Curatorial Statement IABR 2026 – SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Form Follows Finance

Architecture is not shaped by design decisions alone. Behind every building, city, and landscape lie systems that determine what gets built, where, for whom, and under what conditions. Raw materials, energy, labor, infrastructure, regulation, ownership, and capital make architecture possible. The relationships between these systems determine whose interests are served, what kinds of value are created, and who bears the costs.

Over recent decades, financial systems have gained increasing influence over the built environment. Buildings are not only places to live, work, or gather, but also investment assets. Land, buildings, and infrastructure are valued in terms of returns, costs, revenue, short-term risk evasion, and future earnings. Financial models and ownership structures shape not only the development of cities, but also the design decisions behind them. These mechanisms are deeply rooted in historical power relations, colonial trade networks, and the unequal distribution of resources, labor, and wealth.

Form Follows Finance describes a reality in which economic mechanisms increasingly determine what kinds of architecture become possible. Financial criteria influence the size of homes, the efficiency of floor plans, the choice of materials, and decisions about demolition or reuse. The potential value of land as financial collateral outweighs the social or material value of what stands on it.

At the same time, the logic of continuous economic growth is confronting the physical limits of a finite planet. The extractive systems that have catalyse the contemporary prosperity growth are placing increasing pressure on the ecological conditions on which that prosperity depends. Demand for raw materials, energy, water, and space continues to rise, while the consequences of depletion, pollution, and climate change are distributed unequally.

We have come to treat the planet as a bank from which we can withdraw indefinitely. Yet the natural systems that sustain life abide by different rhythms and do not operate according to financial principles. A forest can be cleared in days but may take decades or centuries to regenerate. Clean groundwater can be extracted faster than it is replenished by natural purification in soil layers. Materials may be written off financially while remaining usable for generations. What generates financial returns in the short term may cause ecological and social damage that cannot easily be repaired.

This tension is reinforced by the ways in which the systems organizing our societies also shape our expectations and habits. Economic growth, increasing private ownership, efficiency, rising consumption, and ever-higher standards of comfort have become so deeply embedded in everyday life that we often regard them as natural rather than as the outcomes of historical and political choices.

Architecture both reflects and reinforces these assumptions. The growing amount of living space per person, the preference for new construction over reuse, and the expectation of individual amenities are not merely design choices. They also express prevailing ideas about prosperity and progress. In this way, if designers don't question these ideas, they help reproduce existing systems even as their damaging consequences become increasingly apparent.

Architecture does not stand outside these developments. It gives them spatial form. It translates financial models into buildings, raw materials into structures, regulation into land use, and political priorities into the organization of cities and landscapes. Architecture is therefore not only dependent on existing systems; it also helps sustain them.

This makes its position ambiguous. Architecture can create social value, but it can also enable speculation. It can contribute to ecological restoration, but also to the depletion of resources. It can provide space for encounter and collective life, but also organize exclusion and control.

The question, then, is not only how we can build differently, but which systems our buildings and cities sustain, what assumptions underpin them, and where possibilities for change might emerge.

SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

No building, city, or landscape stands on its own. Everything we build depends on multiple systems, which are themselves supported by other systems.

A building rests on foundations that also alter the ground beneath it. Its construction depends on materials, energy, labor, transport, knowledge, and capital drawn from different parts of the world. A home is connected to local land policy, but also to international mortgage markets, global capital flows, and political decisions made far beyond the neighborhood where the property is located. A city cannot function without water, food, electricity, waste management, air and the people who maintain these services. And behind seemingly immaterial systems, such as digital networks and financial markets, lie physical infrastructures, raw materials, energy consumption, and often poor human labor conditions.

These relationships mostly remain out of view. We see the building, but not the mine where its metal originated. We use digital services, but rarely see the data centers, cables, and energy networks that make them possible. We speak of the inaccessible housing market, but not always of the financial and legal mechanisms that determine who can access a home.

