that is environmentally resilient. For practitioners in the developing world, this book is reflective of the two-way process of learning: what the developing world can learn from the developed world and vice versa. In the first, most developed part of the book, “Speeches and Articles”, the subject matters cover a broad professional horizon — from aesthetics, heritage, urbanism, accessibility, sustainability, exclusion and education to war and peace —, while the references are vastly spanning beyond the field of architecture, to include poets like

T.S. Eliot, writers like Italo Calvino, musicians like Tracy Chapman, and many more.

Speaking for myself and my field of engagement, the chapter “Architecture & Urbanism” has a particular resonance. But I do believe that any reader will deeply resonate with any other particular chapter within the book, or with the whole of the book.

The second part of the book is “The Random Diary”. Though reduced in comparison with the first part, it can be read like a “thriller” — places, names and dates are introduced as the first clues, and thereafter an elaboration on moments is captured in each instance, involving a particular incident, a particular meeting, a particular impression. When leafing this part, representative members of the UIA regions present there, enthusiastically pop out of the pages, to inspire, to amuse, or simply for the reader to be reminded of their endeavors. There are no rules in this part of the book. It is playful. Time here is not linear, nor are the memories necessarily chronological. And it calls for your participation in “joining the dots”.

I end with the story beneath the story or “rio abajo rio” — the river beneath the river. Woven between places, names, dates, observations, deliberation, provocations... this book is a love-story. The story of a deep and profound love of the profession and of the people that the author has encountered on his journey. And certainly, his journey is a long one, with an acknowledgement that what has mattered most was the journey itself.

Beautifully conceived and meticulously executed, Vassilis Sgoutas' book will long give pleasure. It holds an exciting world of Architecture delved into and engraved on an exquisitely crafted writing.

A writing that is radical. As it makes hope possible.

5 Founded in 1972 in the village of Tilonia, Rajasthan, by Sanjit 'Bunker' Roy, The Barefoot College had the mission to enable poor, marginalized rural population to become self-sufficient, by redefining conventional meanings of “professionals”, by using and enhancing local knowledge and skills and encouraging learning by doing. The Barefoot Movement is an example of what can be achieved if poor people are allowed to develop themselves.