



**The Future's Just
Not That Into You**

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DAVID ZACH

Futurist

The Future's Just Not That Into You

A few ideas on how to meet the future on your own terms.

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It's time to admit that you've got a problem. Your obsession with the future is getting out of hand. You keep going on about how you were made for each other. You even change your plans because it's what you think the future wants. But no matter, you just know you're going to be perfect together.

Um, no. In case you haven't noticed, the future pretty much ignores you. And, let's be honest, you know it's never going to call. It'll never stop by unannounced. It's not even going to meet you halfway.

Really, it's almost as if the future didn't even know you exist — and in practical terms, it doesn't. It's also practical to realize that it's got its own issues, its own

people, its own problems. By the time just even a little bit of the future happens, we'll be dead and long gone. And so it's not the future you need to worry about, it's you. Your attention is misplaced. You're needed in the here and now. You need to show up fully prepared to be no place else. The object of your affection should be today.

And today, with all this fear and doubt about your architectural education, maybe your first assignment hasn't even happened yet. Maybe it's happening right now. What if it's to show the future what you're really made of? If the future won't come to you, you will have to go to the future. Here are a few ideas on how to meet the future on your own terms.

1. Entrepreneurial wealth creation. In case no one noticed, tomorrow is expensive. Very expensive. We can't possible afford even a fraction of what we're expecting unless we create vast new wealth. Not just redistributed, but baby-fresh wealth that's far more than just money. Whatever has value, we need more of; from working friendships to logistical networks. From 3-D printers to apps that automate everyday tasks. From green buildings to blue-sky thinking. More needs to be much more.

You need to realize how incredibly easy it is to an entrepreneur today. Business plans are just a few clicks away and can cost nothing. Take a look at websites like kickstarter.com, where the marketplace of ideas now reaches the entire Internet-accessing world. Steven Johnson in *Where Good Ideas Come From* makes clear that we've become incredibly good at invention, and that's being systematized by the big organizations. What's not yet clear is that individuals can leverage all of that innovative infrastructure to their singular or small network advantage.

Explore and expand the notion of "pop-up businesses" and find that time is on your side, using the new tools to respond to marketplace trends. In the future, businesses lasting a few months may be more successful and productive than ones that last for decades. Use 3-D printers and other new maker tech for a leap-frog revival of localized factories and the reinvention of architecture. Apply your fresh knowledge of logistics and design to bring new life to the great big marketplace of ideas.

The future is going to require a fair amount of blood, tears, toil and duct tape to hold together and work. It'll have you digging in the dirt and working in the dust and grease, and some of that will get under your nails. Your

knuckles will get bruised. That might have once repelled you, but in Future 2.0, these will be a badges of honor. Band-aids are for the brave.

Most think that entrepreneurs are all about success, but they're a lot about failure, too, and they're not afraid of it. The freedom to fail is much more important than the freedom to succeed. Where you have the freedom to succeed, the pathways are often already laid out, but the path and rewards are banal. Where we have the freedom to fail, we have the encouraging freedom to try new things, to often fail, and then pick ourselves up and try again. And again. And again. Until it works. That's how it works.

2. Life-work planning. That was the best course I took in college. It taught me peak-skills identification and how to explain the value of my mix and match skills to the marketplace. In the years to come, even if you call yourself an architect (I mean, it is a cool title and all), you're going to need to be eloquent about your full spectrum of skills and even your skill gaps. Your collaborative skills will be essential for helping you to fill those gaps with the talent of coworkers.

3. Small is still beautiful. A brilliant retort to the age of just about everything being bigger is to be a bit smaller. Think local. Think sooner rather than later. Think yours, not everyone else's. There's an appropriateness of scale that gets lost in the gloss of globalization. Search for resources that will help you secure your own familiar and familial piece of the world. The Lt. Governor of Idaho, Brad Little, said "Small ideas are as important as big ideas." Yes, please. What's the big idea for your generation? How about a lot of small, livable ideas? Your generation of small ideas may do more for designing a

viable future than so many of the big ideas we've been keeping on financial life support. Fight the notion of things being too big to fail, because that arrogance requires too many other things to be too small to succeed. All great things start small.

Some things are great because they stay small — and that's just one more great thing about who we are and what we can do.

Surveys show that the millennials want meaningful work, which is often translated into the desire to change the world. That's big and noble, but how do they know that all of their efforts to do good won't converge into an even bigger world of hurt? What are the foundations of their world-changing ambitions? Are they seeing only obvious implications, but not the implications of the implications that echo from their source and cannot be predicted nor controlled? Milton Friedman said "The power to do good is also the power to do harm." Perhaps in the desire to think big, efforts should start small, grounded in time-test principles and with the near and the dear.

How about starting a little closer to little? If you don't have the patience to change (and keep changing) a baby's diaper, how can you expect to change the world? Change cannot be isolated. Everything has consequences and when you connect those beyond just their first effects, your choices will be more clear and realistic. David Frost said, "Love is staying up all night with a sick child — or a healthy adult." The good life includes accepting and loving all of it, because life comes with happiness and tears, and all the choices and changes these must bring. It's fantastic that you want to save the world. Start with your own smaller world first. Make your inevitable

mistakes small and early, not too big and too late.