Nor are all the crucial systems on which we depend designed by humans. Water, in all its forms, soil processes, ecosystems, and atmospheric conditions help shape how our environments emerge and change. Without rivers, there would be no ports; without wind, no historical sailing routes or the trade networks that depended on them; without living soils, no food production. Human and natural systems do not exist separately but are continuously intertwined. The built environment does not stand apart from nature: it is materially, energetically, and ecologically embedded within it.

Designing support, moreover, is not inherently positive. A system can support affordable housing, but also speculation; ecological restoration, but also extraction; collective knowledge, but also control. What one system supports may place another under pressure.

What does a system support, who benefits from it, and who or what bears the costs?

This question lies at the heart of the twelfth International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT.

The exhibition investigates the interdependencies that shape our built environment. It reveals how economic, ecological, political, material, cultural, and social systems are intertwined, how they have developed over time, and where opportunities exist to organize their relationships differently.

In doing so, the focus shifts from architecture as an autonomous object to architecture as part of a larger whole. At the same time, the exhibition questions the assumptions through which we understand our environment. Systems consist not only of infrastructures, institutions, and financial models. They are also sustained by habits, expectations, and ideas about what is normal, desirable, or possible.

If buildings and cities emerge from such complex relationships, their futures cannot be determined through new designs or technological solutions alone. Today's ecological and social challenges demand more than efficient buildings, sustainable materials, or innovative construction methods. They also call for different ways of producing, financing, owning, managing, maintaining, and collaborating.

This does not mean that architecture can change these systems on its own. The discipline is deeply entangled with other disciplines that help shape these systems. However, architecture can certainly help drive the discussion on necessary changes. This is precisely why its capacity to act needs to be reconsidered.

Architecture can reveal relationships that usually remain hidden. It can challenge established assumptions, connect different forms of knowledge, and imagine new possibilities and realize alternative practices. It can contribute to preserving and adapting what already exists, restoring damaged landscapes, and developing collective forms of ownership, management, and care.

Sometimes the significance of a design lies not in a new building, but in a different approach to existing materials or structures. In organizing cooperation among residents. In connecting ecological knowledge to spatial decision-making. Or in changing the rules and financial conditions under which buildings come into being.

Architecture’s capacity to act therefore lies not only in designing objects, but also in revealing, questioning, maintaining, and, where possible, reimagining or reorganizing the relationships that shape our living environment.

The central question is no longer what architecture can produce, but what it can make possible.

The Site as Method

The twelfth IABR takes place in the former Hunter Douglas factory on the Rotterdam peninsula of Feijenoord, along the River Maas.

The history of this site reveals how natural processes, human interventions, and economic developments shape a landscape together. The area emerged within the tidal environment of the Rhine-Meuse delta, where water and sediment continually shifted the boundaries between land and river. Through the construction of ports, hydraulic engineering works, and successive phases of industrialization, it became part of Rotterdam's expanding port city and its international trading networks.

On a site that once contained a gallows field and later a plague house, industrial activities developed during the nineteenth century. The grounds eventually became a production complex for aluminum such as Luxaflex sun-shading systems, ceiling finishes, partition walls and other building components, better known as multinational Hunter Douglas.

This history remains legible in the existing halls and structures. Columns and beams literally support the factory roof. But what supported the factory itself?

The factory formed part of an international network of resource extraction, production, transport, and trade. Behind its structure lie mines, energy sources, shipping routes, labor relations, financial arrangements, and international markets. Each of these systems depended, in turn, on others: energy on resources and infrastructure, production on labor and knowledge, and labor on food, housing, and social provisions. The factory was not an isolated building but a node where these relationships converged.

Following changes in ownership, including the involvement of private equity firm 3G Capital, questions have emerged about the relationship between financial returns and the material and social value of the site. In 2021 the Hunter Douglas site was purchased by three listed Dutch companies – a consortium comprising two property developers and a pension fund: Heijmans, Dura Vermeer and ASR.

With the disappearance of industrial production, the relationships between the factory, the surrounding neighborhood, and the people who worked there also changed.

What was once a place of production now stands at the beginning of a new phase of urban development. This transformation raises renewed questions about the relationship between private returns and public value, between financial interests and the needs of existing communities.

