



**Architecture Research**  
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**AR**

9

28

47

61

97

129

159

## **Introduction**

Emmanuel Petit

## **Uvod**

Emmanuel Petit

## **Catching Flak**

On the Irony of Fortresses

Anna Neimark, Michael Osman

## **Who Laughs Last?**

The Architecture of Entertainment as a Paradigm of  
Serious Irony from Cedric Price to the Present Day

Cesira Sissi Roselli

## **After / Image**

Sam Jacob

## **Transfer of Power**

A Calendar of Classical Contradictions from Trump to  
Biden

Kyle Dugdale

## **Re-enter Pliocene**

Irony and Sincerity in Speculative Architectural  
Fiction

George Papamattheakis

187

231

251

291

325

363

## **AI: Peter Pan's Runaway Shadow, Digital Twins and an Intelligently Artificial Architecture of Irony**

Rhetoric and Form

Ralitza Petit

## **Feral Surfaces**

A More-Than-Human Perspective on New York's Wild Side

Ariane Lourie Harrison

## **Humorous Irony in Guild House and BEST Products Stores**

How an Architecture of Communication Can Fail to Communicate

Katerina Zacharopoulou

## **Cold War Architectures**

Global Discourses, Slovenian Practices, and Ideological Fractures

Nika Grabar

## **Architectural Irony and the Sarajevo City Hall**

A Symbol of Cultural Paradox

Lejla Odobašić Novo

Biographies



# Introduction

**Emmanuel Petit**

- 1 Friedrich Schlegel, "Das ganze Werk ist ein steter Kampf das Undarstellbare darzustellen," in Martin Götze, *Ironie und absolute Darstellung: Philosophie und Poetik in der Frühromantik* (Paderborn: Schöningh Verlag, 2001), 230.
- 2 Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische und theoretische Schriften* (Stuttgart: Philip Reclam, 1978), 82.

Irony is not just one topic amongst many in architecture. It is a subject which readily aligns architecture with theory, and thus intellectually channels access to our discipline in a particular light. Neither an attribute of architectural form that one can catch by looking at it in a state of distraction, nor a set structure of discourse, nor accessible to casual apperception, irony requires a "learned" understanding and interpretation of the relation and discrepancies between percept and concept. "The whole work (of irony) is a permanent struggle to represent the unrepresentable"<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schlegel claimed when he concocted his literary fragments, and proposed, in order to escape the aporetic impasse this ambition produces, that "it is equally deadly for the mind to have a system, and not to have one. It will just have to decide to combine both."<sup>2</sup> In architecture, the notion mostly hinges on architecture's double reality as a *thing*, on the one hand, and as a set of *ideas*, on the other. Beyond an acute ability to read and articulate architectural form, it presupposes a grasp of architecture's history, its cultural and intellectual contexts, as well as the mannerisms and idiosyncrasies of discourse. Irony in architecture animates the relation between things and ideas as if the ontological difference was obfuscated in a paradoxical, yet intellectually engaging way. The conceptual focus on the tectonic dialectic between thingness and ideality turns architecture itself into a form of theory. And so on the most general level, the focus on theory is what makes the topic of irony in architecture intellectually stimulating and edifying.

Certain periods of history were particularly prone to double readings, for they emphasized the self-reflective *mise-en-relation* with concepts not readily contained in architectural form or texts, but alluded to. This circumstance accentuates cultivation and scholarship over originality and innovation, and occasionally earned irony the incrimination of conservatism. Yet the shrewd cheekiness and chutzpah that has often accompanied its erudite expressions has generally safeguarded irony from being reactionary. That said, irony has its own generative mechanisms which shun a creation *ex nihilo*.

The reckoning with the tradition emanating from North Italian humanism has a certain presence in many an argument on architectural irony—from the mannerist shenanigans on the classical revival of the Antique, like in Giulio Romano's formal tinkering at the *Palazzo del Te*, to the romanticist fascination with the imaginary ruins of an unspecified past, like in Giambattista Piranesi's depictions of the *Carceri d'invenzione*. In this history of architectural theory, the postmodern stands out as a period of heightened self-consciousness; it is also the period that has, more than any other, built its arguments on the conceptual quicksand of irony.



Notwithstanding the complicated socio-political and cultural contexts postmodern thought emerged from, its protagonists had the weighty legacy of twentieth century modernism to engage. A good portion of the postmodern argumentation had internalised this sort of relational polemic as a primordial paradox which defined its concepts and line of reasoning. I maintain elsewhere that irony encapsulates the very structure of postmodern theory in architecture.

As such, in the early 1980s, Frank Gehry began to express an interest in the geometric and metaphorical possibilities of the fish shape as a fundamental configurational paradigm for architecture; his was precisely a critique of the humanist prerequisite of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism of the classical tradition. In short, if the articulated, hierarchical, and tripartite body of the Vitruvian Man could be replaced with the scaled, streamlined shape of fish, architecture would be spawned freely and afresh. While Gehry brought fresh meat to the table of the architectural discussion, so to speak, its discursive efficacy derived from the rebuttal of everything that came before. It was this rudimental negation of architecture's fundamentals, formulated from within the discipline, which interestingly, generated a new universe of forms that, in many ways, foreshadowed a radical shift towards a new formal paradigm: A decade later, the notions of smooth and topological form, of self-similar *repetition and difference* of shapes, or of the curved stringing together of structural segments would dominate the discussions around computer modelling and digital fabrication. The humorous and absurd manifestation of Gehry's proposition, sometimes in concord with Claes Oldenburg, was of course part and parcel of this discursive strategy.

Three examples can illustrate how internalized irony operated in postmodernism—one relying on quotational distancing from modernism; one on self-referentiality; and the third one on the "ingenious" reading of an urban text. All three examples epitomise the complex intertwining of perceptual and conceptual realities of architecture, and make the architectural "thing" itself into a support for theory:

The first example is by Chicago architect Stanley Tigerman, who had designed his Little House in the Clouds (1976) in open reference to Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (1951), by making use of the latter's architectural attributes only to re-enact them in a state of self-negation or self-cancellation. While Mies's house is composed of a single, asymmetrical, and extroverted volume, Tigerman's is sliced into a double mass across an introspective mirror line; whereas Mies's house is raised off the ground on a platform, Tigerman's is sunken into a ditch only to be raised again on small pilotis to the original level of the ground; and while Mies



has peripheral windows to link the interior of his house horizontally to the surrounding countryside, Tigerman privileges the internalized, vertical view; this interior vista is directed towards the “artificial nature” of a *trompe l’oeil* fresco of clouds, which are painted on the house’s ceiling with no actual window in the whole house. The Jewish Tigerman saw in these formalist games, played in relation to the architecture of the catholic Mies, a whole dialogical cosmology between what he called *Hellenic* versus *Hebraic* cultures. It was this architect’s way to express his cultural diaspora as a Jew in America, negotiating his anachronistic love/hate relationship with the corporate architecture in the Midwestern city of Chicago that had, by his own account, been “invaded by the Germans”—Miesianism modernism. A multitude of cultural cross-references, from Kierkegaard to Bakhtin, from Freud to Lacan, from Schinkel to Magritte, are being woven into the discussion of architectural form up to the moment when this piece of design is turned into a book of existentialism. Tigerman’s Little House is not simply a piece of architectural design, but the instantiation of a dialectic theory about rival worldviews.

The second example is Peter Eisenman’s House VI (1976): The project is predicated on a spatial diagram, which Eisenman duplicated, only to turn the twin diagram on its head, and nest it in the original drawing. While the first diagram has a conventional relationship to gravity, the turned-around twin becomes a referential sign or symbol set against the gravitational field. The entire formal complexity of the house is then created through this mechanism of playful self-reflexivity between the initial drawing and its inverted double: As such, the stair that ascends to the upper floor is mirrored by the “sign” of a stair which is suspended from the ceiling. Similarly, while certain columns act as conventional supports, others “negate” gravity by hanging from above, and hovering above the ground. The architecture of House VI hinges on this sort of self-reflexive and self-negating dialectic syntax; as such, the house is a manifesto for a *weltanschauung* that plays pragmatism off against ideality. It is also a built manifesto against the Vitruvian principles of architecture: indeed, not all columns in a building are reducible to *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and even *venustas*, such is the argument, but they can represent “other” realities that are completely internal and proper to architecture. House VI is an instance of built theory.

And the third example is Rem Koolhaas’s proposition in *Delirious New York* (1978), where Koolhaas sees Manhattan, the city of pragmatism and rationality, simultaneously as its dialogical other, namely as a “city of poetry.” The implication is that all opposite meanings converge when taken to extremes: As such, the “problem” of excessive congestion in the

- 3 Jeff Kipnis, "Twisting the Separatrix," in K. Michael Hays, *Architecture Theory Since 1968* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998), 726.

metropolis is turned into a specific “culture” of congestion. When a pragmatic problem becomes so overwhelming that it cannot effectively be remedied, then a changed cultural mindset about that same problem can sublimate it into a new aesthetic and a changed mentality. In the book Koolhaas also argues that the built structure of Manhattan exemplifies that the two big adversary ideological and political systems in the world—Soviet communism and American capitalism—have finally coalesced into the same architectural typology : the symbolic high-rise building, which has been developed analogously in Moscow and in New York. Furthermore, in his “Story of the Pool,” Koolhaas imagines the high-rise-turned-horizontal as a long swimming city precinct, a horizontal skyscraper, which becomes a dynamic battleground and *trait d'union* between Western and Soviet urbanisms. Ironically, the claim is that opposite ideologies can be represented by the very same architecture, because architecture allegedly has the capacity to absorb and embody ideological contradictions. Here again, the postmodern tale about urban architecture is a theoretical proposition.

Notwithstanding its occasional penchant for superficial aesthetics—so-called POMO, the postmodern was a fundamentally philosophical and literary theory movement, with architecture as its figurehead. Extending the conceptual preoccupations of postmodernism, DECON from the mid-to-late 1980s then marked the apex of irony when architectural theory turned its intellectual query against the material foundations of architecture itself :

When buildings began to simulate their own disintegration and decay, architecture had unmasked the internal quarrel and questioning, and unconcealed its lasting theory-envy on the battlefield of architectural form. Eisenman turned to Jacques Derrida to *figure out* the surreptitious specters of architecture’s philosophy through formalism; together, they published a series of discussion transcripts entitled *Chora L Works*. The discourses of architecture and philosophy became so totally entangled that, on the one hand, the philosopher, Derrida, began to take on responsibility to shape architecture by claiming “I will stop apologizing for not being an architect,” to which the architect Eisenman denigrated his own authority and responded “... And I will stop apologizing for not being an architect.”<sup>3</sup> In the context of architects turning to philosophy, Bernard Tschumi invoked Georges Bataille and Jacques Lacan to address an alleged dark subconscious of architecture, which had been suppressed by the inherent violence of architecture’s positive, optimistic, beautiful, and “constructive” halo. A blow to the phenomenological bias of the vulgar, non-theoretical apperception of the beauty of architecture by the general



public, DECON ventured to frustrate bourgeois contentment by exhibiting that architecture was not a sphere for the gentrification of lifestyles—a sort of art “deco,” but a stage for the display of the discipline’s internal dialectic and doubt. To oppose the apathy and happy numbness of the *status quo*, architecture unleashed a certain diabolical energy in a formalist and spatial drama. Historically speaking, DECON was one of those moments when architecture most expressively, and ironically, exhibited the fundamental incongruities between its materialism (“the brick”) and its metaphysics (“doubt”).

Since architecture’s “digital turn” in the early-to-mid 1990s, however, the concern with the meaning, symbolism, critique, and hermeneutics of architecture has been perceived as unnecessarily arcane, and has given way to other thematic preoccupations in the field. When digital technology became ubiquitous for the conception and transmission of ideas, the focus of architectural discourse shifted towards generative practices that were mostly pragmatic and technological in nature. They moved away from the reflective, critical, and dialectic modes which had largely defined it throughout the postmodern and poststructuralist decades, towards the more straightforward experimentation with new fabrication techniques, the digital generation of form, as well as with the prolific dissemination of images. Discourse experienced a both literal and metaphorical “flattening” by moving its battleground onto the digital screen: on the one hand, the physicality of architecture found itself converted into immaterial lines on flat screens; and on the other, the discussion among architects manifested an outright impatience with ideas that were not directly geared towards stirring a software response. The dominant topics of discussion almost exclusively pivoted around the generation and manipulation of form—folding, emergence, topology, hyper surfacing, nonlinearity—while theory turned to Gilles Deleuze. Deleuzianism in architecture felt serious, obsessive, and cult-like; for sure, the formalisms and philosophies of “smoothness” were a territory in which the dialectical schisms of irony had no place. While the 1990s were doubtlessly the pioneering decade for digital modelling, in which the “all-to-serious” experimentation with the new media was taking place, its cultural spark had happened in critical debates which preceded those years.

Likewise, in the first two decades of our century, neither theory nor irony were necessarily much *en vogue* in architecture. The development of social media platforms changed the protocols of communication altogether: it enabled spontaneous, individualistic, and direct expression, where discourse lost much of its procedural formalism, its diplomacy, and many a time, its decorum. It got replaced with an ongoing buzz where every



social media user is individually given the public stage to broadcast opinion, view, sentiment, belief, suspicion, theory. The ubiquitous availability of miscellaneous “content” has relativized the authority of the institutions, which traditionally framed, safeguarded, and peer-reviewed access to ideas. Individual posts are competing with official news channels and have become a conduit for the impulsive, informal expression of political opinion. In a way, the resulting cacophony is heterogeneous to a point where it lacks a common epistemological basis against which any of the subtle effects of irony would be discernible. Along these lines, in the last decades, the discipline of architecture too has digressed from its intellectual preoccupation and found itself more concerned with performative than with reflective activity.

