

# Interview With Liam Young | Arch2O

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Liam Young is an architect who operates in the spaces between design, fiction, and futures. He is a founder of the think tank **Tomorrows Thoughts Today**, and also co-runs the '**Unknown Fields Division**' at the [Architectural Association](#), all while holding numerous teaching positions worldwide. The **Unknown Fields Division** is a nomadic studio that sets off on annual expeditions to the ends of the earth exploring the alternative worlds, alien landscapes, industrial ecologies and precarious wilderness set in motion by the powerful push and pull of the city's desires. **Tomorrows Thoughts Today** is a London-based futures think tank exploring the consequences of fantastic, speculative and imaginary urbanisms. Liam's projects develop fictional speculations as critical instruments to survey the consequences of emerging environmental and technological futures.

The interviewer, Zack Saunders (founder of [ARCH\[or\]studio](#) in the US and Arch2O contributing editor) takes this opportunity to speak with Liam on the recalibration of the Unknown Fields Division, its' recent book-launch, his plans to coordinate a curious new program at Sci-ARC, his two recent short-films, and how new technologies might generate new forms of culture, among other things ...

## 1. When you meet someone in, say, an airport and they ask 'what do you do?', how do you respond?

*Normally I go 'ughh, that's a long story!' The professional answer is: I am an architect, but I explore the global, urban and architectural implications of emerging technologies. It's a form of practice that is developed just because the normal/traditional forms of practice the architect has operated within and those traditional structures of power the architect has operated under are fundamentally changing and fundamentally have changed, so for the profession to constantly cling on to this old idea about what it once did, seems not only bizarre but also problematic and damaging. I define my form of practice around trying to explore what the architect can now do, where our space is, where we find new sites of agency in the context of a world where technology is now the dominant driver of spatial change. I'm interested in these different forms of architects that result from these new forms of technology: the architect as strategist, the architect as urbanist, the architect as software engineer, as futurist, as policy maker, as product designer. The orchestrator of mixed-reality mediated experiences. That design structures and projects that exist with and without physical footprints. The most interesting gigs I get are from the architecture world, and I still think I operate as an architect even though what I do doesn't fit into the traditional form of practice that we're all told still exist.*

*Historically, the Architect was considered to be more of a polymath, like you describe; the Renaissance architect, for instance, was not only engaged in designing the architectural edifice itself, he was interested in perspective, mathematics, machinery, et cetera.*

*I think despite all attempts in recent years to the contrary, architecture is still one of the last degrees that hasn't disappeared into formats of vocational training. We can still sit down at a bar and have a really interesting conversation with a film-director, or an engineer, or an artist, or a politician. There are very few degrees left that demand that scope of interest and that privilege that kind of expanded understanding of the forces that shape the world. It seems shocking to me that this extraordinary training, that is so long and complex but also so nuanced and broad that lends itself to these multi-disciplinary forms of practice, that we end up designing boutique houses or glamorous vanity pieces in the middle-east just seems an incredible waste of time. People misquote me as saying 'an architect's skills are wasted on making buildings', really I said 'an architect's skills are wasted on just making buildings'(1). We still do that, and architects are still going to have a role there, but the scope of what we can do and the conversation we can engage in is so much broader than that; to define our practice so narrowly just seems ridiculous.*

**2. Following this idea of expanding the role of the architect, Sci-ARC recently announced applications are currently open for its new Master's in Arts program entitled 'Fiction + Entertainment'(2). As the program's official coordinator, what do you have in store for prospective students?**

*This is my attempt to formalize the form of practice that I myself engage in, trying to construct a program that puts in place an infrastructure that helps a student develop alternative forms of practice. I'm interested in the new genre that's emerging where the architect is really an agent of fiction and story. We tell stories about what the city could be like, we tell stories of what the future could be. Architects have always found ways to move into those types of practices, but it's always been through change, circumstance and sheer will. This I think is the first program that puts in place strategies and formalizes that process where an architect or a designer can leave the program with a network and set of skills, and a project that launches them into these allied disciplines of film, fiction, video games, documentary, marketing, politics – all of these sites where the ability to tell stories across space is extraordinarily valued. It's a degree which is trying to take seriously the idea that the traditional space of architects as the makers and shapers of physical buildings is being increasingly diminished, and to ask the question 'what do we do now?'. My response to that is we construct stories, and we launch those stories into the world with such a force that they generate debate and discourse, they instigate cultural shifts and changes; and I would argue they have more scope for change than any singular building project ever would.*

**3. Do you feel the program is being received well? Are people reaching out and saying 'I wish there was something like this when I was in school!'?**

*I do think there aren't other programs like it. We're not a program that would normally exist in a film school, I don't think we're trying to compete with film-school programs. There's production design and concept art programs which equally are very industry driven and geared towards Hollywood and they're decidedly uncritical.*