How can the existing buildings take on new meaning? Which forms of production and employment will remain part of the city? How can new housing contribute to the surrounding community? And how do these developments relate to the challenges of climate change, heat stress, flood safety, and ecological restoration?

The former factory is therefore more than the location of the exhibition. It also provides a method for looking at the built environment.

The site reveals how different systems together produce a building, a neighborhood, and a city, but also what happens when those systems change or disappear.

Starting from this particular history, the IABR investigates how existing structures can acquire new meanings and functions, which relationships need to be preserved, restored, or reorganized, and how the future development of the area might contribute to forms of social value that cannot be measured solely in financial returns.

The Exhibition as Research

SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT brings together an urban and public program, research, and an exhibition with 56 projects, each investigating the systems behind the built environment in their own way.

The exhibition offers neither a single vision of the future nor a collection of ready-made solutions. Instead, it brings together different ways of seeing, investigating, and acting.

Some projects reveal how financial models, regulations, ownership structures, and political decisions shape our cities. Others trace the origins and life cycles of materials, from extraction and production to transport, use, demolition, and reuse.

Several projects examine how water, soil, air, and ecosystems help shape our living environment, and what it means to design with these processes rather than simply seeking to control them.

Others focus on the systems that shape our knowledge and imagination: data, maps, archives, images, and stories. They demonstrate that the ways we describe and understand the world also influence what we consider possible. A spreadsheet can reduce a building to its financial return. A map can make political boundaries appear self-evident. An architectural drawing can leave the origins of materials out of view. Other forms of representation can reveal what these instruments conceal.

Still other projects explore alternative forms of support. Collective housing, shared ownership, the reuse of buildings and materials, informal infrastructures, maintenance, local and Indigenous knowledge, cooperation, and care show how existing relationships can be organized differently.

The projects differ widely in scale, form, and approach. Some are critical and analytical; others are speculative, experimental, or directly connected to design practice. What they share is a shift in attention from individual objects to the relationships that make those objects possible.

The exhibition reveals not only how systems operate, but also where they are vulnerable, where interests collide, and where possibilities for change emerge. It also examines how our habitual ways of seeing render certain relationships invisible, and how other perspectives can open up new possibilities.

A Place for New Connections

Not every change begins with a new design. Sometimes it begins by recognizing what already exists, understanding a dependency, or revealing a relationship that had previously remained out of view.

Through SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT, the IABR also examines its own role. Can a temporary exhibition be more than a presentation of ideas and projects? Can it help establish relationships between people, knowledge, institutions, and places that endure beyond its duration?

This question takes on particular significance in Feijenoord, where the future of the former Hunter Douglas site is still being shaped. The transformation of the area concerns not only the use of buildings and the design of public space, but also the interests of existing communities, the future of work, affordable housing, and the distribution of space and resources.

These challenges cannot be resolved by a single designer, developer, or institution. They require cooperation among different parties, each with their own interests, responsibilities, and forms of knowledge.

By temporarily opening the former factory as a place for encounter, research, education, debate, and experimentation, the IABR aims to create space for this exchange. The collaborative program Samen Slim ('Smart Together') explores how large-scale urban development might contribute more effectively to broader prosperity through more inclusive forms of commissioning, alternative design principles, and new financing models. Neighborhood initiatives brought together in the Soft Atlas demonstrate forms of knowledge, cooperation, and social value that already exist in the area. And at the heart of the exhibition, master's students from the Rotterdam Academy of Architecture are spending three months exploring possible futures for this site, drawing on a thorough understanding of the existing conditions.

The biennale does not determine what the future of Feijenoord should look like. It can, however, bring together existing knowledge and initiatives, enable new connections, and raise questions that matter for the area's future development.

In this way, the biennale itself becomes part of the investigation. The question is not only which systems support architecture, but also what forms of support a cultural institution can provide.

For the future of a place is shaped not only by what gets built, but also by the relationships that emerge and endure there.

The future is here; it just needs to be (re)assembled.