Thus we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology so long as we merely conceive and push forward the technological, put up with it, or evade it. Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral. (Martin Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology)

Recalibration implies a history of iterations as well as a need to examine something that has seemingly come out of alignment. But one should not be tempted to read into the identification of misalignment any sort of pejorative valuation; quite the opposite is intended. The significance of holding the conference for the first time outside of English-speaking North America should not be underestimated. The result is a curious alignment of misalignments—between ACADIA and the still-fl edgling community in Mexico—that presents each with the opportunity to refl ect inward bywidening its gaze.

Initially, the ACADIA conference had no themes. After a few years of namelessness they started to fl ow one upon another, providing a staccato record of the zeitgeist of the community (in the United States and Canada at least) throughout conference’s history. From 1988’s rather straightforward “Computing in Design Education,” through 1992’s “Mission, Method, Madness” to 2000’s “Eternity, Infinity and Virtuality,” the organization’s annual conference theme has varied from the starkly descriptive to the generic to the ephemeral. St. Louis’s “Reconnecting” in 1994 is seemingly erased by “Connecting: Crossroads of Digital Discourse” in Indianapolis nine years later, apparently so disconnected in the intervening decade as to have never occurred. Detours in recursion, as in St. Louis, as well as 2001’s “Reinventing the Discourse,” and 2009’s ambiguous “reForm,” dot the landscape and provide little respite from the onward march of the vanguard.

From the foregoing it is diffi cult not to conclude that these conferences have tended to be a succession of singular events instead of a conversation through time. Early debate converged on how computation might affect architecture. And rooted in academia, ACADIA has always been a forum for discussion about the potential effects of digital tools in design and architecture education. Recently, research has shifted toward robotic production and augmented reality, with an attendant focus on materials and simulation. In The Architecture of Error, Francesca Hughes frames the arc of architectural investigation over the past century or thereabouts as an obsessive pursuit of domination over matter itself—and thus the elimination of aberration, of inconsistency—while pointing out the exponential growth in computational capacity that we have at our disposal in the pursuit of an ultimately unattainable perfection. Hughes prefaces her argument by unapologetically leaving any conclusions to be discovered by the practitioner/student, to “take up the risk into their own spatial practice and see where it leads.” Given the breadth of institutional knowledge generated by the ACADIA community and its periphery since its inception, it is both necessary and appropriate to recognize the urgent need to take up this challenge. It is no longer suffi cient, as Heidegger points out, to “push forward the technological,” as if the mere use of technology were to confer some intrinsic value to our work. In the fetishization of technology—sometimes at the expense of important inquiry concerning its use and effects—we run the risk of failing to appreciate the full signifi cance of decades of research within broader and perhaps heretofore unconsidered contexts.

As an illustrative aside, we are reminded of perhaps one of the greatest fi aces of recent science, the discovery—aft er already in orbit—of a 1.3 mm positioning error in the primary lens installed on the Hubble Space Telescope. The mistake rendered the $1.5 billion device virtually useless until a patch was installed in a subsequent service mission. In the end, the solution involved accepting that
there was no feasible way to repair the error in the lens. Rather, scientists adjusted other equipment to embrace the flaw, essentially incorporating the glitch into the design of the telescope and all later additions to it. And while the episode did have negative implications in terms of delayed investigations and additional costs, our lesson is that the recognition, quantification, and understanding of the error led to its inspiring and resilient solution. The situation for "Computer Aided Design in Architecture" is perhaps even more dramatic; where Hubble was a spectacular, singular, collective, extraplanetary crisis, our work calls for constant, many-authored, often imperceptible, and yet vitally urgent rigor and vigilance. The seemingly greater direness of Hubble masks its relative insignificance unless it is taken to render our need for a recalibration visible, palpable.

The situation in Mexico may be distinct, but no less compelling. Here we struggle with the more fundamental issue of trying to catch up in terms of recent technical and architectural innovation. Currently, few names come to mind that have any international presence in the computational design scene, and of these, two works of theirs in particular are often referred to as embodying our incursion into the contemporary discussion. Yet any deeper investigation will reveal that these are not representative of any broader dialogue having taken root; they are singular examples whose value in terms of the advancement of the discourse is highly debatable when viewed in a global context. Toward the opposite pole of the discussion, there is Aravena’s argument from the penultimate Venice Biennale, focusing on rammed earth or mud brick projects that get tangled in a romantic social activism that is employed both intentionally and unconsciously to excuse a lack of (technical) innovation. Risking nostalgia, to find true innovation we must revisit the past. Carlos Mijares mastered the use of brick both from its geometric logics and its material behaviors. Juan José Diaz-Infante explored spatial structures, following in the footsteps of Fuller, to create his own cosmology, expressed through design. Agustin Hernández sought a futuristic language employing a deep geometric understanding and structural wit. Javier Senosiain developed, despite general criticism of the aesthetics of his work, a series of unique methods to build concrete shells to materialize his "organic architecture." Gerardo Oliva, a student of Frei Otto, still runs the Structures Laboratory at the UNAM, investigating lightweight structures. None of them used advanced digital resources. All of them understood the interdependence between material behavior, geometry, and systems interaction.

