



UTOPIA is a biennial ideas competition for architecture students, launched in 2022 to mark the centenary of Itten+Brechtbühl. In partnership with the Swiss Architecture Museum (SAM), it serves as a platform for bold, socially engaged, and architecturally grounded visions that address the urgent questions of our time. Following the themes “Learning for the Future” (2022) and “LESS” (2024), the third edition will open in late February 2026.

Established to inspire the next generation of architects, UTOPIA invites participants to challenge dominant paradigms and imagine alternative futures. By encouraging speculative thinking anchored in design rigor, the competition contributes to a broader architectural discourse and promotes critical engagement with social and environmental change.

The inaugural theme, “Future Learning”, took as its point of departure a built utopia from Itten+Brechtbühl’s early history: the Muesmatt Institute in Bern, designed in 1928 by Otto Rudolf Salvisberg. Radically forward-thinking for its time, the building was developed in close collaboration with Salvisberg’s associate Otto Brechtbühl, who would later become his partner. Revisiting this landmark, students were asked to rethink conventional educational spaces. Informed by digital transformation and the experience of the pandemic, they proposed new spatial models for decentralized, networked learning suited to the challenges of the 21st century.

The 2024 edition explored the theme “LESS,” addressing the climate crisis through the lens of architectural sufficiency. Participants were encouraged to investigate the creative potential of reduction, simplicity, and restraint — not only as a response to scarcity, but as a path toward new design methodologies. The resulting proposals reflected a shift from utopia to what might be called “pragmatopia”: architecture that pairs vision with viability and engages today’s challenges with both clarity and wit.

Since its launch, UTOPIA has grown into a vital forum for emerging design perspectives. The 2024 call attracted 30 submissions, sparking wide-ranging debate within the jury and at the awards ceremony. The jury has been independent and multidisciplinary from the outset, drawing on expertise in architecture, urbanism, landscape, digital pedagogy, art, and architectural criticism. Since 2024, the panel also includes a representative from the student generation, bringing an additional layer of perspective to the evaluation process.

Public lectures and panel discussions have deepened engagement with each cycle’s theme, creating moments of exchange between academia and practice. Hosted alongside the competition and awards events, these programs have featured figures such as Jan Amundsen of Copenhagen-based 3XN and Prof. Friederike Kluge, co-founder of Countdown 2030 in Basel. Their contributions have helped broaden public dialogue and sharpen the focus on architecture’s role in shaping future societies.

The third edition of UTOPIA will be announced in late February 2026.