This *modus operandi* was aligned with the explosive expansion of the new urban agglomerations in Asia and the Middle East, from Dubai to Shenzhen, and have been decidedly progressivist without, however, really resuscitating the pioneering spirit that had characterized the 1950s or the utopian zeal of the 1960s. This hyper development came hand in hand with an almost inevitable pragmatist ideology that remained incurious about excessive disciplinary introspection. The unapologetically “modern” drive has rendered architecture self-assured in its procedures but has deflected from self-questioning and self-doubt — more generally, it has to a large extent suspended disciplinary self-reflection.

When the party came to an end around 2020, when sanitary, ecological, financial and geopolitical crises piled up, a certain introspection has come to impose itself again upon society at large, and the discipline of architecture in particular. It appears as if the extreme urgencies of the Covid crisis, the inflation crisis, the migration crisis, the Ukraine crisis, and the climate crisis have unleashed the “raw real,” in the face of which mankind’s theories, dreams and hopes come across as ineffective romantic reverie. These urgencies already triggered the realist instinct where even a humanist discipline like architecture gets instrumentalized “to fix the problems at hand” with the revival of an utterly flat pragmatism.

However, one can assume that the intellectual response to a “real” existential threat also reopens space for the drama of irony—though in ways that differ from its previous (postmodern and other) versions. This time round, irony is not literary and semantic in kind; facing this alleged eruption of the raw real, one can expect to be facing a Nietzschean “world-historical irony,” which is based on the suspicion that a cunning divinity is keeping its finger in the great game of the world, and uses humans as its plaything. We find ourselves yet again in a place where we have to evaluate the relation between our discipline’s intrinsically

- 4 *Don't Look Up*, Released December 10, 2021 (USA), Director: Adam McKay, Starring: Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Lawrence, Ariana Grande, Cate Blanchett, Meryl Streep.

constructive and forward-looking underpinning (“You cannot believe in the bomb and be an architect”), and the desire to be relevant by addressing the predicaments of the zeitgeist. Allegedly, these testing times are therefore inherently fertile grounds for irony.

Without yet being able to fully comprehend its effects today, one can nevertheless begin to pinpoint a few seedbeds for contemporary irony, of which I identify three :

For one, the development of the notion of *post-humanism* has altered human self-perception; the technological possibilities to interfere with, or modify bodies and minds alike, are fundamentally probing every traditional theory about what it means to be human. When limbs can be replaced or expanded with prostheses, neurons can connect to electronic chips, sex and gender can be changed and rendered fluid, and artificial intelligence can compete with its natural counterpart, there should be ample room for new forms of irony! In the creative and critical disciplines, this broad revision of the value and place of human agency has thus already opened up new domains for dialectics. For the biological body will always remain as a “conservative” reference point or shadow from which the post-human improvements derive and depend. Post-humanism is not only an evolutive modification of humanist assumptions, but it is also a form of self-negation from within humanist theory itself. And architecture will not be immune to this evolution; given the multiple and repeated enmeshments of architecture with biological metaphors, which by far exceed the classical arguments about bodily proportion, organization, or profile, any tinkering with that fundamental paradigm will open a space for the whole spectrum of irony—from existentialist to humorous. In particular, the difficulty to clearly separate subjects from objects when objects have already become sentient, responsive, and (artificially) smart, holds a large potential for new dialectic.

A second hotbed for contemporary irony appears in mankind’s relation to the *Anthropocene*, the environment and the climate. Torn between the realisation that action is needed to avoid fatal catastrophe from the careless over-exploitation of resources, on the one hand, and the inexplicable persistent disbelief in the scientific evidence, humanity finds itself suspended in a new dialectic, which, in cinema, was portrayed in a most wonderfully ironic and satirical film *Don’t Look Up*.<sup>4</sup> The film shows how world opinion has become divided among people who believe that a comet, which is on collision course with the earth, is a severe threat, those who decry alarmism and believe that mining a destroyed comet will create jobs, and those who deny that the comet even exists. The film stands as a satirical take on the human handling of evidence about the

- 5 Liam Young, "The Great Endeavor." La biennale di Venezia, August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

climate crisis, and the divide between thought and deed in this respect. Today's ironies tend to scheme with the discrepancies between those sophisticated technological, political and other systems of control that mankind has itself designed and implemented, on the one hand, and the sensation of total loss of human control in face of those same systems. It is the tale of the apprentice sorcerer reloaded as one of the central leitmotifs for contemporary irony. In architecture, Liam Young's recent project *Great Endeavor* thematises the dichotomy of the fatal and absolute human subjugation by climate change, on the one hand, and the visionary fiction of total human control through technology, on the other. Young dreams up a world which will, by his own account, "involve the construction of the largest engineering project in human history, and the development of a new infrastructure equivalent in size to that of the entire global fossil fuel industry."<sup>5</sup> His take on the future of the planet hovers between a profigate optimism and a daunting outlook onto the future; the project sits on the sublime borderline between earnestness and frivolity. Though deprived of any ostensible humor, the project does play with the Janus-faced outfall of human intervention at planetary scale: In a sort of ironic reversal, Young suggests that if humanity repeated its extreme effort of industrialisation, we would get it right the second time round.

A third breeding ground for contemporary irony is to be found in the sphere of socio-politics, which has seen of late the rise of populism. The anti-establishment stances of populism across countries, from the United States to Argentina, and from France to Italy, are the most striking symptom of the attempt to do away with the "high grounds" of democracy that are perceived as abstract and elitist. It appears as if the extreme urgencies of the latest crises could no longer afford the long, tedious, and formalist processes of democracy. As such, the pandemic forced health authorities to weigh the duration of their safety testing protocols against the speed of the vaccines' market launch; the strong migration flows have triggered the nationalist clinging to a fabricated golden age when things were simple, direct, and great; and a new cohort of protestors, from Last Generation to Tyre Extinguishers, has felt legitimate to suspend the rule of law in view of the alleged imminence of climate collapse. What tends to be forgotten in the current situation is that the democratic formalisms emanate from the social contract on which our modern civilisations have been constructed — a contract that is endemic to culture, language, and social interaction in general. And for sure, all things cultural tend to be labyrinthine and manifold, and therefore irreducible to a simple way of talking. If the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the era when formal socio-political institutions were erected in the name of upholding the complexities of the "social contract"—international



courts of justice, global trade treaties, geopolitical military alliances— the 21<sup>st</sup> century has started to enact their undoing in a weird conceptual short circuit. If one can assume that “all architecture is political” in that it has a millennia-long history of instantiating underlying power relationships, the current self-negation of democratic principles from within the Western (democratic) regimes will bring forth this embedded irony — either in the way our buildings are interpreted, designed and represented, or in the way in which humans behave because of these same buildings.

If the introductory suggestion of this essay remains plausible, i.e. that irony hinges on architecture’s double reality as a thing, on the one hand, and as a set of ideas, on the other, then the current tumultuous times should be fertile ground for irony’s return after having been dormant since postmodernism. As a matter of fact, when architecture’s enduring or classical clichés of stability, serenity, durability, confidence, and optimism will again be confronted with the primordial component of thinking —questioning— we are about to enter a new “theory” moment for architectural discourse.



# Uvod

**Emmanuel Petit**

- 1 Schlegel, »Das ganze Werk ist ein steter Kampf das Undarstellbare darzustellen,« navedeno v: Martin Götze, *Ironie und absolute Darstellung: Philosophie und Poetik in der Frühromantik* (Paderborn: Schöningh Verlag, 2001), 230.
- 2 Schlegel, »Athenäums-Fragment 41«, *Kritische und theoretische Schriften* (Stuttgart: Philip Reclam, 1978), 82: »Es ist gleich tödlich für den Geist, ein System zu haben, und keins zu haben. Er wird sich also wohl entschließen müssen, beides zu verbinden“ (prevedeno v slovenščino po avtorjevem prevodu iz nemščine v angleščino).

Ironija ni le ena od številnih tém, ki nastopajo v arhitekturi. Je tista, ki arhitekturo neposredno povezuje s teorijo, ter omogoča, da s posebnega zornega kota intelektualno pristopamo k naši stroki. Ni atribut arhitekturne forme, ki bi ga lahko ugledali v stanju raztresenosti, pa tudi ne določena struktura v diskurzu ali nekaj, kar je dostopno površnemu zaznavanju; ironija zahteva »omikano« razumevanje ter interpretacijo odnosa in razhajanj med zaznavo in pojmom. »Celotno delo (ironije) je nenehno prizadevanje predstaviti nepredstavljivo«, <sup>1</sup> je med snovanjem svojih literarnih fragmentov ugotavljal Friedrich Schlegel, ki je, da bi se izognil aporetični slepi ulici, v kateri slej ko prej konča to prizadevanje, zagotavljal, da je »za um imeti sistem enako usodno kot imeti nobenega. Bržkone se bo moral odločiti za kombinacijo obojega.«<sup>2</sup> V arhitekturi se ironija večinoma navezuje na dvojno realnost arhitekture kot *stvari* in skupka *idej*. Poleg sposobnosti ostroumnega razčlenjevanja in artikuliranja arhitekturne forme predpostavlja poznavanje in razumevanje zgodovine arhitekture, njenega kulturnega in intelektualnega konteksta ter manirizmov in svojskosti diskurza. Ironija v arhitekturi vnaša nemir v odnose med stvarmi in idejami, kot ontološka diferenca, ki je zamegljena na protisloven, a intelektualno privlačen način. Konceptualna osredotočenost na tektonsko dialektiko med stvarskostjo in idejnostjo spreminja arhitekturo v obliko teorije. Na najbolj splošni ravni je torej prav zaradi osredotočenosti na teorijo téma ironije v arhitekturi intelektualno zanimiva in poučna.

Določena zgodovinska obdobja so bila še posebej naklonjena dvojnemu branju, saj so poudarjala samoreflektivno navezovanje na koncepte, ki sami po sebi v arhitekturni formi ali besedilih niso prisotni, temveč zgolj nakazani. Ta okoliščina bolj kot izvirnost in inovacijo poudarja pomen izobrazbe in razgledanosti ter je ironiji občasno celo prislužila obtožbo konservativnosti, vendar pa je zvijačna drznost in prevzetnost, ki pogosto spremlja njeno omikano ekspresivnost, ironijo večinoma obvarovala reakcionarnosti. Ob povedanem pa ima ironija vendarle tudi svoje lastne mehanizme porajanja, ki se izogibajo ustvarjanju *ex nihilo*.

Obračun s tradicijo, ki izvira iz severnoitalijanskega humanizma, je na nek način prisoten v številnih argumentih o ironiji v arhitekturi – od manirističnih preigravanj s klasicističnim oživljanjem antike, kot je to počel Giulio Romano pri *Tejski palači*, do romantičnega navdušenja nad umišljenimi ruševinami nedoločene preteklosti, kot jih je v svojih *Carceri d'invenzione* upodobil Giambattista Piranesi. Postmodernizem izstopa iz te zgodovine arhitekturne teorije kot obdobje izostrenega samo-zavedanja, ki je bolj kot katerikoli drugo svoje argumente utemeljevalo v konceptualnem živem pesku ironije. Ne glede na zapletene družbenopolitične in kulturne kontekste, iz katerih se je porajala postmoderna misel, so se morali njeni



protagonisti spoprijeti z zahtevno dediščino modernizma dvajsetega stoletja. Velik del postmoderne argumentacije je ponotranjil te vrste relacijsko polemiko kot prvobitni paradoks, ki je opredelil njene koncepte in logiko. Na nekem drugem mestu ugotavljam, da je v ironiji povzet sam ustroj postmoderne teorije v arhitekturi.

Na začetku osemdesetih let 20. stoletja je začel Frank Gehry raziskovati geometrične in metaforične možnosti oblike ribe kot za arhitekturo temeljne konfiguracijske paradigme; njegova kritika je bila uperjena prav zoper humanistični imperativ antropocentrizma in antropomorfizem klasičistične tradicije. Skratka, če bi artikulirano, hierarhično, tridelno telo vitruvijskega človeka lahko nadomestila luskasta, aerodinamična oblika ribe, bi se arhitektura lahko na novo in svobodno plodila. Svež kos mesa, ki ga je, če tako rečem, k mizi arhitekturne debate prinesel Gehry, svojo diskurzivno moč črpa iz spodbijanja vsega, kar je bilo prej. Zanimivo pri tem je, da je ta rudimentarna negacija samih temeljev arhitekture, ki se je izoblikovala znotraj stroke, ustvarila nov univerzum oblik, ki so v več pogledih napovedovale korenit preobrat k novi formalni paradigmi: desetletje kasneje so predstave o gladki in topološki formi, samo-podobni *ponovitvi* in *razliki* oblik oz. o krivuljastem nizanju konstrukcijskih segmentov že prevladovali v razpravah o računalniškem modeliranju in digitalni izdelavi. Seveda je bila duhovita in absurdna manifestacija Gehryjeve teze, občasno skupaj s Claesom Oldenburgom, neizogibni element te diskurzivne strategije.