In other circumstances, these same sensibilities may have evolved into an endemic adoption and enhancement of technologies and techniques. But critically, despite this rich history of analogue investigation, most practices and schools in Mexico nowadays are either out of touch or remain willfully alien to digital advancements, clinging to an established idea of a "correct architecture" that has roots in Beaux Arts and late modern traditions. The use of computers other than for drafting is more likely to be frowned upon than encouraged. A vicious cycle exists in which new technologies/methods/strategies are not advocated or taught because few learn or appreciate them; consequently, there is no one to teach them. The exceptions are those who study abroad yet seldom return, and thus the cycle remains unbroken. The result is the promotion of one stylistic and methodological strand, denying the existence or validity of any other; to the point of perpetuating a characteristic graphic language: pencil-drawn axonometric drawings, hand-made (intentionally imperfect) models, and some sort of material roughness are ever-present in local exhibitions or competitions. The only manifestation of possible alternative approaches to the status quo stems entirely from the practice of "tropicalisation," a term that suggests the superficial application of external solutions to local problems, rather than encouraging original production that arises directly from the needs of the local condition. A fetishism of a different type is the consequence,
of any calibration lies in the near approximation or “fidelity” of the product to the standard. In this light “precision” becomes a problem without solution, because achieving the ideal requires impossible levels of exactness in the pursuit of this “fidelity,” and any result that does not match up is to be disregarded as at best an anomaly, or at worst a failure. In cleaving to paradigm then, "Calibration: On Precision and Fidelity” becomes untenable, parochial even—the very framing of the discussion shifts it unsustainably away from outcomes toward archetypes, and in so doing leaves rich terrain untilled. By contrast, "On Imprecision and Infidelity” argues for embracing the unexpected and the imperfect as generators rather than as failures.

Consider an early turn of phrase we volleyed for the conference theme: “On the Matter of Truth (or On the Truth of Matter)” was a bit of wordplay intended to provoke discussion about matter, data, precision, and the physical and material truths (lowercase “t”) under which we operate as practitioners, educators, and especially as researchers. The double meaning of “matter”—a physical substance as well as a topic under consideration—welcomes an ambiguity, within desirable limits, to promote scholarship that relies on both connotations of the word. However, in the current political climate, the word “truth” held potential to either situate our discussions or to stultify, to dog whistle for “fake-ness” polemics, or worse, as an espousal of a religious or philosophical telos. More literally, “truth” is simply the state of being true; fidelis can be translated as “faithful” but also “true” in Latin. Moreover, through a DeLandian approach we may fathom these strata of overlapping meanings and interpretations to derive these truths from a critical examination of their material logics—emerging from the matter itself. We may even read the gradients of intensity that may blur the separation between them. The multiplicity of readings, instead of being an impediment in fact permits the expansion of the debate to include unintentional and under-explored infidelities, precisely the domains in which “Recalibration” now attempts to provoke reflection.
When considered through the context of these realities, both communities are well-positioned to engage in a renewed discourse on matters that are inextricably bound up in the ACADIA acronym itself: What is the relevance of CAD in this (or any) particular geopolitical context? What can be learned from non-digital computational/algorithmic/systemic approaches to design? Is CAD fully dependent on digital fabrication? Is CAD fully dependent on computers? Does CAD mean/require precision? Finally, extending the inherent critique of Cedric Price’s “Technology is the answer, but what was the question?” leads us to ask: Is technology really the answer? Is technology the only answer? Should technology in fact be the question? And perhaps more critically, are we asking the right questions? Herein lies the both the original and ongoing intent of the theme: honesty, truthfulness, and rigor in observation and analysis of the results of our investigations, in addition to the application of these same levels of exactitude in the framing of the initial questions that the research aims to pose.

None of the preceding discussion is intended to suggest that ACADIAns and their local counterparts should simply place themselves in the others’ position in an act of cultural and academic empathy in order to see the situation anew through the eyes of an “other.” This would imply that we find value in our current circumstances only through external appraisal. On the contrary, circumstance demands a high level of self-examination that requires each to appreciate characteristics that may have been heretofore discounted as problematic, but that nevertheless may acquire value when considered in combination with those of the other. Regardless of any specific thematic focus, this is the hope and the challenge of this year’s conference.

Welcome to ACADIA 2018 and to Mexico City.