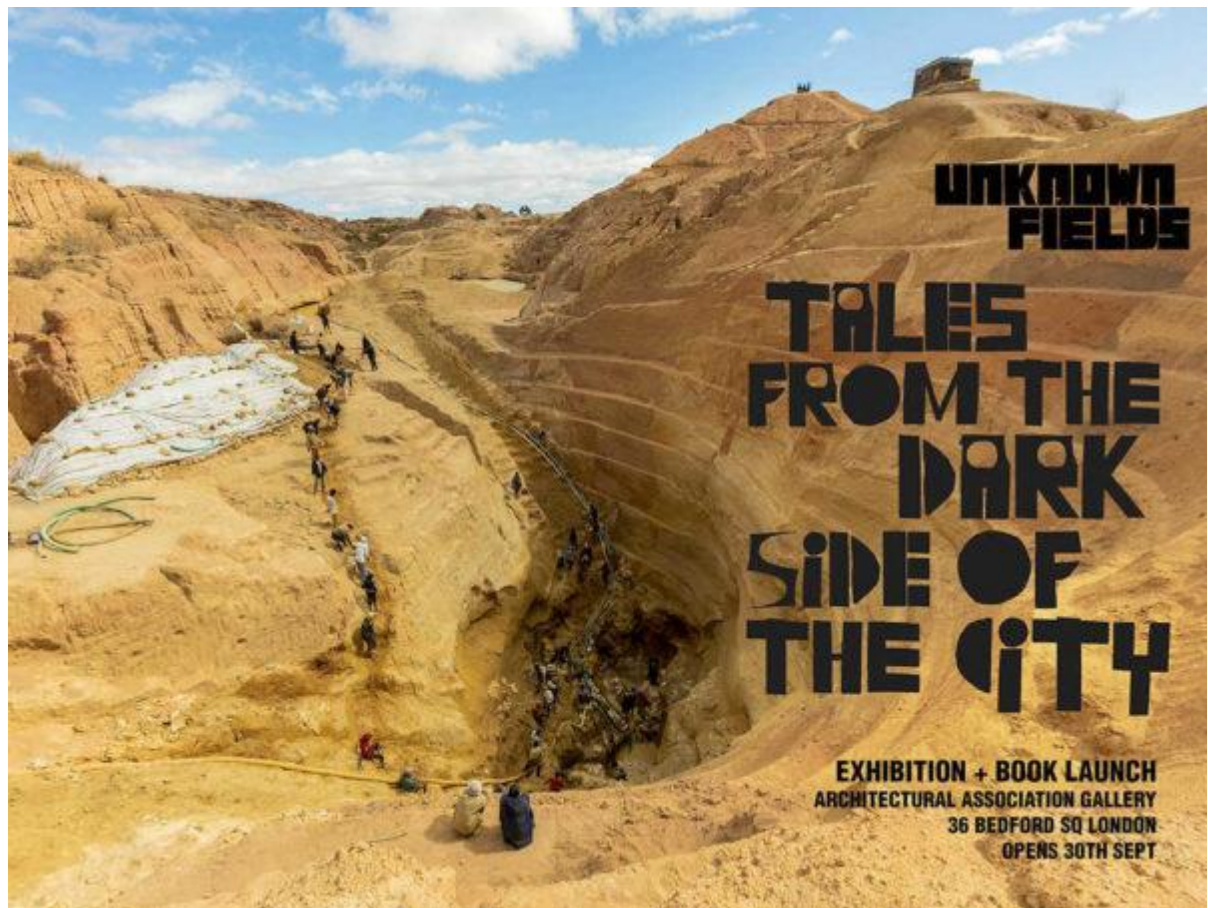
*I don't think there's really another space, at-least in an architectural context, which is exploring these ideas in this type of Master's program format. We're pretty excited about it and there seems to be a huge amount of interest from a range of different groups from architects that have spent some time in the realities of practice and are somewhat disillusioned or frustrated with the compromises that exist there and the potential complicit nature of their practice in relationship to market forces and the economies that can actually pay for it, and they see the type of work that we're trying to do as a way to actually build a career doing the sorts of projects they've always wanted to do. Architects have traditionally done these types of projects, but they've been considered as hobbies, they're something that we do on the side, on the weekends, after we finish in the office, or that we have to squeeze in around academic positions. Whereas we are trying to establish career paths through this type of work. Or we're getting applicants from these allied disciplines, they might be product designers, interactive designers, they might be concept designers that have been working in film, writers that tell stories about the city, urban researchers, people from disciplines that exist around architecture that want to develop a spatial mode of thinking and bring that back into their own disciplines. What I'm interested in doing is trying to launch into the world, just like Trojan horses, architects that operate parasitically in all of these different disciplines that still operate in some form as architects, but that do so on a set on a massive budget film project, or in the halls of a game studio, or making films that are shown on HBO and National Geographic. That was really the impetus to start a program like this.*

**Unknown Fields Division. Showreel 2013. The Unknown Fields Division is a nomadic design studio embedded within the Architectural Association School of Architecture. Coordinated by Liam Young and Kate Davies. [For more please click here](#)**

**4. Teaching for you is not a new endeavor, for the last 8 years Kate Davies and yourself have ran the now infamous nomadic research lab at the Architectural Association Unknown Fields Division. In that time you took your students all over the world to forgotten or unknown landscapes – mining fields, landscapes of quarantine, military outposts – places that are not generally known to the public. Recently you announced that this unit was coming to an end and would be reconfigured somehow and brought back into the AA; what are your plans for the Unknown Fields Division?**