Trije primeri ponazarjajo delovanje ponotranjene ironije v postmodernizmu – prvi se opira na citatno distanciranje od modernizma, drugi na samonanašalnost, tretji pa na »domiselno« branje urbanega besedila. Vsi trije so vzorčni primeri kompleksnega prepleta zaznavnih in konceptualnih realnosti arhitekture, v katerih se arhitekturna »stvar« vzpostavi kot opora teoriji:

Prvi primer je chikaški arhitekt Stanley Tigerman, ki je svojo Malo hišo v oblakih (1976) zasnoval kot odkrito referenco na hišo Farnsworth (1951) Miesa van der Roheja, tako da je uporabil arhitekturne attribute slednje ter jih poustvaril kot samonegacijo oz. samo-preklic. Če je Miesova hiša enoten, asimetričen in navzven odprt volumen, Tigermanovo na dvoje cepi introspektivna zrcalna črta; Miesova je dvignjena od tal in stoji na ploščadi, Tigermanova pa vkopana v jarek ter nato z nizkimi podpornimi stebri dvignjena na prvotni nivo tal; Mies je dal svoji hiši obodna okna, ki njeno notranjost horizontalno povezujejo s okoliško pokrajino, Tigerman pa je dal prednost ponotranjenemu, vertikalnemu pogledu – ta pogled v notranjost je usmerjen k »umetni naravi« *trompe l'oeila* v obliki freske oblakov, naslikanih na strop hiše, ki je v celoti brez oken. Jud Tigerman je



v tem formalističnem poigravanju z elementi arhitekture katolika Miesa uzrl vso dialoško kozmologijo tega, kar je sam imenoval *helenska proti hebrejski* kulturi. Arhitekt je tako izrazil pripadnost svoji kulturni diaspori Juda v Ameriki, ki se je poskušal izviti iz anahronističnega ljubezensko-sovražnega razmerja s korporativno arhitekturo Chicaga na ameriškem Srednjem zahodu, ki so ga po njegovih besedah "zavzeli Nemci" – miesijanski modernizem. Množica kulturnih navzkrižnih referenc, od Kierkegaar-da do Bahtina, od Freuda do Lacana in od Schinkla do Magritta, se vpleta v debato o arhitekturni formi vse dokler idejni načrt ne postane knjiga eksistencializma. Tigermanova Mala hiša ni zgolj arhitekturna zasnova, temveč uprimeritev dialektične teorije o rivalstvu svetovnih nazorov.

Drugi primer je Hiša VI (1976) Petra Eisenmana. Projekt temelji na prostorskem diagramu, ki ga je Eisenman podvojil, tako da je podvojeni diagram obrnil na glavo in ga ugnedil v izvirno risbo. Če ima prvi diagram konvencionalen odnos do težnosti, je njegov obrnjeni dvojček referenčni znak oz. simbol, postavljen nasproti gravitacijskemu polju. Ta mehanizem igrive samorefleksivnosti med prvotno risbo in njenim obrnjenim dvojnikom ustvarja vso formalno kompleksnost hiše: stopnišče, ki se dviguje v prvo nadstropje se tako zrcali v »znaku« stopnic, ki se spuščajo s stropa, in medtem ko nekateri stebri delujejo kot standardna podpora, drugi visijo navzdol in v »zanikanju« težnosti lebdiijo nad tlemi. Na te vrste samorefleksivni in samo-zanikajoči dialektični sintaksi stoji arhitektura Hiše VI; kot taka, je hiša manifest svetovnega nazora, ki izigrava pragmatizem, da nasprotuje idealiteti. Je tudi grajeni manifest proti Vitruvijevim načelom v arhitekturi: njegov argument je, da vseh stebrov v stavbi dejansko ne moremo zreducirati na *firmitas*, *utilitas*, in celo na *venustas* ne, zato pa lahko ti predstavljajo »druge« realnosti, ki so popolnoma notranje in lastne arhitekturi. Hiša VI je primer grajene teorije.

Tretji primer je teza, ki jo je v knjigi *Delirious New York* (1978) postavil Rem Koolhaas, ki v Manhattnu, mestu pragmatizma in racionalnosti, prepozna tudi njegovega dialoškega drugega, namreč »mesto poezije«. Kar pomeni, da se v svoji skrajni stopnji vsi nasprotni pomeni zbližajo: iz »problema« prenatrpanosti metropole tako nastane posebna »kultura« natrpanosti. Ko postane pragmatični problem tako neizmeren, da ga ni več mogoče učinkovito obvladati, lahko drugačna kulturna miselnost o istem problemu le-tega sublimira v novo estetiko in drugačno mentaliteto. Poleg tega Koolhaas v knjigi trdi, da grajena struktura Manhattna ponazarja, kako sta se dva velika sovražna ideološka in politična sistema – sovjetski komunizem in ameriški kapitalizem – navsezadnje združila v isto arhitekturno tipologijo: simbolični nebotičnik, ki je sočasno nastal v Moskvi in New Yorku. Nadalje si v »Zgodbi o bazenu« Koolhas zamisli vodoravno

- 3 Kipnis, »/Twisting the Separatrix/«; prvič objavljeno v *Assemblage* 14, April, 1991; V: K. Michael Hays, *Architecture Theory Since 1968* (MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1998), 726.

obrnjeno stolpnico kot dolg, plavajoč predel mesta, horizontalni nebotičnik, ki postane dinamično bojišče in *trait d'union* med zahodnim in sovjetskim urbanizmom. Ironija se tu skriva v trditvi, da lahko ista arhitektura predstavlja nasprotni si ideologiji, ker naj bi arhitektura menda imela sposobnost vpiti in utelesiti ideološka protislovja. Tudi tu je teoretična predpostavka postmoderna zgodba o urbani arhitekturi.

Ne glede na njegovo občasno spogledovanje s površinsko estetiko je bil postmodernizem v temelju filozofsko in literarnoteoretično gibanje, arhitektura pa njegova marioneta. Dekonstruktivizem je nato razširil konceptualno polje delovanja postmodernizma in v obdobju od sredine do konca osemdesetih zaznamoval vrhunec ironije, ko je arhitekturna teorija svoje intelektualno preizpraševanje usmerila k materialnim temeljem arhitekture:

ko so stavbe začele hliniti lasten razkroj in propad, je arhitektura že razkrila notranje spore in dvome, ter na bojišču arhitekturne forme razgabila svojo večno zavist do teorije. Eisenman se je, da bi s formalizmom *razvozlal* skrivnostne prikazni filozofije arhitekture, obrnil k Jacquesu Derridaju; skupaj sta objavila zbirko zapisov pogovorov z naslovom *Chora L Works*. Diskurza arhitekture in filozofije sta se tu tako tesno prepletla, da je filozof Derrida prevzel odgovornost za oblikovanje arhitekture z besedami »ne bom se več opravičeval, da nisem arhitekt«, na kar se je arhitekt Eisenman odzval tako, da se je odrekel svoji avtonomiji, rekoč »... Jaz pa se ne bom več opravičeval, ker nisem arhitekt.«<sup>3</sup> Še en arhitekt, ki se je obrnil k filozofiji, Bernard Tschumi, se je na primer skliceval na Georges-a Batailla in Jacques-a Lacana, ko je obravnaval domnevno temno podzavest arhitekture, ki jo je potlačilo inherentno nasilje pozitivne, optimistične, lepe in »konstruktivne« avreole arhitekture. Dekonstruktivizem, ki je zadal udarec fenomenološki pristranskosti splošne javnosti z njeno popreproščeno, neteoretično apercipijo lepote arhitekture, si je zadal pokvariti meščansko zadovoljstvo, ko je pokazal, da arhitektura ni nekakšna »deco« umetnost, namenjena gentrifikaciji življenskih slogov, temveč oder za prikazovanje notranje dialektike stroke in njenega dvoma. Da bi se uprla apatiji in zadovoljni otopelosti *statusa quo*, je arhitektura v formalistično in prostorsko dramo sprostila nekakšno peklensko energijo. Dekonstruktivizem je bil eden tistih trenutkov v zgodovini, ko je arhitektura najbolj izrazito in ironično izpostavila temeljna neskladja med svojim materializmom (»opeko«) in svojo metafiziko (»dvomom«).

Z »digitalnim obratom« v arhitekturi v prvi polovici devetdesetih je interes za pomen, simbolizem, kritiko in hermenevtiko arhitekture dobil nalepko nečesa brez potrebe skrivnostnega, posledično pa so njegovo mesto zavzele druge tematike na tem področju. Ko je digitalna tehnologija



postala neobhodna pri snovanju in širjenju idej, se je središče arhitekturnega diskurza pomaknilo h generativnim praksam, ki so bile večinoma pragmatične in tehnološke narave. Te so se od reflektivnih, kritičnih in dialektičnih pristopov, ki so ga v veliki meri opredeljevali skozi desetletja postmodernizma in poststrukturalizma, pomaknile k bolj neposrednemu eksperimentiranju z novimi tehnikami izdelave, digitalnemu generiranju oblik ter dejavnemu širjenju podob. S selitvijo bojišča na digitalni ekran, se je diskurz dobesedno in metaforično »sploščil«: na eni strani se je telesnost arhitekture pretvorila v nematerialne črte na ravnih ekranih, na drugi pa je v debati med arhitekti prišla na dan odkrita nestrpnost do idej, ki niso bile neposredno naravnane k izzivanju programskega odziva. Prevladujoče teme so se skoraj izključno vrtele okrog generiranja in manipuliranja oblik – pregibanja, nastajanja, topologije, hiperploskev, nelinearnosti, – medtem ko se je teorija obrnila k Gillesu Deleuzu. Deleuzianizem v arhitekturi se je zdel nekaj resnega, obsesivnega, kultnega; v območju formalizma in filozofij »gladkosti« pač ni bilo prostora za dialektične razkole ironije. Čeprav so bila devetdeseta nedvomno pionirsko obdobje digitalnega modeliranja, v katerem se je odvijalo »vse preresno« eksperimentiranje z novimi mediji, se je njegov kulturni zametek zanetil v kritičnih debatah, ki so se kresale pred tem.

Podobno tudi arhitekturna teorija in ironija nista bili ravno v modi v prvih desetletjih našega stoletja. Razvoj platform družbenih medijev je popolnoma spremenil protokole komunikacije: omogočil je spontano, individualistično in neposredno izražanje mnenj, v katerem je diskurz izgubil precej svojega proceduralnega formalizma, svoje diplomacije in večkrat tudi svoje spodobnosti. Nadomestilo ga je nenehno vznemirjenje in govorjenje vsevprek, kjer vsak uporabnik družbenih medijev dobi svoj javni oder za nastopanje, s katerega lahko objavlja svoja mnenja, stališča, poglede, prepričanja, sume ali teorije. Vsesplošna dostopnost raznoraznih »vsebin« je relativizirala avtoriteto institucij, ki so tradicionalno uokvirjale, varovale in strokovno nadzorovale dostop do idej. Individualne objave, ki so postale sredstvo za impulzivno, neformalno izražanje političnih mnenj, tekmujejo z uradnimi novičarskimi kanali. Posledična kakofonija glasov je tako heterogena, da je izgubila skupno epistemološko osnovo, ob kateri bi sploh lahko razbrali pretanjene učinke ironije. Podobno se je v zadnjih desetletjih tudi arhitekturna stroka oddaljila od svoje zatopljenosti v intelektualna razmišljanja in refleksijo zamenjala za performativnost.

Novi način delovanja je sovpadal z eksplozivno rastjo novih urbanih aglomeracij v Aziji in na Srednjem vzhodu, od Dubaja do Šenzena, a mu kljub njegovi odločni progresivnosti ni uspelo obuditi pionirskega duha, ki je zaznamoval petdeseta leta 20. stoletja ali utopistično gorečnost, ki je



pustila pečat v šestdesetih. Ta hiperrazvoj se je pojavil skupaj s skoraj neizogibno pragmatistično ideologijo, ki jo je pretirana introspekcija stroke pustila ravnodušno. Temu neomajno »modernemu« zagonu gre pripisati zasluge za to, da je arhitektura, ki zdaj samozavestno izvaja svoje postopke, opustila samo-preizpraševanje in dvom v svoj prav ter se na splošno v veliki meri odpovedala disciplinarni samorefleksiji.

A ko se je ok. leta 2020 zabava končala in so se nakopičile zdravstvene, okoljske, finančne in geopolitične krize, se je bila tudi družba na splošno, še posebej pa arhitektura kot stroka, prisiljena zazreti vase. Kot da so izjemne razmere, ki so jih ustvarile krize, nastale s covidom, inflacijo, migracijami, vojno v Ukrajini in podnebnimi spremembami, spustile z vajeti »surovo resničnost«, spričo katere se teorije, sanje in upanje človeštva zdijo kot brezplodne romantične sanjarije. Realistični nagon, ki so ga prebudile te ujme, je z oživiljanjem suhoparnega pragmatizma celó humanistično disciplino kot je arhitektura instrumentaliziral v orodje za »reševanje aktualnih problemov«.

Vseeno lahko predpostavimo, da tudi intelektualni odziv na »resnično« ogroženost našega obstoja znova odpira prostor za dramo ironije, pa čeprav na drugačen način kot v njenih prejšnjih (postmodernistični in drugih) različicah. Tokrat ironija ni literarne in semantične narave; soočeni z domnevnim izbruhom surove resničnosti bi lahko pričakovali soočenje z nietzschejansko »svetovnozgodovinsko ironijo«, utemeljeno v sumu, da zvijačno božanstvo vleče niti v veliki igri s svetom, v kateri ljudje nastopamo kot njegove lutke. Znova smo se znašli na točki, ko moramo ovrednotiti razmerje med imanentno konstruktivno in v prihodnost naravnano podstat stroke (»ne moreš biti arhitekt in verjeti v bombo«) ter težnjo po ohranjanju relevantnosti z reševanjem zagat našega časa. Domnevno torej ti težki časi že po naravi nudijo plodna tla za razcvet ironije.

