Today, economic factors seem to outweigh politics. Architecture itself has frequently come to be seen as contingent on existing economic power structures, to the detriment of its political force. This perception can, however, be challenged. Political potential was an inherent feature of the medium for architecture's historical avant-garde in the early twentieth century, and political attitudes have often been at the core of architectural culture. Current shifts in the profession announce the rebirth of political engagement as an essential element of architecture's social relevance. “Being political” translates, in this context, into an interaction with the urban realm, which, since Plato and Aristotle, has been considered the ideal setting for political action.

This exhibition of works from the Museum’s collection demonstrates that, over the last half century, architects and other urban practitioners have responded actively to the ever-evolving condition of the polis. In “9 + 1” thematic sections, it represents the diversity of ways in which political attitudes have been expressed in architectural concepts and urban interventions since the 1960s. The more than one hundred works on view (including recent additions to MoMA’s collection) engage with issues such as radicalism, iconoclasm, social borders, public space, and the politics of shelter, and they show architects achieving political resonance using unexpected design tools, including fiction, deconstruction, and dystopia. In addition, each section features politically engaged works of art or graphic design, presented in dialogue with the architecture projects. This is not an exhibition about protagonists, movements, buildings, or specific designs; it is, rather, about a cultural practice that reacts to and comments upon the conditions of its time.
In the wake of widespread critiques of modernist doctrines in the 1950s, neo-avant-garde movements in architecture and urbanism in the 1960s and 1970s once again advocated that architecture could change society. As made explicit in the politically engaged graphic work of Gunter Rambow, on view here, what had begun as a utopian vision ended in architecture—large-scale housing projects, for instance—often perceived as impersonal, formulaic, and insensitive to the needs of everyday people. Against this, new modes of urban life had to be devised, and a radical architectural imagination was again conjured to impel society in fresh directions.

Both anticipating and reflecting the political agitation of May 1968, architects who took inspiration from counterculture movements—such as Cedric Price and Archigram in Great Britain, Laurids Ortner in Austria, and Archizoom in Italy—embraced new programs and forms of technology. From London to Tokyo, innovative city models were devised that could respond to quickly changing social needs. Many incorporated prefabricated “plug-in” parts and units, “self-incubation processes,” and original conceptions of the environment. Rethinking the city at its very roots was seen as the answer to the exhaustion of the political potential of the modern movement. These utopian projects remained unbuilt, but they attained their implicit goal in stirring the cultural consciousness and remain important critical references for architecture culture today.

Beginning in the 1960s, fictional narratives and made-up scenarios also became tools to catalyze alternative forms of political commentary in architecture. During the 1970s, in particular, architects such as Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi initiated a dialogue with the earlier, unrealized propositions of the neo-avant-garde (represented here in Section 1), using narrative and dystopia in an ironic inquiry into the role of architecture in the contemporary world. Following the use of storytelling and science-fiction imagery by radical groups such as Superstudio, these fictional approaches questioned the nature of architecture’s contribution to society and the authority of existing architectural discourses. Designing paradoxical liberations or new forms of pleasure, they proposed a shift in architecture’s interactions with reality. Beyond escapism or nostalgic fantasy, these fictions were a potent strategy to communicate architects’ critical positions in the face of existing conditions.
Deconstruction emerged as a philosophical trend in the late 1960s. Developed by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, it was intended to be a tool of inquiry that would overturn traditional binary oppositions of meaning and value and expose the largely unacknowledged role they play in shaping thought and social relations. By the 1980s, deconstruction had been adopted in the field of architecture as a mode of intellectual inquiry particularly concerned with the way the built world is structured and conceived. As portrayed in The Museum of Modern Art’s 1988 exhibition Deconstructivist Architecture, deconstructivism asserted the autonomy of architecture as a cultural discipline, reaffirming the dominance of design processes over social intent.