*Kate and I started Unknown Fields as a different type of design studio, one that would position itself out in the field, engaging with the realities of how the world is changing, as opposed to being locked away in the shadowed halls of an architecture academic institution. For a number of years we've run projects with students out in these landscapes which we think are really fundamental in understanding what the contemporary city has become. We have really tried to map out these territories that exist behind the scenes of this city, and to tell stories about those landscapes and to document them, and to re-narrate them and package them in forms that allow them to be represented to a world that, for the most part, is doing their best to ignore them. For the last 8 years we've been doing that with students from the AA. What we're trying to do now is evolve that interest into a research lab that works with students much more as researchers and collaborators, and less as a traditional AA studio teaching model. That's really because the places that we've been going to are becoming increasingly politicized and increasingly extreme, the practical nature of*

*our work means somehow we have to get into these landscapes and document them. Doing that with a group of 20 students hasn't always been easy; we've had to develop a series of tactics and strategies, utilizing tools of investigative journalism such as fake personas and hidden cameras. In order to continue this type of work we've had to downscale and do much more focused trips, operating like a small documentary crew. We've changed the model of what it is we do. We now work through grants, research funding and media partnerships to do this type of work as opposed to relying on traditional architectural academic institutional format of student fees.*



**Tales From the Dark Side of the City. London, 2016. Illustrated, Hardback. 6 Book Box Set and accompanying exhibition. ‘Tales from the Dark Side of the City’ is a collection of stories from the constellation of elsewheres that are conjured into being by the city’s wants and needs, fears and dreams; brought to you by the Unknown Fields Division. More details of the accompanying exhibition and where to buy the book series can be found here: [www.aabookshop.net](http://www.aabookshop.net) and [www.aaschool.ac.uk](http://www.aaschool.ac.uk)**

**5. Coinciding with the announced reconfiguration of your unit, the Unknown Fields Division launched a book series containing a selection of stories informed by past expeditions.**

*To relaunch Unknown Fields in this new guise, we consolidated the work of the last 8 years into an exhibition called the Dark Side of the City, which is currently on now and closes at the end of February (2017) at the AA. We consolidated 6 of the 13 expeditions we have done into a book series entitled 'Tales from the Dark Side of the City', which has also just been released. Each expedition is a story, a narrative, that somehow tells this tale about place and positions it relative to an understanding of how this landscape creates, supports and structures our experience of the city. Really what Unknown Fields is interested in doing is creating a portrait of the modern city. We've published 6 books now and every year we will publish a new one as part of an ongoing series. These books are really trying to create this atlas to this contemporary city that we are describing. We chose 6 expeditions because these places constitute a particular part of that city. It's a city that doesn't exist on a singular point on a map anymore, it's a city that is now distributed across the entirety of the planet. Architecture once existed in singular sites and that's the way we used to conceive of it, but now in a networked world the city is this planetary-scaled construction. These are 6 stories from that distributed city. One story is looking at where the city gets its energy and is based on the expedition we took through the lithium fields in Bolivia, Chili and Argentina; one is exploring where the city makes its technology and is based on an expedition we took on board a Chinese cargo ship and through the factory landscapes of China and the mining landscapes of Mongolia; another one looks at where the city gets its luxury objects and is based on our expedition through Madagascar which produces a very large percentage of the world's gemstones. These books all come together to try to create and give narrative form to this contemporary urban space that we now are all occupying, and for the most part as architects and designers, we all structure and design.*

**In the Robot Skies: A Drone Love Story. 2016. Directed by speculative architect Liam Young and written by fiction author Tim Maughan, 'In the Robot Skies' is the world's first narrative shot entirely through autonomous pre-programmed drones. From the eyes of the drones we see two teenagers each held by police order within the digital confines of their own council estate tower block in London. In this near future city drones form both agents of state surveillance but also become co-opted as the aerial vehicles through which two teens fall in love.**

**6. You recently released a trailer for two short films entitled 'In the Robot Skies: A Drone Love Story', the world's first fiction film to be entirely shot by autonomous drones, which you describe as "a near-future love story set against the fears and wonders of an impending drone age" and 'Where the City Can't See', shot entirely using laser scanners, is "set in a not-to-distant future, where Google maps, urban management systems and CCTV are not only mapping our cities, but ruling them". What are some of the main ideas you explore in these films?**

*These two film projects are really investigations and speculative scenarios that come out of the research that we've done with Unknown Fields. At its core, Unknown Fields and the work I've done with Kate is really about going out into the world and looking at the emerging trends and forces of technology that are shaping contemporary landscapes and the city, its kind of a way of looking at the world through a*

