

In the public interest

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There is a story going round that, having commissioned Alejandro Aravena to curate the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, its president Paolo Baratta decided that henceforth the international exhibition would be organised exclusively by “committed” architects. And that explains the choice of Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara for this 16th edition. The cofounders of Irish practice Grafton Architects intend to present, under the title *Freespace*, “examples of generosity and thoughtfulness in architecture”. A fairly timid manifesto but, as we know, biennials gather as many different interpretations as it does participants, so hopefully we will see as much fighting spirit as benevolence in the pavilions of the Giardini and the Arsenale. For this Spring issue, AA has decided to proceed to its own interpretation, and to present projects and buildings that illustrate the different ways in which generosity is represented in architecture, particularly with regards to “freespaces”. As highlighted by Anne Lacaton in the following pages, “the principle of enlarging a space is something that we have adhered to from our very first projects. It comes from the observation and conviction that briefs or standards, for housing, are often too restrictive and don’t leave room for personalisation.” This is a timely reminder from Lacaton & Vassal just as, in France, social housing is under threat by the proposed Elan law, which concerns future developments in housing, regional planning and digital technology. Presented to the French government on April 4th, this proposed legislation appears to be aiming for a worthwhile simplification of the procedures governing the production and management of housing. However, it also puts into question the need for architectural competitions for social housing projects, thus jeopardising architectural and urban quality. “Build more, better and cheaper”: isn’t such a mantra –that of the Elan proposal– suspect? This over-simplification seems more like an all-destructive bulldozer. Numerous architects are speaking out against this harmful plan. Because housing is the very expression of architecture, because it is a matter of public interest. “Build more, better and cheaper”? Build, above all, but leave it to the architects. In the interest of the public.