

THE NEW NORMAL

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Something has shifted, it seems. We are making new worlds faster than we can keep track of them, and the pace is unlikely to slow.

Have our technologies advanced beyond our ability to conceptualize and describe their implications? If so, such a gap is dangerous.

In response, one impulse is to pull the emergency brake, and to try to put all the genies back in all the bottles. This is ill-advised (and hopeless). Better instead to invest in emergence, in contingency, in designation: to map the New Normal for what it is, and to shape it toward what it should be.

THE NEW

When something new appears, we may see it as a combination of familiar things. A car is a "horseless carriage." A handheld computer + camera + wireless data is a "mobile phone." A metropolis interlaced with sensor networks and information technology is called a "smart city." A blockchain is, more or less, "digital money." And so on.

In the short term, "hybrids" may make sense by analogy and suggest continuity, but as the new evolves and resembles the familiar less and less, they create confusion, even fear. They delay recognition and defer understanding of what requires our most acute attention. So Strelka moves from Hybrid Urbanism to the articulation, design and redesign of The New Normal.

But why is that so hard, and what is the New Normal anyway? Or better, what should it be?

THE NORMAL

Our condition is one that links seemingly distant and different things, one into another. Ecological flows become sites of intensive sensing, quantification and governance. Global computing infrastructure spurs platform economics and creates virtual geographies in its own image. Cities link into vast discontinuous urban networks as they also weave borders into enclaves or escape routes. Addressing systems locate billions of entities and events into unfamiliar maps. Interfaces present vibrant augmentations of reality, standing in for extended cognition. Users, both human and non-human, populate this tangled apparatus, an accidental megastructure that Strelka Program Director, Benjamin H. Bratton, calls The Stack.

But the New Normal describes not just technologies but (even more so) economics, politics, and cultures: a multipolar Anthropocenic precipice, uncertain public planning (too much, too little), genomic flows and fundamentalisms, financial melodramas, and paths to globalization full of contradictions and hidden trapdoors.

How to define all of these directly? What do words like "sovereignty", "politics", "identity", "human", "architecture", "organic", "citizen", "home", "modern", "authentic", "progressive", "natural", etc. even mean anymore? Or more precisely, does their meaning describe what is actually happening? At what point does the gap between what they mean and what is happening become so wide that we should move on to new terms?

We need to design a more effective glossary of the present. Can we do it fast enough?

MOSCOW: SPECULATIVE URBANISM

Strelka is the ideal platform to ask and to probe these questions, as they extend directly from the mission of the Institute to reimagine and refashion the future of Russian cities.

Our location and research context is Moscow, and our ambition for its future draws on its legacies of melancholic utopianism. Linking European and Asian passages, Arctic and Baltic flows, it is now perched, like our common future, between traditional and hypermodern programs. What are the most important lessons to be drawn from its contradictions, potencies, and potential? As the city expands its circumference, will it innovate a regional vernacular of sprawl or of interlocking nested megastructures, or both?

With the New Normal program at Strelka we ask how variations on past futurisms might help shape a bolder and more courageous urbanism for Moscow now and in the the decades to come.

Perhaps the lesson is to look up. Across the horizons of its eleven time zones, Russia was the seat of humanity's initial forays into the verticality of space, freeing us from one sort of planetary perch in order to reveal to us those from which we can never leave.

From this we do not conclude that progress is a myth. We conclude instead that the myth is that progress is assured — it is not — but progress is always possible.

DESIGNING THE NEW NORMAL

And so, the conditions around which we organize this effort are not just technological, they are also philosophical and theoretical. They confound, excite and inspire both creativity and anxiety. They both demand and resist design: automation of what? machine vision of what? Whose artificial intelligence? The future city when?

Wading into these questions, The New Normal at Strelka is a speculative urbanism think-tank, a platform for the invention and articulation of a new discourse and new models. Our research program will extend over (at least) two years and will grow and extend into diverse research outcomes. It is based on a long-term collaboration between faculty, students and local and global experts from varied disciplinary backgrounds. For this, speculative design research is not supplemental to the serious work remaking the city but essential to its responsibilities in a moment of change and uncertainty. Only by mapping what is possible can we hoperealize what is preferable.

The curriculum is structured as a series of intensive modules in which students will engage the urban through traditional and advanced methodologies. The phases of these modules will focus on three core areas of speculative design thinking: pattern recognition, scenario development, and platform design. These are in turn based on intensive engagement with crucial techniques, from quantitative cultural data analysis and visualization to the contemporary philosophy of technology, design, and aesthetics.

The program is for interdisciplinary designers, programmers, theorists, and entrepreneurs who are comfortable with counterintuitive perspectives and who wish to work across scales, sites, and platforms. Research and outcomes will combine conventional and unconventional forms and formats: urban data, urban economics, urban philosophy, urban software, urban cinema, urban services, urban science-fiction, urban systems, urban interfaces, and even urban planning.

To see things anew, and to see them for what they really are, in all their marvelous strangeness, both beautiful and ugly, may require our most intense fictions and adventurous imagination. The future is where we will live and grow, but first we need to catch up to the present.