*documentary lens, looking for the weak signals, the possible futures; what I do in my personal practice is to take that research that we've uncovered during these expeditions and exaggerate it into speculative fictions, it's this process of exaggerating the present and extrapolating from the trends we see emerging on our Unknown Fields expeditions and to play them out into possible future scenarios. That's the way the two parts of my practice are organized. With our work in China for instance, a company like DJI has made drone technology cheap enough to be accessible to just about anybody, this extraordinary company that's grown so big in the last 5 years has turned drones from essentially military technologies to something that sits in everyone's garages, or wrapped under the Christmas tree. Drone technologies right now are in that interesting space where they've just become affordable and ubiquitous and are at the point of being democratized where everyone can get their hands on them. We're interested then, in that context, to play out those trends and to look at what are some of the stories that might emerge in our city where drones are as ubiquitous as pigeons. These film projects are really about examining the cultural implications of these new technologies and exploring the new subcultures that might emerge, the new forms of agency, and the new types of resistance that might emerge in this context.*

**7. One of the main characters of the 'In the Robot Skies', Jazz, attempts to circumvent her aerial monitors by using similar technology to subversively communicate with Tamir – a romantic relationship that is later disrupted by the robots of the skies. While conveying a dark version of the future smart city, there is also a sense of hope that we might also be able to evade such oppressive forces should we find ourselves to be inhabitants of such a city in the near future. As you constructed this potential future scenario, what specific personal experiences or ideas related to our techno-centric society did you draw on?**

*We shape these stories based not necessarily just on our own personal experiences but on the ways that cultures shift, morph and form in urban spaces across time. Really what this film is looking at was the way that new technologies generate new forms of culture. To really examine that we looked at past instances of how that occurs. In the 80's for instance, the implementation of the new chromed subway car became this new blank canvas rolling through the streets of New York which then became co-opted by the early days of graffiti and was a player in the emergence of Hip Hop, a culture that's now been co-opted but for a long time was an extraordinary voice of protest and resistance. We're interested in what's a similar sub-cultural response might emerge in the context of this new form of infrastructure, ubiquitous technologies and drone surveillance. That's the nature of technology: you can't separate technology and culture. They're really extensions of ourselves, in which case they're fraught with the same the same contradictions and complexities that all of us are. You can use the drone to fly above peoples heads and spy on us, look through a teenage girl's bedroom window while she's changing, to monitor crowds and keep people in check, but you can also use them to paint graffiti on a wall, strap speakers on them to create a new audio-visual experience like we did in our 'Drone Orchestra' project. This film tells a story of two teenagers that hack the drone network and use it as an infrastructure through which to fall in love, by passing little messages to each other back and forth. Really it's just retelling the story of what happens to all of our technologies, but I think it's important for us to be telling these stories because it reveals the complexities of these systems. These things aren't*

*dystopian or utopian, they are equal measure of both. They can be used to remotely operate from an air-force base in Nevada, over a village in Afghanistan, but they can also be used to send a message of love from one tower in a speculative surveillance state to another. The more that we can talk about all those different uses and applications of technology, the more we can begin to be more critical consumers of these technologies. The point of these film projects is to talk about the various implications of these technologies which are already here; technologies that we haven't developed the cultural capacity to understand what they mean yet.*



**LOOP 60Hz: Transmissions from the Drone Orchestra. Live Performance, 2014. 'Drone Orchestra' is an immersive live music and drone performance developed through a new collaboration between Liam Young and musician John Cale, formerly of the Velvet Underground. John Cale, known for experimenting with different industrial sounds in his practice, once tuned his instruments to the hum of refrigerator motors. Cale in collaboration with Liam Young explore the soundscape of a new generation, the distant rumble of drone propellers, to be set against the visual spectacle of Young's choreographed flying machines. Typically associated with militarized applications, each drone is re-purposed here as both disembodied instrument and dynamic audio infrastructure. The Barbican Theater, London.**

**8. The 'Drone Orchestra' utilized the drone as a performer in a musical production, a thing that we might relate to or even connect with in new kinds of ways; on the other hand, 'In the Robot Skies' explores the future role of the drone as a supervisory or monitoring device. As the relationship between technology and society becomes more and more complex and interwoven, are there other roles that technology might play that you intend to explore in your work?**