Čeprav danes še ne moremo v celoti razumeti njenih učinkov, lahko vseeno poskusimo določiti nekaj točk, kjer se poraja sodobna ironija. Sam izpostavljam tri:

Prva je nastanek pojma *posthumanizem*, ki je spremenil človekovo zaznavanje samega sebe; tehnološke možnosti spreminjanja teles in mentalitete so zavrtale v temelje vseh tradicionalnih teorij o tem, kaj pomeni biti človek. V času, ko je ude mogoče zamenjati ali dopolniti s protezami in povezati nevrone z elektronskimi čipi, ko je mogoče zamenjati spol in spolno identiteto, ki s tem postaneta fluidna, umetna inteligenca pa lahko tekmuje s svojim človeškim dvojnikom, bi moralo biti več kot dovolj prostora za nove oblike ironije! V kreativnih in kritičnih strokah je ta splošna revizija vloge in pomena človekove delovalnosti že tlakovala nove poti za dialektiko. Biološko telo bo namreč vedno ostalo »konservativna« referenčna

4 *Don't Look Up*, v kinematografih 10. decembra 2021 (ZD, Režiser: Adam McKay, igralska zasedba: Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Lawrence, Ariana Grande, Cate Blanchett, Meryl Streep).

5 <https://www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/2023/dangerous-liaisons/liam-young> (dostop 15. avgust 2024).

točka oz. senca, iz katere izhajajo in se nanjo opirajo postčloveške izboljšave. Posthumanizem ni le evolucijska prilagoditev humanističnih predpostavk, temveč je obenem tudi oblika samonegacije znotraj same teorije humanizma. Tej evoluciji se tudi arhitektura ne bo mogla upreti; če upoštevamo številna in vedno znova ponovljena zapletanja arhitekture z biološkimi metaforami, ki daleč presegajo klasične argumente o telesnih razmerjih, organizaciji ali profilu, bo vsako poigravanje s temeljno paradigmo odprlo vrata celotnemu spektru ironije – od eksistencialistične do humorne. Še posebej velik potencial za novo dialektiko se skriva v težavnem ločevanju med subjekti in objekti, saj so objekti že postali čuteči, odzivni in (umetno) pametni.

Drugo gojišče sodobne ironije se kaže v odnosu človeštva do *antropocena*, okolja in podnebja. Razpeto med spoznanjem o nujnosti ukrepov, ki bodo preprečili usodno katastrofo zaradi brezbriznega in čezmernega izkoriščanja naravnih virov, in nerazložljivo vztrajno nejevero v znanstvene dokaze, je človeštvo obviselo v novi dialektiki, ki je bila na velikem platnu nazorno prikazana v čudovito ironičnem in satiričnem filmu *Ne glejte gor*.<sup>4</sup> V njem vidimo svet, v katerem se ljudje delijo na tiste, ki so prepričani, da jih komet, katerega pot se križa z zemljo, resno ogroža, tiste, ki obsojajo zganjanje panike in so prepričani, da bo uničeni komet ustvaril nova delovna mesta, ter tiste, ki zanikajo sam obstoj kometa. Kot satirični komentar človekovega ravnanja z dokazi o podnebni krizi film obravnava tudi razkorak med človekovim razmišljanjem in njegovimi dejanji. Današnje ironije rade manipulirajo z neskladji med izpopolnjenimi tehnološkimi, političnimi in drugimi sistemi nadzora, ki jih je ustvaril in uveljavil človek sam, ter z občutkom popolne izgube nadzora nad temi istimi sistemi. Pred nami je zgodba o vajencu in čarovniku, tokrat kot eden osrednjih lajtmotivov sodobne ironije. Na področju arhitekture Liam Young v svojem nedavnem projektu *Great Endeavor* (Veliki podvig) tematizira dihotomijo med podnebnimi spremembami, ki so si usodno in absolutno pokorile človeka, ter vizionarsko fikcijo o človekovem prevzemu popolnega nadzora s pomočjo tehnologije. Young je ustvaril namišljeni svet, za katerega je po njegovih besedah »treba zgraditi največji inženirski projekt v človeški zgodovini in postaviti novo infrastrukturo, ki bo tako velika kot vsa svetovna industrija fosilnih goriv.«<sup>5</sup> Njegov pogled na prihodnost planeta se giblje med neizmernim optimizmom in strašljivim obetom prihodnosti, sam projekt pa je umeščen na sublimno mejo med resnostjo in lahkomiselnostjo. Čeprav je navidezno vse prej kot humoren, se projekt poigrava z dvoličnim izbruhom človekovih posegov na planetarni ravni: v nekakšnem ironičnem obratu Young namigne, da če bi človeštvo znova vložilo toliko navora, kot ga je namenilo industrializaciji, bi nam v drugo uspelo.



Tretje plodišče sodobne ironije najdemo na socialnopolitičnem področju, kjer smo v zadnjem času priča vzponu populizma. Protisistemske države populizma po vsem svetu, od Združenih držav do Argentine in od Francije do Italije, so najočitnejši sindrom poskusa odpraviti »kreposti« demokracije, ki se pogosto zdijo abstraktne in elitistične. Kaže, da izjemne razmere zadnjih kriz zahtevajo nekaj več od dolgovernih, napornih in formalističnih postopkov demokracije. Tako je pandemija prisilila organe zdravstvene dejavnosti, da izbirajo med trajanjem svojih protokolov za preizkušanje varnosti novih cepiv in hitrostjo njihovega uvajanja; veliki migracijski tokovi so zanetili nacionalistično priseganje na zlato dobo (ki je nikoli ni bilo), ko je bilo vse preprosto, neposredno, in naravnost čudovito; novi kohorti protestnikov, od Last Generation do Tyre Extinguishers, pa se spričo domnevno neizogibnega podnebnega zloma zdi upravičeno zaobiti zakon. A v trenutni situaciji večkrat pozabimo, da demokratični formalizmi izvirajo iz družbene pogodbe, na kateri temeljijo naše moderne civilizacije – pogodbe, ki je endemična kulturi, jeziku in vsaki obliki družbenega občevanja. Vse, kar je povezano s kulturo, je seveda po naravi zapleteno in večplastno, zato o tem ni mogoče govoriti na preprost način. Če je bilo 20. stoletje doba, ko so bile v imenu spoštovanja kompleksnosti »družbene pogodbe« vzpostavljene formalne družbenopolitične institucije (mednarodna sodišča, globalne trgovinske pogodbe, geopolitična vojaška zavezništva), pa je v 21. stoletju prišlo do čudnega konceptualnega kratkega stika, ki je izzval njihovo odpravljanje. Če naj bi bila zaradi svoje tisočletja dolge zgodovine ustvarjanja oblastnih razmerij "vsa arhitektura politična", bo samonegacija demokratičnih načel, ki trenutno poteka znotraj Zahodnih (demokratičnih) režimov, porodila njeno notranjo ironijo – bodisi s tem, kako interpretiramo, načrtujemo in predstavljamo svoje stavbe, ali pa s tem, kako se zaradi taistih stavb obnašamo.

Če je torej uvodna teza tega eseja, namreč da se ironija navezuje na dvojno realnost arhitekture kot stvari in kot skupka idej, še vedno prepričljiva, potem bi morali biti današnji burni časi kot nalašč za vrnitev ironije po obdobju njenega mirovanja, ki je sledilo zatonu postmodernizma. Ko bodo trajni oz. uveljavljeni klišeji arhitekturnega jezika, kot so stabilnost, umirjenost, trajnost, samozavest in optimizem znova soočeni s temeljno prvino mišljenja – preizpraševanjem – bomo prestopili prag novega trenutka »teorije« v arhitekturnem diskurzu.

*E.P. 2024*



# **Catching Flak**

## **On the Irony of Fortresses**

**Anna Neimark**  
**Michael Osman**

- 1 Peter D. Eisenman's academic career in architecture began by contemplating philosophical questions of the field's self-definition. For example, "Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition," *Design Quarterly* No. 78/79 (1970), 1-5; "Post-Functionalism," *Oppositions* 6 (Fall 1976). See also, many of the essays in *Eisenman Inside Out: Selected Writings, 1963-1988* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
- 2 Paul de Man, "The Concept of Irony," *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp. 163-184.

“The ironization of form consists in a deliberate destruction of the form.”

Walter Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik  
in der Deutschen Romantik* (1920)

Architecture has a written aspect, some of which is related to the design and construction of buildings and some of which employs language as a tool for the description of buildings in narrative. When we consider architecture as a form of writing that includes all the above, it can be sensuous, literal, figurative, and abstract—as an abstraction, architecture can be representational of itself.<sup>1</sup> An inevitable byproduct of architecture’s written aspect is its production of irony.

We define irony along the lines of Paul de Man’s 1977 oddly titled lecture on “The Concept of Irony,” where he described the term as anything but a concept.<sup>2</sup> Rather, de Man viewed irony as an interruption in written narrative, a negation of its linear flow. Insofar as narrative is the basis of civilizational history, de Man maintains, it is the technique through which human culture documents its development over time.

Architecture plays a significant role in such an effort. For example, when a work of architecture is intended to mark a moment in time—often as a monument—it offers culture a circuit of reference between historical narrative and built form. In many cases, one work of architecture refers to another that preceded it in history and thereby reinforces the linearity of the civilizational narrative. Architecture’s ironies would therefore be interruptions to this structure of narrative; they might be interpreted as gaps within the networks of reference, or “shorts” within the circuitry of history. These forms of architectural negation are meanings that interrupt any metanarrative of civilizational meaning.

Here, we will focus on one example of an architectural irony that interrupts the cultural metanarrative: the fortress. It is one of the Ur-forms of architecture because it has traditionally functioned in the defense of cities, coastlines, and borders. Fortresses have a storied literature, and they constitute a significant part of architecture’s military genre. First, we will show how fortress architecture developed through language and then we will explain the resulting irony of fortresses today.

As a form in the military genre, fortresses were expensive, highly technical, large-scale military constructions that warranted a specialized set of terms. Over time, this vocabulary became a common syntax for army engineers and soldiers. The architectural grammar of fortress-design and construction reached a climax at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the work of Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, Louis the XIV’s guru of siege warfare. He



formalized the use of words that represented precise programmatic functions for the arrangement of any fortress. At the start of his *New Method of Fortification*, Vauban provided a list of words and their respective definitions in about twenty pages. Here is a selection of ten terms as they appeared in the context of the British translation of that lexicon:

*Banquette*, a little foot-pace at the bottom of the parapet, upon which the soldiers get up to fire into the moat, or upon the covert-way.

*Battery*, is a place raised, whereon to plant the great guns, and play upon the enemy.

*Breach*, is the ruin which the cannon or a mine makes in a fortification to take it by assault.

*Chandeliers*, are wooden parapets covered with bavins, filled with earth about a foot high, made use of in approaches, mines and galleries, to cover the workmen, and hinder the besieged from constraining them to quit their labour.

*Courtain*, is the longest streight line that runs about the rampart drawn from one flank to the other, and bordered with a good parapet five feet high, behind which the soldiers place themselves to fire upon the covert-way, and into the moat.

*Esplanade*, is the place void of houses, between the citadel and the town.

*Flank*, is the part which joins the courtain to the face of the bastion, from which the face of the next bastion requires its defence.

*Gallery*, is a covered walk, either of earth or turf. The sides of it are made with planks and pillars; and they are made use of in the moat.

*Palisades*, are wooden stakes from five to seven feet high, armed with two or three iron points, which are fixed before fortresses, courtains, ramparts, and glaces.

*Parapet*, is an elevation of earth upon the rampart, behind which the soldiers stand, and where the canon is planted for the defence of the place.<sup>3</sup>



Removing these words from their alphabetical order allows us to arrange them in a fortified stack, a sort of poem. *Offset from the perimeter of the moat, the chandelier bedecked parapet looms upon the rampart, encircling the bastions that extend into the flanks connected by curtain walls. These, in turn, descend inward toward the parade grounds, beyond the banquettes and the batteries of weapons. Reversing direction, we follow the line of fire, along the vectors of the palisades, where galleries dig in before the glacis that undulate outward and then flatten into an esplanade of no-man's land.* These sentences do not only describe a tower of stone and earthworks, they also compose a tower of words that was once held together by the language of fortresses.

But the coherence of language has been breached. This assault is not only the result of our awkward attempt at writing an ironic poem: the words are simply hard to follow. We also cannot blame ourselves as mere laymen who lack the necessary knowledge of these technical terms. Indeed, so many of these words do sound familiar because they have received new definitions that overwhelm those developed by Vauban. Fortresses and their vocabulary have taken on an ironic character because of the cultural repression of their technical meaning. These terms have been (purposely) forgotten from the mainstream of culture as the buildings have increasingly disappeared from the linear narrative of history. Fortress language appears to have become antique, antiquarian even. Meanwhile, physical fortress buildings no longer belong to strategies of war, nor do they express the enclosure of cities, nor do they figure prominently as protectors of national borders. Certainly, nobody would take on the expense of building a fortress any longer. It is ridiculous to fortify a place with a building when one must defend against drones or cyberattacks, except metaphorically, as in designing a “firewall.” Fortresses are now memorialized as sites of the lost narrative strength of architecture—they remain as historical sites of victory or loss, as relics of former political and strategic representations of power.