4. Amateur practice. In the heart of a good architect is the soul of an amateur. The "ama" in that word means "love." It's the love of the art and craft. This love will save the future of the occupation and perhaps even the future at large. If that's not in you, go slowly retire somewhere else.

Despite all the rules and rulers, you should always be a bit of an amateur, in love with design. It's what gets you up in the morning and it's what keeps you awake at night. And this is key: you didn't just choose architecture because you thought it was what the future wanted. It is what you needed, it's what you can't live without. I always admire the architects who can hear the vocare; the calling. You were able to hear it telling you what you must become. Very few can hear such gifts, and you must cherish it.

The day after speaking at AIAS Forum 2010, three student architects and I talked and walked to the Ontario Gallery of Art. Upon looking into the OGA's Gehry Staircase gallery, they forgot me. In awe, they began to draw. In awe, I watched them. From outside of your world looking in, I see not simply rare talent, but rare passion and the heart of an amateur. This will save the profession no matter where it goes. It must be continually nurtured and regarded. It is too easily overwhelmed in the rush of modern times. What you have and what you are is drawn from the center of life.

5. Think into other boxes. The best thing that ever to happen to architecture and architects is the current dearth of jobs. It didn't just happen because the economy

turned down, it's because the profession turned down. It got boring. It didn't know how to defend itself against regulations, automation and cross-boundary poaching. It became more worried about being cool and collected than in creating the beautiful and useful. Every profession is stumbling into the future. The fact it's happening more in architecture is a great opportunity, terrifying as it may be.

So think into those other bewildered occupations. Start mergers. Start acquisitions. Don't do it as if you were Wall Street barons. You're not. Do it as if you're architects on the adventure of a lifetime, designing new challenges, crafting new stories and wonders. As the barriers blur between graphics and facades, redesign the walls and portals between them. Tear down the delusion of believing the borders of architecture are set and known. It may have foundations set in stone, but the rules for what we will build above them are now being negotiated across all boundaries. GK Chesterton said, "There are no rules of architecture for a castle in the clouds." Which rules will we design for those we build on the ground?

6. Engage the past. Advanced economies are sadly absurd for actively discarding their elders. The younger those discards are, the more absurd it is. The divorcing of the generations and segregating them into their own self-referential worlds feeds our ignorance and arrogance. Wealth comes from connecting things, and we have impoverished ourselves by breaking and hiding such natural and lively bonds.

But as Sir Boyle Roche asked, "Why should we do anything for posterity; what has posterity ever done for us?" A good answer is that posterity always gives those who are older not only a reason to live, but reasons to

invest, to strive, to conquer fears and conquer horizons. Generational bonds give us opportunities to share not just the delightful moments, but also foundations so that posterity does not have to keep repeating what it should not. Posterity doesn't need our fads, it needs the continuity of our principles. We shouldn't just connect them towards what is the latest, but towards what is almost too late. Progress from the past does not always mean leaving things behind us, it also means leaving things inside of us.

7. Put work in its place. The most foolish of all baby boomer legacies is the worship of work. They wanted everyone else to believe that work was at the center of life. No, life is at the center of life. Work is good; it's good for the soul, but it is not the only thing good for the soul. And if it's even slightly possible that we do in fact have souls, then we should be fighting the good fight to ensure that there are good things that compose it.

You'll have to work to rethink what we know about work and life from an architect's perspective. You should work hard to turn the ordinary over to the engineers and the general contractors or whomever else might want it. Don't work for the stuff that ends up just looking like technical drawings. That's not what architects are supposed to do.

Design and build beautiful, useful things that connect us into life in this world. If you can't do that, then why bother? You're architects and you have something incredible to say about designing good tomorrows. You'll take some heat for working for all of that, but you'll finally know what it really is to be cool.

In a word, you must rebel. You must focus your attention on what's most important, both for now and for the years to come. Your attention is the most valuable resource you own, so learn to protect that first or you will fail in all else. Your rebellion requires not only a working knowledge of tactics and strategies, but also a very grounded sense of mission and vision.

You're going to have to commit the high crime of closing your mind, but you'll be closing it around something solid, something good. It will not have to be fresh and original, but it will have to be noble, fierce and timeless. It will not have to be unique and fresh, it have to be connected and rooted. You will need to rebel against the distractions of momentary history and ally yourself with the calm and eternal.

In Latin there is a phrase: amor fati. It means to love your fate; accepting the fact of all of your life. The joys, the losses, the choices. You do not get to choose all of your life, but you can choose your destination. Live your fate to your greatest conclusion. That is all the future really wants from you. You should enjoy the dangers and the rewards, even the failings. It's going to be crazy scary, and it is yours.

In Star Trek Generations, Picard pulls Kirk out of retirement to join forces as fate offers yet another threat to the survival of just about everything. Kirk says to Pickard, "I take it the odds are against us and the situation is grim." Pickard: "You could say that." Speaking of the future, Kirk replied, "Sounds like fun."

David Zach has a master's degree in Studies of the Future from the University of Houston, but he got that degree way back in 1981, so it's pretty much history at this point. Serving the American Institute of Architects until 2013, David was one of two non-architects on the board. He writes and speaks about architecture with neither their knowledge nor approval. He loves architecture. He's hopeful about architects. David Zach can be reached: dave@davidzach.com and is on Twitter at [@DavidZach](https://twitter.com/DavidZach)