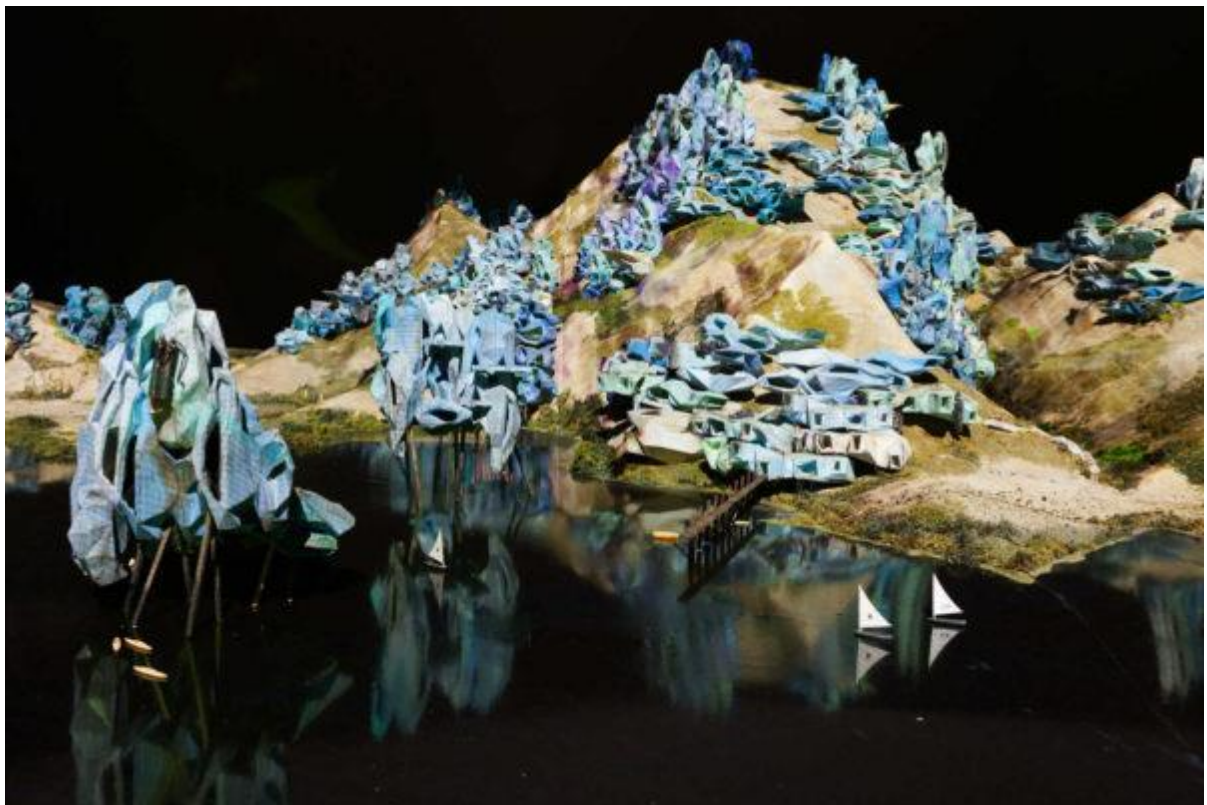
*The 'Drone Orchestra' project is exploring the drone as a cultural agent, not a militarized one because that's the way that we consume and relate to technology in the end – the mobile phone started out as being a device through which we are efficiently able to communicate with each other while we're on the move, but now it's a really extraordinary object of culture, it's an extension of ourselves and our social lives, we decorate them and they become fashion objects. Our entire world is mediated through these processes that we access through this glowing rectangle that sits in each one of our pockets. We're interested in all those multifarious cultural applications of technologies. The 'Drone Orchestra' was one idea of how these things become co-opted by music subcultures, but we've done another project with drones called 'Electronic Countermeasures' where we put on-board this flying infrastructure a series of WiFi routers and the drone flock would drift through the city broadcasting a pirate internet signal. We did that project just after they banned Pirate Bay in the United Kingdom, and it became this aerial file-sharing platform where people could log on and upload and share files. The drone network would then disperse and reform in different parts of the city and it became an off-grid internet system in a context where governments were censoring and closing down our access to the network. These drone structures are just that, they're an infrastructural system that can be co-opted and used in different ways, whether we strap a missile to them or an open-source WiFi network. Similarly all these new technologies of the 'smart city' can be used in all those different ways – if you're an architect and urbanist and you're not interested right now in how the driver-less car is going to fundamentally change the urban environment then you're in complete and utter denial. We should be telling stories about what this new form of infrastructure is going to do. What's the politics of that infrastructure? How does it change public spaces? How does it change what the road network is? If we're not interested in the way the driver-less car, for instance, is changing our world then we're not really fully engaging with what cities are becoming.*

*Drones, driver-less cars, smart city technologies, mobile devices – they're all examples of what I describe as 'before-culture technologies'. These things have arrived before our ideological capacity to understand what they mean. What our work is really about is how to prototype those different types of relationships we might have to them. Every car company on the planet has already invested billions of dollars in developing a driver-less car, but no-one really has fully plaid out the implications of what this new infrastructure might mean. But you can't put the genie back in the bottle, these things are already coming and architects and urbanists weren't at the table when that decision was made. The question really through this work is how can we become more informed consumers of these technologies rather than just standing in line waiting for the latest iPhone model to be released, and hoping it's going to be doing something interesting or worth-while. I think we should be asking more questions of the technology that we're bringing into the world rather than just being enamored by our sheer capacity to produce it. All these projects are trying to play out those possibilities. We're in a really interesting moment where all of this stuff has arrived and we're not entirely sure where it all is going to lead us, the future is a shadowy unknown place. What the role of these films are, what the role of the speculative project is, is to shine a light into this dark landscape that's in front of us and to illuminate as much of it as possible so we can make informed choices about which paths we want to take.*



**9. Speculating on the future is undoubtedly important for positing new ways of life and for understanding where our current decisions may lead us; however, might it also carry the risk of missing opportunities for the here and now? The late Jane Jacobs once argued that people are generally so concerned with the future that they don't see what is happening now (3).**