Deconstructivism ultimately ushered in an architectural star system characterized by the desertion of all political aspirations, but its critical impulse continued to surface in practices that aimed to counter expectations and destabilize the norm. Atypical approaches to this attitude include the literal “de-constructions” of artist Gordon Matta-Clark, Lebbeus Woods’s disconcerting fragments of worlds, and the willful dismemberment of conventional design principles that is characteristic of Thom Mayne’s early career with Morphosis. As deconstructivism lost the edge of its initial aesthetic and spatial innovations, the political promise of deconstruction found new expression in work that questioned accepted truths.

Sometimes unwittingly, architects have been key actors in the emergence of an urban landscape that thrives on the branding of everything from commercial products to experiences. As artist Barbara Kruger points out in her work on view here, in these conditions individual identity runs the risk of being subsumed by patterns of consumption. As brands and icons have become commonplace in our society, architecture has often been dictated by a commercial logic; cities, public spaces, corporations, and cultural institutions alike have undergone visual operations that prioritize their efficiency in sustaining tourism, consumption, and economic success above other values.

Occasionally, architects have expressed critical views on these phenomena. James Wines combined art and architecture to provide an ironic take on the American retail world with his popular Best stores, and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill conceived a headquarters for National Commercial Bank in Jeddah that, rather than relying on branding, is a challenging spatial experiment. At the other end of the spectrum, architects themselves have become iconic brands: 2x4, Inc. used a portrait of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to adorn the entrance of Rem Koolhaas’s McCormick Tribune Campus Center, paying homage to the original designer of the Illinois Institute of Technology campus but also signalling that architecture had been absorbed by popular consumer culture.
In October 1969, in a performance program supported by the Architecture League of New York, artist Vito Acconci followed strangers through the streets of the city. By yielding to the movements of others wherever possible, Acconci hinted at existing tensions between the private and public domains. His work also demonstrates that the use of public space by citizens cannot be predicted or controlled by those who have designed it. Nonetheless, public space has traditionally been the favored site for the expression, via urban design, of the political intentions and representations of those in power.

Despite this paradoxical condition, since the 1980s architects have newly deployed their creative and critical energies around the theme of public space. Public space is the site of critical statements about historical events, as in Emilio Ambasz’s Pro Memoria Garden in Germany. In Will Alsop’s master plan for Bradford, England, it communicates aspirations for change and narratives of a better future for an entire city. Plazas designed by West 8 and Jürgen Mayer H. activate urban life in an open-ended, participatory process. In Diller + Scofidio’s Blur Building in Switzerland, on the other hand, public space is an arena in which to assess the limits and possibilities of a self-conscious social performance.

Architecture is often considered to be a service profession, and politically conscious architects sometimes find themselves in the difficult position of appearing to bite the hand of the corporations and governments that commission their work. But architecture is a form of cultural production that, like other arts, bears an intellectual responsibility toward the world at large, and many architects—along with artists such as Ai Weiwei, whose work is on view here—have embraced tactics meant to challenge authority, whether that of societal conventions in general or of architecture’s own rules and disciplinary constraints.

Iconoclasm in architecture can be traced back to the work of the Soviet avant-gardes, with its deliberate disrespect for the valued images of the old order. This attitude was also the impetus behind the work of architect Hans Hollein in the 1960s: in his project on view here, the substitution of an aircraft carrier for a building both suggests that “everything is architecture,” as Hollein declared, and implodes the visual language of traditional architecture. Other forms of institutional critique in architecture followed those developed in visual art, beginning in the 1960s. Critical takes on the established value of cultural institutions were the inspiration for architectural propositions such as those of Yona Friedman and Diller + Scofidio, which address The Museum of Modern Art.
As architectural modernism developed, transparency—both literal and symbolic—became one of the most cherished tropes of architects in search of democratic ideals. Glass, in its use in architecture, exposes private space to view, and it became synonymous with social transparency. In the 1970s, artists such as Jeff Wall and Dan Graham, whose work is on display here, questioned this mythology, and architectural transparency was eventually unmasked as an ideological illusion that sustained social control rather than promoting the further democratization of the world. Transparency, it became clear, was not transparent after all.