The written aspect of fortress architecture lives in the scrapheap of metaphor. The very silliness of a contemporary fortress allows it to contribute to our definition of architectural irony. With its dislocation from culture, the language of fortification—and its corollary architectural forms—have come to interrupt the flow of cultural meaning with archaic meanings. Paul de Man would have called this, after Fichte, parabasis. This is our modern Tower of Babel.

The language of military architecture has an extensive double life: banquette furniture, hanging chandeliers, curtainwall façades, urban boulevards, interior enfilades, Thanksgiving parades, battery power, and printed magazines. These are just some of the terms that have taken on new meanings and

- 4 The language of warfare more generally populates critical discourse. The word “salient,” for example, means a projecting feature of landscape; it is also known as a “bulge” in descriptions of territory. Often, it is a feature within a battlefield that projects into enemy territory. See Hugh M. Cole, *The U.S. Army in World War II: The European Theater of Operations. The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1993). More broadly, see Bruno Latour, “Why Critique Has Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30:2 (Winter 2004), 225.
- 5 Michael Braun, More than 1,300 refugees are stopped at sea or removed from Dry Tortugas National Park, WUSF, The Florida Roundup, January 6, 2023 <https://www.wusf.org/local-state/2023-01-06/more-than-1300-refugees-stopped-at-sea-removed-dry-tortugas-national-park> (accessed December 10, 2024).
- 6 Otto Wagner, *Modern Architecture: A Guidebook for His Students to This Field of Art*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Santa Monica: Getty Center for Arts and Humanities, 1988). See also, Carl Schorske, *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

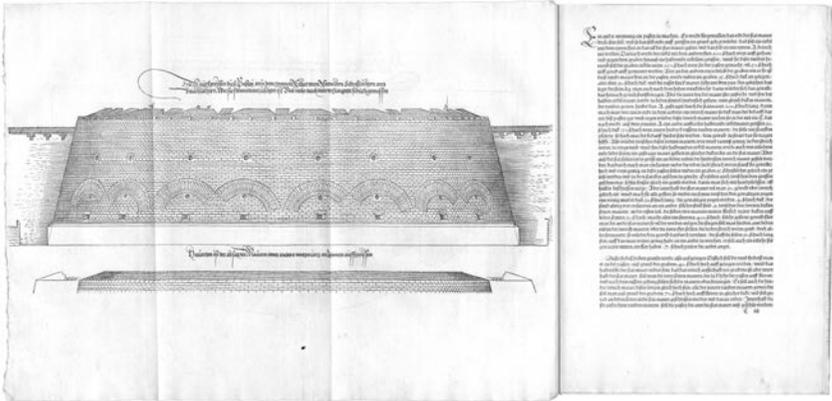
have little to do with warfare. There are still more terms related to fortification that have not yet found their way into common parlance: glacis, caponier, casemate. What might they come to mean?

At their moment of cultural relevance, fortresses borrowed from other genres of architectural language too. We can point to the terms used for domestic aspects of that architecture that helped feed and house the garrison. One wonders why certain fortress-terms also share philological kinship with animal anatomy: how do cuts of meat relate to the bastioned flank? In the service of irony, it is possible to trace these elements of language and their corresponding forms as they reemerge in inconspicuous places, or at inconvenient times. Fortress-irony, if such a thing can even be named, offers a certain comic relief, albeit nerdy and even boring. At the same time, it may also sharpen the critical stakes, as it were—or give another type of salience to architectural rhetoric.<sup>4</sup>

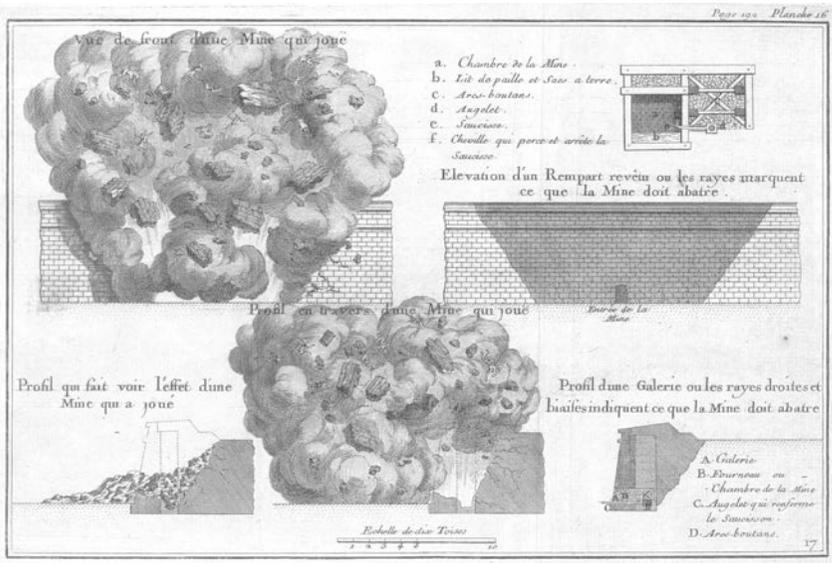
Just as mainstream culture represses the archaic language of military architecture, it also represses the fortresses that linger in cities or under them. Often, we ignore military buildings that populate the countryside, or we look past those that surf the waves in the sea. In 2023, hundreds of refugees from Cuba and Haiti were processed after landing at Dry Tortugas National Park. News coverage of this tragic encounter with the Coast Guard said little of the beautiful architectural landmark Fort Jefferson that occupied the background of the images.<sup>5</sup> This was one of the 42 forts of the so-called “Third System,” built to protect the US coastline after the British invasion that spawned the War of 1812. That monument continues to stand on the western most island of the Florida Keys, as “Guardian of the Gulf.” But there is irony in the fact that such fortress is now a snorkeling and fishing destination overseen by the National Park Service.

Perhaps the greatest repression of military architecture figures strongly in one of the core narratives of architectural modernism in Europe. The erasure of the medieval ramparts around the city of Vienna made space for the Ringstraße at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and literally laid the groundwork for Otto Wagner to theorize a form of a monumental modern metropolis.<sup>6</sup> Even the Viennese architect Adolf Loos, with his distinctive psychoanalytical view of modern life—for Loos, architecture was a tool that enabled repression—was unable to see the newly cleared land as the greatest act of repression: that of a former fortification.

Canons, too, are a medium of irony. In the German language, little distinction is made between the weapons of war and the annals of disciplinary knowledge: both *kanonen* are spelled with a single *n*. Bringing cannons into the canon, Robin Evans described the conundrum faced by early military engineers who sought to describe the projected surfaces of fortresses. The



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7 Robin Evans, "Architectural Projection," *Architecture and Its Image*, eds. Eve Blau and Edward Kaufman (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 18–35.

- 1 Albrecht Dürer, *Ettliche underricht, zu befestigung der Stett, Schloß, und Flecken*, (Gedruckt zu Nürenberg, 1527).
- 2 Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, *Traité de l'attaque et de la défense des places* (La Haye: chez Pierre de Hondt, 1742). In an astonishing drawing, the military engineer Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban figuratively represented the explosion of lines – this can be read as much an aesthetic attack as a descriptive image. What explodes in the drawing is a curtainwall.

form of a defensive fort, he showed, made a direct relationship between the arc of an offensive shot and the projection plane of drawing. In the field, a vector of offence produces a corresponding geometry of defense. On paper, representing that geometric confluence requires a set of reciprocal orthographic conventions. The longevity of these projections—plan, section, elevation—now celebrates five centuries of architectural attention and far outlives their value for fortress design. Evans writes of one early user, the artist Albrecht Dürer, who speculated on the form of a fortress as a truncated cone with the visual aid of a projectile's path [ 1 ]. The convex surface was simultaneously formed by the attack of cannonballs and informed by the impression of battered arches. Evans playfully dwelled on a possible moment of indecision: Dürer needed the wall to map the path of the projectile, and he needed the path to map the wall. We will never know which one came first.<sup>7</sup> His projections of a fortress were therefore doubled: they were self-referential to the process of projection itself. Self-reference, according to de Man, is a fundamental part of the ironic trope as it posits the “I”—the self—and simultaneously posits its destruction. In this case, the “I” of the fort is its geometrical construction and the “not-I” is its destruction under cannon fire. Perhaps this irony is captured in Vauban's depiction of a fortification caught in a cloud of linework flak [ 2 ]. Flak itself is an abbreviation of a compounded German word coined during World War II. The acronym stands for the *Flieger-abwehr-kanonen*, or the flying defense cannons, that produced clouds of shrapnel in the skies.

During this time of heightened emotions brought about by wars, military terms might be the last object we might suspect to remind us of irony. There is nothing ironic about war, as it is experienced. Yet we do find it disturbingly present in the modern language of our discipline. So, much like a fortress under cannon fire, we too are willing to catch some flak for the simple observation that the fortress was once an architectural form that protected; and its meaning was culturally clear. Now, it is a form that destroys form. It is ironic.



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# **Who Laughs Last?**

## **The Architecture of Entertainment as a Paradigm of Serious Irony from Cedric Price to the Present Day**

**Cesira Sissi Roselli**

- 1 Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, "Irony as a Controlled Element, the Truth of Irony," in *The Concept of Irony with continual reference to Socrates. Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, eds. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 327.
- 2 Editorial board. "Lo scherzo telefonico a Meloni e la nota del governo." *Il Sole 24 ore*, November 1, 2023. Consulted on February 14, 2024.

“Anyone who does not understand irony at all [...] does not know the refreshment and strengthening that comes with undressing when the air gets too hot and heavy and diving into the sea of irony, not in order to stay there, of course, but in order to come out healthy, happy, and buoyant and to dress again”<sup>1</sup>.

On September 18<sup>th</sup> 2023 Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni received a phone call by the African Union Commission’s President.

On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, news was leaked that the phone call was actually a prank call carried out by the Russian comedy duo Vovan & Lexus. In fact, during the conversation, no discrepancies emerged compared to the public positions of the government on the issues tendentiously raised by the Russian interlocutors.<sup>2</sup>

The simplicity of a prank call escalates into an international diplomatic incident. This episode becomes emblematic as it demonstrates (in addition to the systemic fragility of the filters within the Italian Prime Minister’s Diplomatic Counselor’s Office) how irony is employed to address extremely serious issues, such as, in this specific case, the war in Ukraine and illegal immigration from North Africa.

This episode transcends the mere news event and leads to a reconsideration of the current status of irony. If, on one hand, political correctness seems to have flattened the debate, and on the other hand, political incorrectness challenges the achievements of civil living, can irony still be a useful tool to interpret the present and, more specifically, the current state of the architectural project?

Irony is the fruit of a sinuous, “malicious” intelligence: it’s the cunning of Ulysses, the Labyrinth of Daedalus. It’s one of those interactive strategy devices that reverse the signs of a force: weakness, through intelligence understood as *mètis*, becomes a strength, swift and polymorphic. Here arises the ironic aspect of the *dolos*, the surprise for the discovered trick, the subtle play with the truth. Irony works by leveraging the opponent’s imagination, the ambiguities of interpretation, and anticipating the gaze of others, articulating a dialogue in search of systematic agreements, contracts, armistices, dissonances, or conflictual voids, where argumentation means saving violence, which is not eliminated but rather internalized and used as a stimulus.

This paper opens with a news story from Italy to draw attention to how irony, even against our will, continues to permeate everyday life and the spaces in which we live.

The contribution is structured around reflections that emerged from the monographic issue of the *Ottagono* magazine in 1991, dedicated to architecture and entertainment. It develops across three interpretations of ‘fun’ in

- 3 Giulio Giorello, *La danza della parola. L'ironia come arma civile per combattere schemi e dogmatismi* (Milano: Mondadori, 2019), 53.  
Translated by Michele Bazzoli.

- 4 Marco De Michelis, "Architecture and entertainment," *Ottagono* 98 (1991): 4.

relation to architectural design: *fun as an architecture of deviation, fun as a world within the world, and fun as the fragmentation of the Vitruvian triad.*

The word “fun” is placed in relation to irony, understanding “fun” as a potential application of the ironic approach in architecture. In the projects presented below, the idea of “fun” opens irony up to a more collective dimension: the ironic perspective of the individual designer extends into the collective sphere, transforms ways of living, and questions consolidated habits of interpreting shared spaces.

### **Irony, architecture, and entertainment starting from *Ottogono***

Irony belongs to the subjective realm of dialectical exchange, leaving objectivity to be what survives objections: it empties the conventional code and introduces one or more variations on a codified subject.

Irony’s gears lead to disconnecting shared mechanisms from the usual support of language to apply them in new yet coherent semantic universes.

As Giulio Giorello writes: “Irony, in order to work, needs a polarity, in the sense that someone must be ironic about something else, so there must be an object of irony and an audience for the irony, and this audience must be intelligent enough to perhaps be simultaneously the object of the irony: this, I believe, is a condition for understanding more about the world in which we live.”<sup>3</sup>

Such a condition repeats cyclically throughout history. To examine how this is reflected in the field of architectural design, some works by Cedric Price are taken as case studies in relation to a series of projects, starting from issue 98 in 1991 of *Ottogono* magazine, of which this contribution quotes the text on its cover, “Who laughs last?”