*These speculative projects are not at all about the future, really, they're about the present. They're not concerned with any mode of predicting what the future might be. It's just a distancing lens that allows us to look back in on the present in new and unexpected ways. In putting forward these speculations we're not interested in whether we're going to get it 'right' or not, we're interested in ways that they cause direct action right now, in the present. Perhaps a better way to describe these speculative projects is not 'the future' at all, but as a kind of 'visionary present', a re-framing of the present that allows us to see it in new ways. This idea that we travel not to see the places that we visit, but to see place that we came from with fresh eyes. I think that way of thinking is both the reason why with Unknown Fields we travel to these distant and extreme landscapes, and why with my own work I think about the future. It's always about understanding our present moment and place in the world, and trying to offer forms of knowledge that we can use to make decisions about the types of futures that we want to have, the types of futures that we want to live in.*



**Under Tomorrows Sky. Exhibition / Installation, 2012. 'Under Tomorrows Sky' is a fictional, future city. Liam Young of the London based Tomorrows Thoughts Today has assembled a think tank of scientists, technologists, futurists, illustrators, science fiction authors and special effects artists to collectively develop this imaginary place, the landscapes that surround it and the stories it contains. 'Under Tomorrows Sky' imagines a post-capitalist urbanity full of optimism and joy, full of life and aspiration. It is a city of extraordinary technology but at first glance appears indistinguishable from nature. It is an artificial reef that grows and decays**

**and grows again as the city becomes a cyclic ecosystem. Together we form a giant complex organism of which ecology and technology are inseparable parts. Premiered at MU in Eindhoven, August 10th 2012.**

10. Future scenarios then inadvertently force the viewer to examine the present. In a way, one is bouncing the here-and-now off this potential future scenario, and vice versa.

*That's why the dystopian project and the utopian project are both valuable, because the cautionary tale of what we describe as 'productive dystopias' become just as useful to act as a kind of warning sign as the utopian project that which suggests this is where we could go, what are the steps we need to put in place in order to get there. We are at this extraordinary moment where the future is a project again. Architecture at various points has fallen in and out of love with conceptualizations of the future, and I think we're at a point right now where the future, or thinking about the future, makes an awful lot of sense. I think it's a really valuable way that the architect can remain relevant in a city where the dominant forces that shape it are technology companies and networks, as opposed to traditional publicly elected governments, buildings, public spaces and basic infrastructure.*

#### **11. Returning to the films, how did these projects come to be? Were there particular issues that you struggled with during their production and execution?**

*A big part of making these films was to explore the new form of agency that's emerging in the context of all these technologies, and that is to say that we're exploring a new narrative position in the films where the technology is the thing that does the seeing, not ourselves. What's starting to happen right now is our cities and spaces are being re-made, not just for us anymore, but to a large extent they're being made for systems to occupy them that aren't human in any shape or form. Our cities are being made for the occupation of machines and systems are being designed and systems are being designed and built to be seen by those machines, and patterns of machine vision rather than our own vision, and patterns of occupation. What we're trying to do with these film projects was to explore this new narrative position of technology itself, the drone film is shot entirely from the drone itself as an object. We developed a way of shooting where the drone is almost entirely pre-programmed and autonomous where it's making a lot of its own decisions about how it frames a shot and how it sees the world; similarly in 'Where the City Can't See', which is the first film shot entirely with laser-scanners, it's shot from the point-of-view of the driverless car that uses those laser-scanners in order to navigate and understand the world. We're interested in what it means for these systems to be active agents and occupants of the city and these films are trying to see the city through their eyes. We actually had to develop a whole series of entirely new film-making techniques in order to capture this new narrative and subjective position. With 'Where the City Can't See' we had to write a lot of our own scripts and software tools that allowed us to essentially hack the laser-scanners in ways in which they weren't intended to create narrative and cinematic effect. The drones themselves aren't supposed to operate in those kinds of sites, and we had to find ways to get around regulations, aviation guidelines and flight restrictions in London in order to tell this story from their perspective. Each film project is more than just a narrative it's actually an experiment in technology and are seeded with design projects. We designed for the drone film a whole series of drone characters and costumes that are not just props or digital*

*objects but actually operate and function, which was an extraordinary task in itself. In 'Where the City Can't See' it follows the story of a group of young factory workers who at night try to subvert the surveillance systems of the city to find a place where they can go and have a dance party. They wear a whole series of what I describe as 'digital camouflage' costumes that really work; we developed a series of textiles that are designed to reflect the laser-light of these scanners in strange and unexpected ways to create these kind of disguising glitches so that people them can't be easily identified. These are inventions, that actually work, that use the film as a site to explore the way that they are implemented. Each one of these came with their own technical challenges, so the films are both narrative projects as well as technical projects.*

**Where the City Can't See. 2016. Directed by speculative architect Liam Young and written by fiction author Tim Maughan, 'Where the City Can't See' is the world's first narrative fiction film shot entirely with laser scanners. Set in the Chinese owned and controlled Detroit Economic Zone (DEZ) and shot using the same scanning technologies used in autonomous vehicles, we see this near future city through the eyes of the robots that manage it. Exploring the subcultures that emerge from these new technologies the film follows a group of young car factory workers across a single night, as they drift through the smart city point clouds in a driverless taxi, searching for a place they know exists but that the map doesn't show. Premiered at "The Invisible City" November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016.**