However, as made evident in the works on view here, architects continued to experiment with transparency in projects with political potential. In Jean Nouvel’s Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art, in Paris, transparency allows for the dematerialization of the traditional city block into semi-public space; and transparency complicates notions of privacy and gender in Kazuyo Sejima & Associates’ Saishunkan Seiyaku Women’s Dormitory in Kumamoto City, Japan. Translucent materials and techniques such as screenprinting and visual layering have augmented architects’ ability to convey messages through surfaces permeable to light. As if demonstrating architects’ intrinsic need for traces of a political script, investigations of the languages of transparency still inform architectural discourse today.

Throughout the twentieth century, artists have attempted to portray the realities of life in places where social tension is the norm. Photographer David Goldblatt, whose work is on view here, has documented his native South Africa, from the realities of daily existence under apartheid to the continuing effects of poverty and inequality. In architecture, these conditions are traditionally faced through a standard roster of solutions, typically determined through centralized, top-down planning. Nevertheless, at given historical moments, political circumstances have allowed for socially engaged architectural practices, community participation in the design process, and unconventional design solutions for extreme problems.

Álvaro Siza’s SAAL S. Victor social housing for Porto, designed in the wake of Portugal’s 1974 revolution, and Giancarlo Mazzanti’s recent library and community center in one of the most dangerous slum areas in Medellín, Colombia, are architectural experiments that actively improve the social conditions around them. Younger architects may take a more activist and hands-on approach to Realpolitik; anticipating rather than following political will, they expand the role and boundaries of architecture. This is evident in Teddy Cruz’s research and work exposing conflict around the border between Tijuana, Mexico, and San Diego, California; artist-architect Didier Faustino’s critical commentary on public space; and the reinvention of community participation and bottom-up design strategies in socially deprived urban communities by the collective raumlaborberlin.
Despite its intimate scale, the home has been a favored subject of architectural investigation. In addition to meeting the basic human need for shelter, it is a potent symbolic vehicle with psychological and political resonance. Architects have produced many manifestos as design proposals for the residential unit—whether for individual or multiple inhabitants. Through the psychoanalysis of its everyday condition, inquiry into its formal and informal properties, and the reinvention of its more profound meanings and modes of organization, shelter remains a common subject of reflection for both architects and artists.

In her work on view here, artist Marjetica Potrč investigates the impact of informal urban growth on the domestic dwelling, and designer Michael Rakowitz, in his paraSITE shelter, addresses the problem of homelessness in a radical new fashion. In the 1970s, architect Gaetano Pesce fictionalized the archeology of shelter, imploding its traditional formal and psychological confines. A few years later, Peter Eisenman completely rethought the design of the “machine for living in” (as early modernist architect Le Corbusier called the home), and, in the 1990s, UNStudio reinvented the geometry of the Möbius strip to affirm radical new design principles for the domestic dwelling. Together, these projects demonstrate that when it comes to conveying statements and positions on evolving ways of life, shelter remains a provocative architectural theme.

Public space has often been considered the ideal arena for the expression of political positions and collective ideals. Here, however, two works are juxtaposed to reveal the potential of the private realm to sustain political engagement. A sense of hopelessness emanates from the video installation *Burn*, by Reynold Reynolds and Patrick Jolley: as a house burns from the inside out, the occupants’ hidden conflicts and worrying emotional issues prevent them from taking action. The performance *Ikea Disobedients*, organized by Spanish architect Andrés Jaque, explores how such emotional drives may be transformed into political agency.

In *Ikea Disobedients*, local residents reenact their domestic rituals and endeavors within a setting made of hacked pieces of Ikea furniture, demonstrating the ways in which their private activities engage their broader communities. In the context of the corroding of traditional politics, Jaque reveals the domestic space to be a site of individual representation in which people are able to express their viewpoints and find common ground. Similar to examples of architecture’s recent “performative turn,” this work advocates for the return of the user in architectural narrative and proposes a role for the architect as an orchestrator and collaborator in the democratic expression of collective will. Performances of *Ikea Disobedients* take place at MoMA PS1 on September 16 and 23, 2012.