In the editorial “Architecture and entertainment”, Marco De Michelis writes regarding the “new towns” designed in the United States for Disney: “Charles Eames seems to have been the first among architect-designers to realise that this contrivance offered an almost ideal way of reproducing qualities commonly attributed to cities, which the cities themselves are in actual fact materially incapable of creating.”<sup>4</sup>

From here, architecture comes into play as the creator of alternative worlds, where desires of leisure and will for disorientation take shape into projects fueled by ironic visions towards the same reality that tries to exclude these dimensions from daily life. From this crack in the granite wall of efficiency at all costs, emerge architectural projects that create pockets of resistance to a *modus vivendi* that seeks to foresee and optimise everything. It’s the paradox of living in a present where everything seems to be entertainment, and where yet nothing really is. On the contrary, to make



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1 Photographic project by Sissi Cesira Roselli, Brescia, Italy, 2024. Artwork: BrixiaDue by Andreas Angelidakis.

- 5 "Entertainment at present strains against all temporal and functional limitations. It is no longer "episodic," but is instead becoming *chronic*. It no longer affects only free time, but *time itself*." Byung-Chul Han, *Good Entertainment. A deconstruction of the Western passion narrative* (Boston, MIT Press, 2019), 107.

- 6 The Fun Palace Project has been famously and extensively discussed in academic circles. This contribution focuses exclusively on the notion of 'fun' in relation to the architecture introduced by Cedric Price.

For a comprehensive and deep discussion of the architecture of the Fun Palace, refer to: Samantha Hardingham, *Cedric Price Opera* (London: Wiley-Academy, 2003); Samantha Hardingham, *Cedric Price Works 1952-2003* (London/Montreal: AA/CCA, 2017); Stanley Mathews, "The Fun Palace as Virtual Architecture. Cedric Price and the Practises of Indeterminacy", *Journal of Architectural Education* III (2006): 39-48; Stanley Mathews, *From Agit-Prop to Free Space. The Architecture of Cedric Price* (London: Black Dog, 2007); Stanley Mathews, Pier Vittorio Aureli, *Potteries Thinkbelt & Fun Palace* (Paris: B2, 2016).

attractive, easy, and quick what by nature requires effort, concentration, and slowness (information, education, culture), necessitates an endeavour that has nothing to do with the lightness being promoted. In these spaces generated by such an exhausting labor we witness the contradiction: pure entertainment is replaced by its slavish commitment to be entertaining and to be entertained.<sup>5</sup>

Considering Price as one of those authors capable of balancing the rigour of technological tension and the determined openness of abstraction, today the need to revisit Price's studies is linked to the desire to reconsider the project of entertainment as the construction of alternative imaginaries, in a prolific exchange between technical sciences and theoretical visions. Experiences such as those developed by Price once again become central issues in the present, where the separation of the various levels of the design process has established an autonomy of the disciplines, causing their progressive and reciprocal emptying.

The detachment between the theory of architecture and its unfolding within reality has become increasingly evident and divergent in recent decades. While until Postmodernism, technological research and architectural imagination would easily exchange their terms in spatial solutions that saw interdisciplinarity not as an obstacle but as an opportunity, today the abrupt metamorphoses of the architectural project's realisation processes seem to leave no room for digestion, verbalisation, and irony. The clash of the theory seems to cool down until becoming a vague shadow, often a construct retroactively placed around a project, or perhaps simply a premise for other professions with different names.

Theories should help us remember the questions that led to complex answers and should be inseparable from operativity, as they are projects in themselves. Architecture is a language, and as such, its form is also its content. The architectural project is the manifestation of a thought, and practice is a thought enacted. Architectural thinking is inseparable from both the tangible reality and the intangible dimension, as it always pertains to the modification of space, which is composed of both concreteness and intangibility, bodies and relationships.

We trace the steps of *Ottagono*, which, with Cedric Price's Fun Palace,<sup>6</sup> begins a series featuring key projects that embody the notion of *fun*, expressed through a series of experiences sharing the same ironical approach, meant as an attitude towards reality that is characterized by analytical awareness and an irreverent consciousness which often germinate in times of crisis and change.

The projects presented in the pages of *Ottagono* are: The Fun Palace by Cedric Price (1961); The Entertainment Center for Leicester Square





7 Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, III.

8 Byung-Chul Han, *op. cit.*, 37-38.

(Michael Webb, 1962); the Entertainment Tower for Montreal (Peter Cook, 1963); the temporary theatre by Pietro Derossi for the XIV Triennale di Milano (1968). Here we can add to this list three more projects in order to outline an overview of the theme which may last up to the present day: The Bang Bang Club (Ugo La Pietra, Milano, 1967), the project for Ministry of Sound (OMA, London 2015) and Andreas Angelidakis installation at the Brescia Due metro stop in Brescia (Italy, 2023).

To define what are the common traits of these projects, from an architectural and political point of view, we can extrapolate three architectural declinations of the adjective *fun*, coined by Cedric Price's Fun Palace, and which can be traced back to the other mentioned projects. First declination: *fun* as the *architecture of deviation*, that is a project of time-space dislocation through the use of materials, colours, and compositive solutions. Second declination: *fun* as *a world within the world*, through the use of different scales within the same project, and the simultaneity of micro- and macroscopic. Third declination: *fun* as *the fragmentation of the Vitruvian triad* of: *firmitas, utilitas, venustas*.<sup>7</sup>

The Architecture of entertainment, in each of the abovementioned projects, invites the viewers to take on a critical stand regarding the time and the space they inhabit: in this sense, all these projects are also political projects.

### 1. *Fun as Architecture of deviation*

"Luxury, for Adorno, is the expression of unadulterated joy. It is also constitutive of art. Life thence finds fulfilment in neither practicality nor instrumental reason. Instead, true joy springs from excess, exuberance, sumptuousness, the senseless, the luxation of the necessary. The surplus or superfluous is what frees life from all compulsion. The absence of compulsion or care is moreover an element of entertainment, even of *utopia*, and is the substance of 'pure amusement'. This is a form of luxury, a luxation of work and necessity, that brings it close to art: "Amusement, free of all restraint, would be not only the opposite of art but its complementary extreme."<sup>8</sup>

Referring back to Adorno's definition of luxury, as quoted by Byung-Chul Han, the concept of *Fun as Architecture of deviation* is posited here. Deviation is the discovery of an alternative path, of non-obvious design methodologies. Analogous to the concept of luxury in this sense, fun is also "a luxation of work and necessity", and therefore a voice of freedom that resonates clearly in the works mentioned below.

In Price's design approach, the architectural artefact is not conceived to be confined within its "wall-bound" finiteness, but to extend beyond its







functional vocation and trigger the creation of new physical and social landscapes. Architectural objects deviate from their perimeter, expand and become *environmental*, based on Von Uexküll's notion of *environment*,<sup>9</sup> Where a portion of territory is activated by certain stimuli that define the subject's environment and the subject itself. Architectures, as environmental objects, act upon reality like these stimuli, igniting a reaction in an "unknown and invisible world" and reconfiguring it into an environment.

Price's architectures expand and re-modulate the space, in an operation similar to that proposed by Casetti for *media*: "Media are far more than simple presences in a space: they are components that *innervate* the territory. [...] To innervate means to provide an individual or collective body with new organs that were previously external to it."<sup>10</sup> It's not a coincidence that Price often employs media devices, emphasising the public dimension inherent in his projects aimed at collectivity, where architecture draws new distribution processes and ways of perceiving the city, blurring the boundaries between interior and exterior, public and private, real and virtual, everlasting and ephemeral.

The ironical mechanism of architecture is to be understood as one of the possible readings of reality, an eventual *mode d'emploi* for the present, identifying in its essence a stingy tangency with that which is the *Formless*. As indeed "nothing in and of itself, the formless has only an operational existence: it is a performative, like obscene words, the violence of which derives less from semantics than from the *very act* of their delivery. The formless is an operation."<sup>11</sup> Irony could thus be understood as one of the deviant ways that allow ideas to survive the impact. With reality, and to actuate its universal intentions without experiencing its contingencies.

### The irony of anticipatory architecture

David Kolb highlights how architecture is less "well-equipped" than all other arts to really be ironic.<sup>12</sup> What Kolb seems to reproach irony for is precisely its tendency to often slip into moralism. In yielding to the temptation to pass judgments, irony loses sight of one of the essential conditions for its existence: the literal meaning it employs must necessarily not be ironic, because only the deduced meaning can be ironic. The author emphasizes how romantic irony arises from the disparity between the boundlessness of feeling and the limitations of the language that must translate those feelings, that is, from the frustration of having to use finite tools to express the infinite. On this trace of the infinite, of the indeterminate, the principle of irony is triggered, which attempts not to fill this void but to make it visible and expressible. According to Kolb, another dimension is added in the

- 13 "At three o'clock every afternoon, I get very tired. I am no use in the office, so I go to this wonderful distorter of time and place called the British Museum. It distorts the climate, because the building has a roof over it; it distorts my laziness, because I do not have to go to Egypt to see the pyramids; and it distorts time, because I can see someone wearing an Elizabethan dress. This automatic distortion, whether of time or of place, when you visit a museum is a good thing. If you visit the same museum on two consecutive wet days, it will be different on both occasions". Cedric Price in Hans Ulrich Obrist, *...dontstop-dontstopdontstopdontstop* (Milano: Postmedia Books, 2010), 72.

postmodern period: the idea of decay inherent in every ideal. Irony, therefore, deconstructs romantic theories and introduces the Platonic gap between reality and its appearance. For this reason, deconstructivist thought, which emphasizes the ineffable, finds in irony one of its most distinctive features, as it does not establish itself in the language among fixed meanings but in the contrast between the attempt to fix a meaning and the impossibility of doing so. Therefore, the profound value that irony can have is to make us aware of our fragility. In doing so, the designer should not force thought or space into rigid and unchangeable forms; this is the danger identified by Cedric Price: the context will change quickly, and the buildings will outlive their irony, losing all meaning.

A response to this issue can be found in Price's notion of "anticipatory architecture," where the author designs his works by planning both their beginning and their natural and necessary end. According to Price, the life of a building is so intertwined with the society for which it is built that as one changes, so does the other; as one ends, so does the other, and so the "ironic" relationship, or simply the relationship of meaning, remains constant, where constant does not mean unchanging, but responsive to the reciprocal fluctuations of meaning. Indeed, precisely to avoid this risk – that the future inherits structures from the present that are now meaningless and useless – architecture must learn to think of itself within a limited temporal duration.

The design process can last a few minutes or a few centuries, what matters is to not fossilise in a given moment trying to quickly tackle issues of contingency, in an honest and continuous effort to question the real utility of an architecture.

Cedric Price understands that architecture is always too slow in responding to the spinning mutations of the city, and therefore must project itself into the future, striving to integrate with this ongoing metamorphosis while knowing how to adapt in turn. Consequently, "anticipatory architecture" takes time, rather than space, as its primary subject – much like irony – in order to come to terms with the planning of its own obsolescence.

Time is always the central dimension around which the design process revolves: according to Price, one of the key strengths of architecture lies in its function as a large time-distorting machine.<sup>13</sup>

An example of this is the proposal presented by the author in 1994 for the international reconversion competition of the Bankside Power Station, now the Tate Modern Gallery. Cedric Price presented a sketch and a two-page text titled "Statement on the Role of Cultural Centres in the Twenty-First Century," related to the development of the South Bank project. The proposal was to install a glass dome on top of the former power station,



transforming the building into a museum item for the city, ready to move along the riverbanks.

With this multifaceted interpretation of the competition announcement, Price precisely echoes the way museums are experienced in the English capital, as authentic public spaces – informal in their usage and open in the free structures offered to visitors like large covered squares. Price takes this vision to the extreme: the exhibition leaves the museum, becoming a fully public event, exposed to the eyes of the citizens, and finds its place in the city, which is simply a slightly larger museum.

All the senses through which the exhibition space is perceived are considered in the design, from the sound of the museum doors opening to the different speeds at which visitors move through it, and even to how one can internalize an intimate experience of art in such a vast environment.

### **Different ways of dealing with History**

This conception of reality as something that is already museumified highlights the commentary on reality itself, which, through interpretation, makes it interesting. This changes the relationship one has with history, making it indeed more fluid: heritage becomes new material for design in the form of sections, fragments, and cut-outs.

In line with such design attitudes, the projects presented in the pages of *Ottogono*, which illustratively detail their plans and sections, include, among others, the Entertainment Center for Leicester Square by Michael Webb (1962), the Entertainment Tower for Montreal by Peter Cook (1963), and Pietro Derossi's design for the theatre in the Italian Pavilion of the XIV Triennale di Milano (1968).

Michael Webb's Entertainment Center for Leicester Square (also eloquently known as Sin Centre) presents itself as a tower device where the support elements appear stripped and covered in metallic scales, transforming the whole architecture into a large dancing object. The two parts that compose the project spin around the two large circulation systems, the vertical and the horizontal one. As a matter of fact, void of any commercial or entertaining aim, the idea of *fun* lies precisely in the creation of the project itself.

Following the same impulse towards verticality, Peter Cook's Entertainment Tower for Montreal is structured. The tower accommodates a variety of functions condensed into an interstellar architecture, engaging with the dream of imminent lunar landings and desired celestial colonization. Auditoriums, theatres, hotels, restaurants, a dancing area, art galleries, and an

- 14 "Actors, dancers, tightrope walkers, and the audience itself were to use the available equipment as a neutral tool of their freedom, responding to the invitation to ascribe meaning to the environment through their engagement. The various proposals for use would renew the "Place" by suggesting a formal arrangement, even without assigning a definitive meaning to the space (form as monument), but highlighting a possible sense among many." Pietro Derossi, *Per un'architettura narrativa. Architettura e progetti 1959-2000* (Milano: Skira 2000), 56. Translated by Michele Bazzoli.
- 15 Pietro Derossi, "Radical Recall", *Ottagono* 98 (1991): 90.
- 16 The inscription is found on a collage dated between 1976 and 1979, created by Cedric Price in relation to the Generator project, preserved in the archives of the CCA in Montreal.

observatory coexist within a stark design built with geodesic domes and movable elements.