**12. Exploring this new point-of-view of the technological device itself has the effect of superimposing the physical and the digital to the (human) viewer. In a past interview, you spoke of Virtual Reality as being "an utterly outmoded term now; the digital and the physical are not mutually exclusive things. You can't use those terms in opposition any more; our experience of this physical space is utterly conditioned by the "digital footprint" that we're occupying at the same time. I talk about the idea of the shadow city, that the city is not just the physical city but also these luminous electronic "shadows" that we can occupy in different ways (1)".**

*That's one of the key questions that's facing us as architects and urbanists today is that we're now occupying this mixed-reality space where what was once functions of the screen are now functions of the world, and we're interested in what that means for us as designers. I use the analogy of the green screen movie stage set as a way of describing what contemporary architecture is becoming, a scaffold for a digitally-constructed and mediated world. The dominant patterns of vision that we design for are now machinic. To describe a space purely by its physical attributes now is only telling a very small part of that story, in the same way that if you were to describe a cinema stage set that ultimately is occupied by a series of characters that are inhabiting any kind of digitally constructed reality – be it an alien space station, or an apocalyptic post-climate landscape, or a rainy street in a romantic comedy – it's not sufficient anymore to just think about the physical boundaries of what that space actually is. Architects need to start to both design in the physical spectrum and also in the digital spectrum, and see them as part of one and the same project. That's a really seismic shift that is facing the profession in the next couple of years. These film projects were in their infancy when I did that interview, and really 'Where the City Can't See' is trying to explore that in very direct terms: What does the city look like, what are the new forms of resistance and agency that emerge when the dominant*

*mode of seeing is these laser scanners? We get the emergence of new fashion trends with these new camouflage textiles. We designed and prototyped a series of what we call 'glitch buildings' or 'stealth buildings' which are made with particular formal and material properties that reflect the laser in different ways so that the architecture is no longer just a function of the material constraints, but has a different kind of signature and profile in the data set through which these driver-less cars and machines chose to navigate operate. All of these things have real-world consequences. In very dry and prosaic terms, when someone is following their GPS and drive into a lake or drive off a bridge that no longer exists, all of these artifacts of the data set upon which we live out most of our lives, actually have these extraordinary real-world physical consequences. Buildings that we design and occupy now cast shadows across all of these spectrums, and that's what we need to start designing for is all these different types and forms of site that now exist.*

### **13. Are you getting closer to describing a portrait of the 'modern city'?**

*I think that's a big part of the Unknown Fields project is trying to map all these landscapes, infrastructures and spaces that constitute this city. I think that's the first part of the project really, in the same way that Architects have always done a form of site research, we've always looked at context that we're designing for and try to understand where its edges are, what the forces that play out within it are, what its adjacencies mean. That's really what we're trying to do, we're trying to find out what this new form of site is – and it's exceedingly complex. You kind of have to map it to understand it, and then in order to design with it. A big part of what we've been trying to do is to map all of these networks and systems to visualize them, to document them, to tell stories about them so that we can then start to design within them. That means that we are no longer designing buildings as singular objects but we are designing buildings that have a position within a network and set in motion consequences that play out across that network, not within the singularities of its particular site. We're designing objects like the 'stealth buildings' that have consequences in both the physical and digital spectrum, and objects like the camouflage textiles that have one visual and aesthetic language through our own eyes but a totally different visual and aesthetic language through the eyes of the machines that are watching it. Slowly we are pulling into focus this new form of site that we are all occupying and designing for.*

### **14. You describe a beautiful relationship between the architect as both coordinator and explorer, designer and story-teller in the ever-changing landscape of the modern world. How does one learn to be so versatile in their thinking, so fluid in their methodologies?**

*All of our work, whether its speculative or documentary-based, starts with the world as it is. For the most part the teaching methodology is to try to understand the world by getting out into it and exploring it, talking to people in those contexts that have spent far more time thinking about them than we have, and then trying to tell those stories. The power of story-telling is really useful in this context of trying to map and understand these conditions. People try to understand this context through diagramming, or map-making, or data visualization techniques, but we're much more interested in a process that I call 'data dramatization' where we map, document and understand these conditions but then we try to disseminate that information and consolidate that information through stories, because that's how our culture shares*

*and disseminates ideas. It takes us a long time in architecture school to develop the capacity to read and understand a diagram, or a section, or a plan – and we're still as a discipline trying figuring out all the intricacies of what these modes of representation mean – yet, since we could sit up we were sat in front of the TV watching stories, we were read books as we fell asleep at night, we all have this amazing fluency through which to understand the world through fictions and stories. And I think that's the currency of the way that we teach here at Sci-ARC, there is both an engagement with the world itself and an engagement with the world through telling stories about it.*



**Under Tomorrow's Sky. Urban Tectonics concept for Under Tomorrow's Sky, Project by Liam Young, Concept Art by Daniel Dociu, 2012. Game concept artist Daniel Dociu was invited to join the Under Tomorrow's Sky think tank and contributed digital paintings that developed with the design discussions.**

**15. As a young designer, who or what had an influence on your thinking as a young person? Who's work is currently on your radar?**

*I studied architecture in a pretty traditional school in Australia, and there the dominant narrative is really one of genius loci, of site specificity. I think a large part of what I'm doing now is continuing that narrative, exploring what site and context mean in relationship to these new technologies that are changing our perception of the spaces around us; so I still think I'm continuing that logic that I started back in my undergraduate architecture education. From the very beginning I was looking at people that were trying to conceptualize an understanding of that modern moment, like J. G. Ballard for instance and his stories written in post-war Britain where he was trying to make sense of that moment. He was trying to make sense of that site that he was immersed in. He constructed a reading of that site through these speculative fictions that he put into the world; but again they weren't predictions of what was*

*going to happen, if some of them actually came true it was purely happenstance and luck. He was really just trying to raise a debate about how we were operating in the present moment. 'High-Rise', which has recently been adapted to a film, was exploring what post-war housing was in Britain; a distinctly architectural book, the Fountainhead to a new generation, was trying to understand what it meant to live in that kind of density, to live in those brutalist towers with these elevated public spaces disconnected from the street and the city around it. High-Rise is really a treaty on those buildings, it's an architectural project in the form of a novel, and now in the form of a film.*

*Today I am privileged enough to have been able to work with a lot of the people that inspire me. 'Ready Player One' is one of the early books that explores narratives around this mixed-reality world that I'm talking about. Director Neill Blomkamp is developing an entirely new aesthetic of the future which is based on his experiences in post-apartheid South Africa. The work of people like Trevor Paglen, which is more documentary-based, would be a key reference for our Unknown Fields projects for instance. He's someone that is trying to use visual and aesthetic practice to understand the complexities of technology of the network. That spectrum of influences, from the speculative to the documentary, is a good summary of the things that we're looking at.*

**16. Regarding your practice, *Tomorrows Thoughts Today*, would you comment on the process that takes place when selecting a project to pursue?**

What we're ultimately trying to do is capture the zeitgeist somehow, identify the anxieties and hopes of the present moment and respond to them. Most of these projects emerge out of a news story, or a contemporary event or moment, and that then becomes the impetus to start to tell one of these stories. The thinking behind the film project 'Where the City Can't See' began on our expedition through the productive landscapes of China; we went there during the fever pitch of Apple where they had just released their figures and they were the most profitable company 'in all of human history', larger than a whole number of nation states. We went to see a supply chain of these technologies and we found an extraordinary condition where China is now outsourcing its production to Africa and setting up special economic zones in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, because the wealth generated from these years of outsourcing technology there meant they're now in a position to distribute that mode and outsource themselves to other countries. That new relationship to globalized production set in motion this speculation about the special economic zone of Detroit, which is where 'Where the City Can't See' is set; and it directly came out of that particular moment, that set of interests, and the expedition to China. The drone film 'In the Robot Skies' originated a few years ago when DJI released a series of consumer models which meant that this technology was now accessible, and again we felt it was an urgent moment to start to explore what some of these alternative applications of the democratized drone might be when it starts to be rolled out all over the city. The work always starts with this engagement in a particular crucial and critical present moment.

**17. I'm curious, when the drones are fluttering through the sky 'like pigeons', will you crack a smile or will you shiver?**

That's the nature of these things, they're full of the same complexities as we ourselves are – they're both fearful and wonderful, extraordinary and harrowing; it's too simple to talk about them in one frame or another. Complexity is difficult, so technology is traditionally talked about in this decidedly optimistic lens, it's going to solve all these problems, anything you are worried about 'don't worry, we've got an app for that!'; or it's this horrible dystopian future where we're going to be wearing these cream-colored uniforms, having pills to moderate our emotions, being controlled by ubiquitous surveillance networks. The reality is it's parts of both, all collapsed together and stirred up. The nature of the work is to explore that complexity, and to tell stories from across that spectrum from the optimistic to the pessimistic, from the dystopian to the utopian to try and find some preferable space that exists between all of them.

### **18. What's next for Liam Young?**

The next Unknown Fields expedition takes us to India and Bangladesh where we're looking behind the scenes of 'fast fashion' to explore the consequences of some of the fashion and aesthetic choices made in more familiar cities. Similarly my next film project is in that same context, it's in India but its looking at render farms and outsourced animation studios where so much of popular Western culture is produced. I'm interested in this idea that we outsource our dreams to the render farms of India. This new film is built from 3D game assets and digital models used in the making of western video games and Hollywood film productions that now sit on servers in massive animation factories in India, and we're telling the story of a render farm worker who spends all day rotoscoping and modeling, who falls in love with a digital model of a famous Hollywood actress and they walk hand-in-hand through this digital utopia he's constructed from the detritus of contemporary game design and film-making. So that's the next project in this series of films – another love story.

### **END NOTES:**

- 1) Tank Magazine. [Interview with Liam Young by Shumi Bose.](#)