A mesh tower also appears miniaturized in Pietro Derossi's theatre for the XIV Triennale di Milano (1968). The tower, on which spotlights and loudspeakers are attached, is one of the mobile devices that compose the project, which boasts: a pulpit with a convex mirror, a projection booth, movable partitions for projections and sound isolation, a semisphere in polyurethane and moquette, platforms called "pluripuffs", inclined planes, and semi-rollers. These devices are aimed at structuring space in an adaptable manner; each object does not have a singular use but serves a momentary necessity.<sup>14</sup> Thanks to its versatility, during the occupation of the XIV Triennale, this place became the perfect theatre for the lit political debate, as Derossi writes: "The construction of the magic and the unreal to break through the practical-inert world that oppresses us may become the road to follow in the search for freedom."<sup>15</sup>

## 2. *Fun as A world within the world*

Projects of varying scales, commissions, and materials populate the Price archive, ranging from a recipe for cooking a nicely crunchy bacon to a project for the Port of Hamburg. Measuring the world is one of the recurring themes in his writings: measurement is what allows us to represent reality in a narratable way, provides the necessary data to alter it, and helps us understand the relationships between the elements of a project.

The issue of measurement is distinctly different from that of scale. In fact, regarding the Generator project, Cedric Price wrote: "THE SYMBOL: any size, only one shape."<sup>16</sup> Architecture is no longer a matter of scale but rather of shape, and how its meaning changes with alterations in its measurement. The overturning of these dimensions creates an *impasse*, encapsulating in a gesture the universal and all-encompassing power of a symbol that is inherently scale-less.

Connecting the discussion on architectural drawing with that of scale, it's interesting to note how Cedric Price used a stamp featuring the outline, both in plan and elevation, of a *red London bus* as a unit of measure. He would apply this stamp to the drawings he presented to his clients. This was immediately useful for easily communicating, even to those unfamiliar with technical drawings, the proportions of the project. The London bus used as a unit of measure is particularly evident in *Serre I* (1986) and *Serre II* (developed later between 1988 and 1990), a project for two greenhouses commissioned for Parc de la Villette in Paris, interpreted by Price as two secret gardens within the large public park designed by competition winner Bernard

- 17 From a formal perspective, the references are the Palm House at Kew Gardens and a house by Howard Gilman in White Oak, Florida, captured in a Polaroid taken and archived by Price himself. (Samantha Hardingham, *Cedric Price Works 1952-2003* (London, Montreal: AA/CCA), 677.

Tschumi in 1983. In the case of Serre I and II as well, the concept that a single form could be decisive when repeated at different scales is revisited, and the stamp of the red bus aids in understanding the relationships between the parts. The presentation of the project always features very precise technical indications regarding the tubular structures that would compose the two large transparent tunnels of the glass greenhouses. Simultaneously, there are almost dreamlike signs that outline their ineffable yet equally important characteristics: the colours, the sound of water, the variations in plant textures, and the scent of roses. Since roses were the main guests of these greenhouses – commissioned by Derly, a perfume company – they feature prominently in Price's notes as large as architectures.

The structures have an elliptical section, defined through a series of early digital developments aimed at maximizing internal volume and natural light for optimal plant growth.<sup>17</sup> This project also echoes, as in the Fun Palace project, the theme of a miniature universe, a world within a world, an architectural bubble protecting a small wonder.

No longer protecting a natural microcosm, but a vivarium of architectural experimentations, the parallel universe of clubbing in the late Sixties draws from a compositional language analogous to that of Cedric Price in terms of graphic signs and structural devices, which is seen in the use of mesh beams the homage to the architecture of transformability.

## The microworlds of nightclubs

Nightclubs constitute an island of identity in the city's homogenising magma; they are spaces of immersion in unease. Particularly in Italy, projects such as the Piper in Rome (Francesco and Giancarlo Capolei, Manlio Cavalli, 1965), the one in Turin (Pietro Derossi, Giorgio Ceretti, Riccardo Rosso, 1966), and Mach 2 (Superstudio, Florence, 1967) transform night into the new day of experimental architecture. These are places where the relationship between body and space is examined, denied, and condemned. Music becomes a catalyst for all the arts. Over the following decades, the space of club culture evolved alongside changing music trends, to which the design must adapt.

Club architecture faces the challenge of designing the enchantment of a suspended space, where the recipe for success follows mysterious rules and is difficult to replicate elsewhere. Making a desire tangible is the starting point of these projects, which, like any sacred ritual, successful party, or indomitable bacchanal, is made of nothing becoming the engine of everything: architecture has the difficult task of channelling this energy without imposing hierarchies, allowing it to explode in its yearning for freedom. In

- 18 Project realized with P. Rizzato and A. Jacober. Angela Rui (edited by), *Ugo La Pietra. Disequilibrating Design* (Mantova: Corraini, 2014), 78-79.

this sense, nightclubs become true temples of *fun*, where entertainment captures the freshest cultural trends and makes them enjoyable for an audience that absorbs their disruptive impact almost by osmosis. Entertainment becomes culture, and culture becomes commerce: the twists of irony are often ruthless.

In 1969, Ugo La Pietra designed the Bang Bang nightclub and the Altrecoese boutique<sup>18</sup> in Milan. The boutique is located at street level, while the nightclub is situated in the building's basement. Like two sides of the same coin, these two realities coexist ironically, each mirroring the other: music and fashion, art and architecture, commerce and entertainment. Day and night blend together in a simultaneous existence that sees both the boutique and the nightclub open at the same time. Both spaces are neutral and are activated by the visitors who, through a series of controls, can lower transparent methacrylate cylinders from the ceiling. These cylinders, serving as display cases for extremely valuable or dangerous items, contain merchandise for sale. A slightly larger cylinder houses the inclined elevator that connects the commercial area of the shop with the night-time area of the club, allowing nightlife memories to resurface in the daylight.

### **3. *Fun as The fragmentation of the Vitruvian triad***

In the work of Cedric Price, we witness a questioning of the dialectical pairs on which architecture has always relied: inside/outside, open/closed, smooth/striped, static/dynamic.

Without mass, without surface, architecture renounces everything that used to characterize it: it empties itself of a precise function in order to become pluri-adaptable, it takes off its status of the institutional monument to become a relational device, it strips itself of material consistency to be reabsorbed by the horizon, vanishing once again in nature, but always thanks to the highest artifice of technique.

Therefore, the malleability of irony requires the interlocutor to overturn common and literal meanings to be understood. In its elusive contours, irony can embody a thought that anticipates the future.

Within its capacity to multiply meanings, irony can highlight or smooth out, reveal the unspeakable through a new code, or create new alphabets for submerged worlds. However, in this reversal of scenarios, it can also lead to exclusion. Irony carries the risk of ambiguity and, consequently, the danger of being misunderstood or not understood at all. It leaves the receiver with the final opportunity: the possibility of grasping or missing the profound meaning of the message. For those who practice irony, this poses the risk of ending up on the margins of decision-making, in the deserted and

- 19 "Everything is fable and everything is true... But from excessive imagining, we always lament the deception: and this deception appears to us either comic or tragic according to our degree of involvement" writes Pirandello in *On Humor*. Translated by Michele Bazzoli.

On the other hand, Vladimir Jankélévitch issues a warning right in the opening pages of his text *Irony*: Socrates, the master of irony, drank the hemlock.

- 20 To date, the project has not been realized, and the architects have stated on their social media: "Apparently we won the competition (we were told so) but then surprisingly the project was cancelled." Source: Amy Frearson, "OMA reveals cancelled design for Ministry Of Sound nightclub with moving walls". Dezeen. January 9, 2017.

- 21 In the same diagrams by OMA, the project is defined as "a desire making machine able to permanently act, change, adapt time and space..." Source: OMA, "Ministry of sound II". OMA. 2015.

- 22 Carlo Antonelli, Fabio De Luca, *Discoinferno. Storia del ballo in Italia 1946-2006*, (Milano: Isbn Edizioni, 2006), 135. Translated by Michele Bazzoli.

- 23 Project "Subbrixia", the public permanent contemporary art collection at the 17 metro stations in Brescia. Curated by Luca Lo Pinto and powered by Fondation CAB.

uncontested realm of those who are excluded or who exclude themselves from the game.<sup>19</sup>

Ideally continuing the review presented by the magazine *Ottagono*, we insert in this section the project for the Ministry of Sound II (OMA, London 2015) and the installation by Andreas Angelidakis at the Brescia Due underground station (Brescia 2023).

Studio OMA won a competition in 2015 to redesign the Ministry of Sound in the Elephant and Castle neighbourhood of London.<sup>20</sup> From the ashes of the iconic nightclub, the studio developed a proposal which both in its intentions and in its design solutions, recalls the matrix of the Fun Palace.

Like the Fun Palace, OMA's architecture for Ministry of Sound II is a dynamic container of experiences, capable of adapting not only its internal layout to accommodate various functions but also its external form. The project reimagines its silhouette according to its programming, altering its volume to expand or compress in response to the activities inside. The recurring large lattice beams that slide floors between them like giant drawers recall the tubular structures envisioned by Cedric Price for the Fun Palace. Indeed, as evidenced by the project presentation, it explicitly adopts the Fun Palace concept as a desire machine intended for a wide range of activities.<sup>21</sup>

As with every subculture, its end is defined as soon as it begins to be decrypted, and perhaps this is the case today for club culture, which passes through the meshes of "the constant fragmentation of a leisure offer that encompasses everything and aggregates nothing."<sup>22</sup> To this increasingly fragmented offer corresponds an increasingly individualised use of the entertainment space, which, from museums, nightclubs, theatres, and multifunctional centres, moves centrifugally to focus on the sofa in our homes. From there, through our devices, we access claustrophobic cultural, musical, and artistic offerings, increasingly tailored to what we already know and increasingly restrictive to the niche to which we belong. Thus, a moment of unusual lightness surprises us when we are forced to go out, move, and remember that our bodies live and move in a shared physical space.

In continuity with what was already inaugurated by Postmodernism regarding the shift in the meaning of an object that translates based on its measurements in space, Andreas Angelidakis's project for the "BrixiaDue"<sup>23</sup> metro station is an example of out-of-scale that ironically brings the theme of archaeology into the ineffability of the present. Here the buttresses of the station are dressed as cyclopean Doric columns. The reversal of the classical structural element unleashes the sense of vertigo at the base of the ironic approach: to show, through an operation of reversal, an unprecedented reading of reality. In this specific case, the ironic language is also used for a reflection on the times of architecture, triggering a short circuit between

- 24 Emmanuel Petit talks about *Post-ironic city* in regard to the projects presented in 2013 for the Grand Paris. Emmanuel Petit, "Project for the Post-ironic City," *Log 27* (2013): 11–20.

the archaeological find and the technological solution. The load-bearing element becomes a contemporary ruin and tells of the amazement of finding oneself in an unsuspected elsewhere. The forked columns unleash an ironic disturbance of Vidlerian memory, accentuated by the materials used: the soft columns in rock wool and PVC give the final slap to the rigidity of the Vitruvian triad, transforming the marble coldness of classicism into the uncertain softness of contemporaneity suspended in mid-air.

Episodes such as that of Angelidakis bring the architectural language, hybridised with that of contemporary art, outside of its conventional spaces. A slice of entertainment escapes the logic that wants to package it and falls onto the tracks of everyday life, bringing us back to discover a moment of irony that awaits us not in a museum or a club, but at a provincial subway stop.

If entertainment risks to be captured in the algorithms, and the fun frays in the design of utopic architectures, is it then possible to still be ironic today?

Is irony in architecture perhaps a luxury that we can't afford anymore, or is it a way to see reality, to interpret the world from a non-schematic point of view, free of preconceptions?

Irony in architecture is an awareness, a distrust of what until recently had been carried forward with blind faith: in the distance between the subject and the object, it repositions the author in relation to his work and the work in relation to its time. In relation to irony, architecture is called to question its own monumentality, and the architect his own authorship, relaunching a reflection on the meanings with which these terms are charged.

Irony is generated from a lack of faith and pushes therefore towards research, it fears immobility, it is heretical but not discouraged by the possibility that the answers can be found elsewhere and that the only way to find them is to question the given data, the fixed points. In this sense, it can still be a way of reading our time.

In the feared *Post-ironic city*,<sup>24</sup> obsessed by ecological rigour, where "the human delirium" has been flattened by sustainable efficiency, irony seems lost: it's the tragedy of dispensable architecture. Baudrillard writes: "Indeed, this is the only genuine function of the intellect: to embrace contradictions, to exercise irony, to take the opposite tack, to exploit rifts and reversibility – even to fly in the face of the lawful and the factual. If the intellectuals of today seem to have run out of things to say, this is because they have failed to assume this ironic function, confining themselves within the limits of their moral, political or philosophical consciousness despite the fact that the rules have changed, that all irony, all radical criticism now

- 26 The term *occasione* here should be understood according to Jankélévitch's definition, namely as an opportunity for improvement that manifests in a state of grace: "not an unexpected stroke of luck that appears on its own, but a guided chance put at the service of our freedom." Jankélévitch Vladimir, *Il non-so-che e il quasi niente* (Genova: Marietti, 1987), 83. Translated by Michele Bazzoli.
- 25 Baudrillard writes about irony in relation to the concept of *Witz* events, that is, those events that occur in a state of "overfusion" and especially in an unpredictable manner in our era. In this chapter, Baudrillard argues for the necessity of "betting" on these fatal events – such as computer viruses – that disrupt the core of the system and overturn the certainty of order, numbers, and the inexorable. (Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (New York/London: Verso, 1993), 39.
- 27 The reference is part of a discussion featuring Odysseus at the moment of his return to Ithaca and his preparation for revenge against the suitors. *Ibid.*, 125.

belongs exclusively to the haphazard, the viral, the catastrophic – to accidental or system-led reversals. Such are the new rules of the game – such is the new principle of uncertainty that now holds sway over all. The operation of this principle is a source of intense intellectual satisfaction (no doubt even of *spiritual* satisfaction).”<sup>25</sup>

Evanescence of language requires a continuous readaptation of the terms of thinking in order for this to be comprehensible in the passage from one subject to another. As seen, the ambiguity of irony amplifies this already complex dynamic, and for this reason it is often experienced with scepticism: he who knows how to smile can be a danger – he keeps something diabolic inside which can destabilize the order of things.

Therefore, one of the tasks of the projective irony can be that of helping to become aware of an occasion<sup>26</sup> and of its uniqueness, improbability and irreversibility. And this, as Jankélévitch remarks, is because irony, unlike humour, is a directed tactic. Humour is vagabond, wandering, while irony has “security and rootedness”. In essence, an intention to want to change things, even if sometimes veiled, is present in irony and is missing in humour, which is content to smile about it, which “does not hide swords in the folds of its tunic.”<sup>27</sup> In light of this, it can be said that irony includes a strategy in its approach and that this strategy can manifest itself in architecture through objects capable of profoundly modifying a given environment, initiating relationships that were previously unexplored, bearers, beyond their construction, demolition, and reconstruction, of new modes of political thought for the project.



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# After / Image

**Sam Jacob**



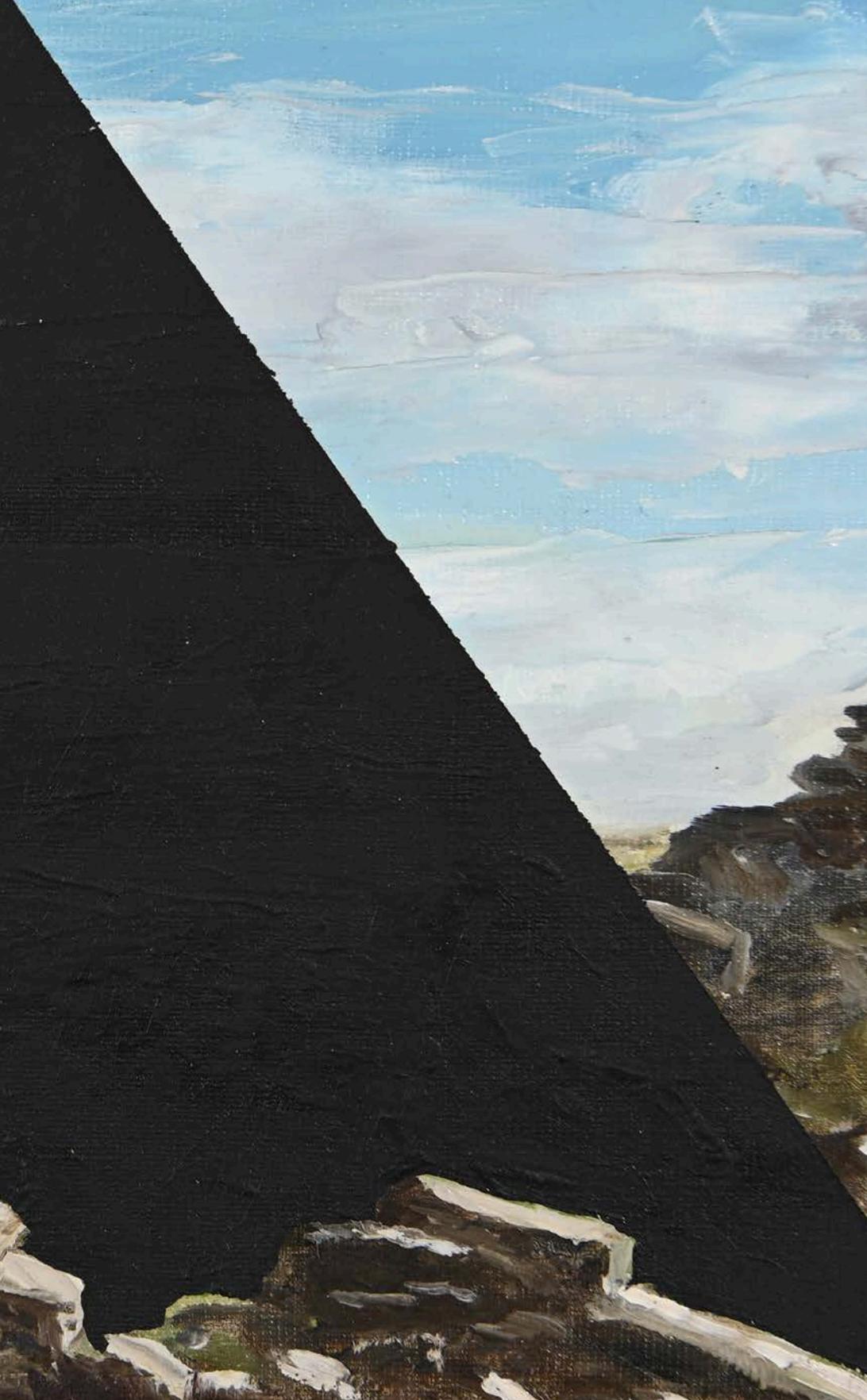






LEAVERTON















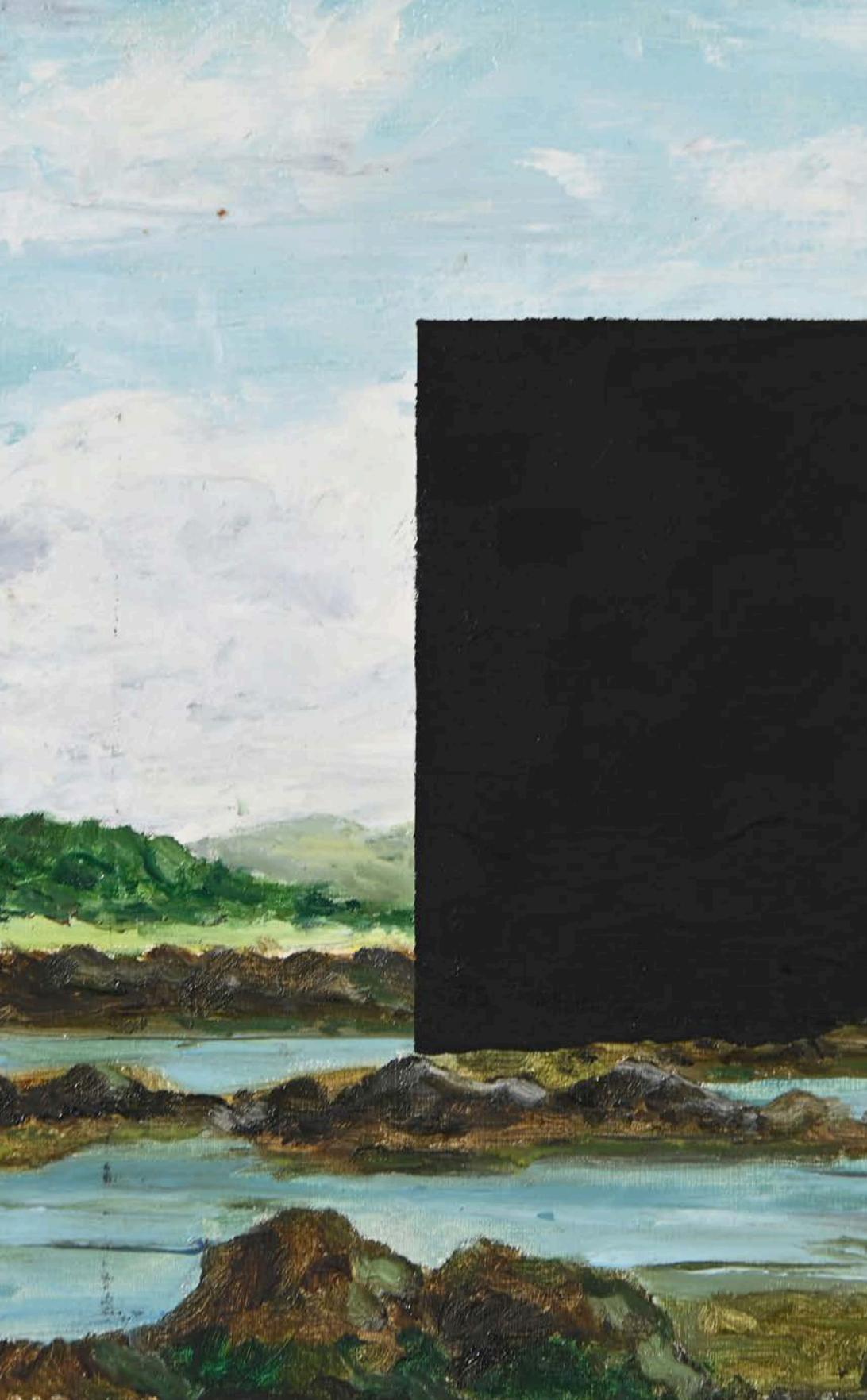


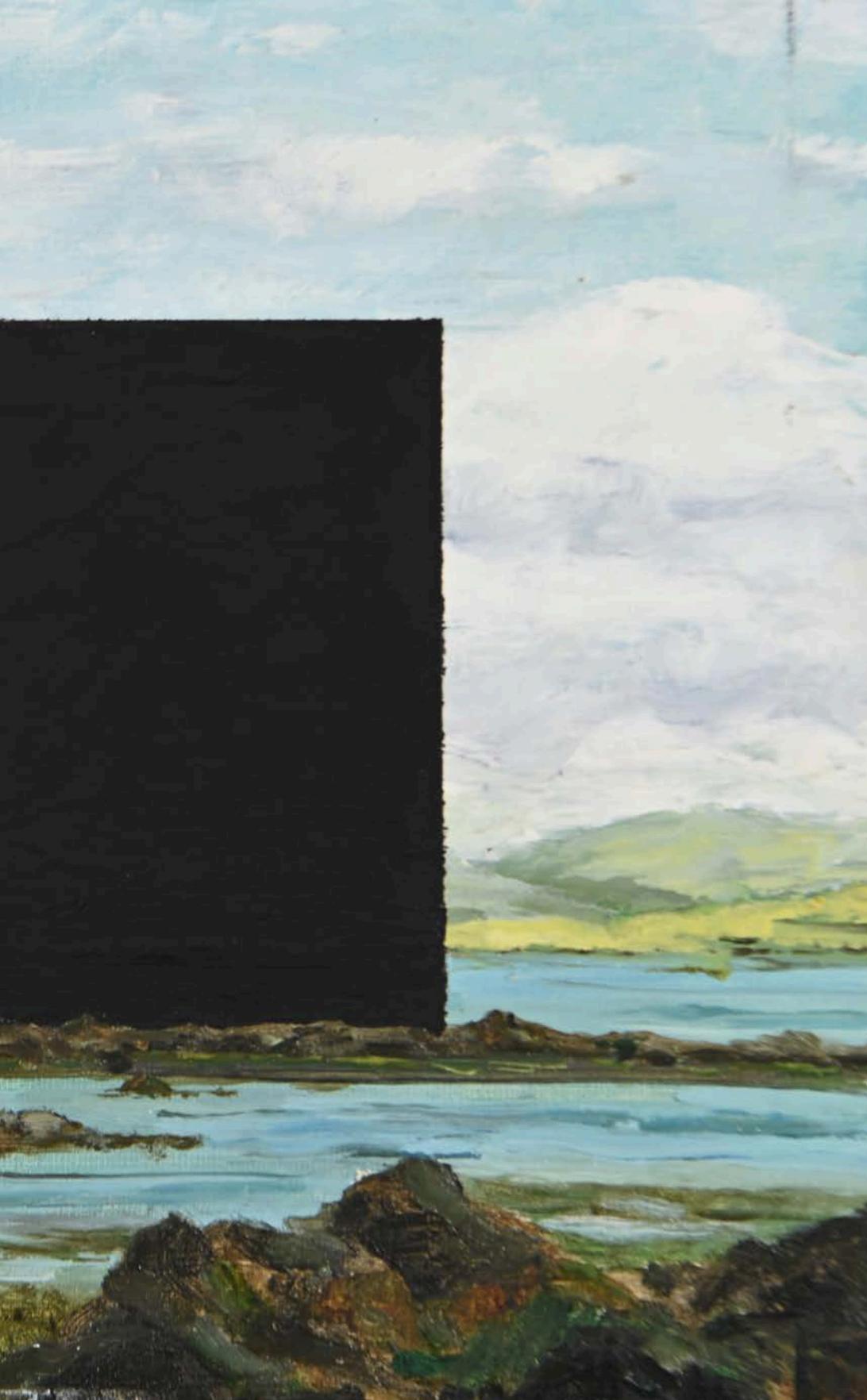


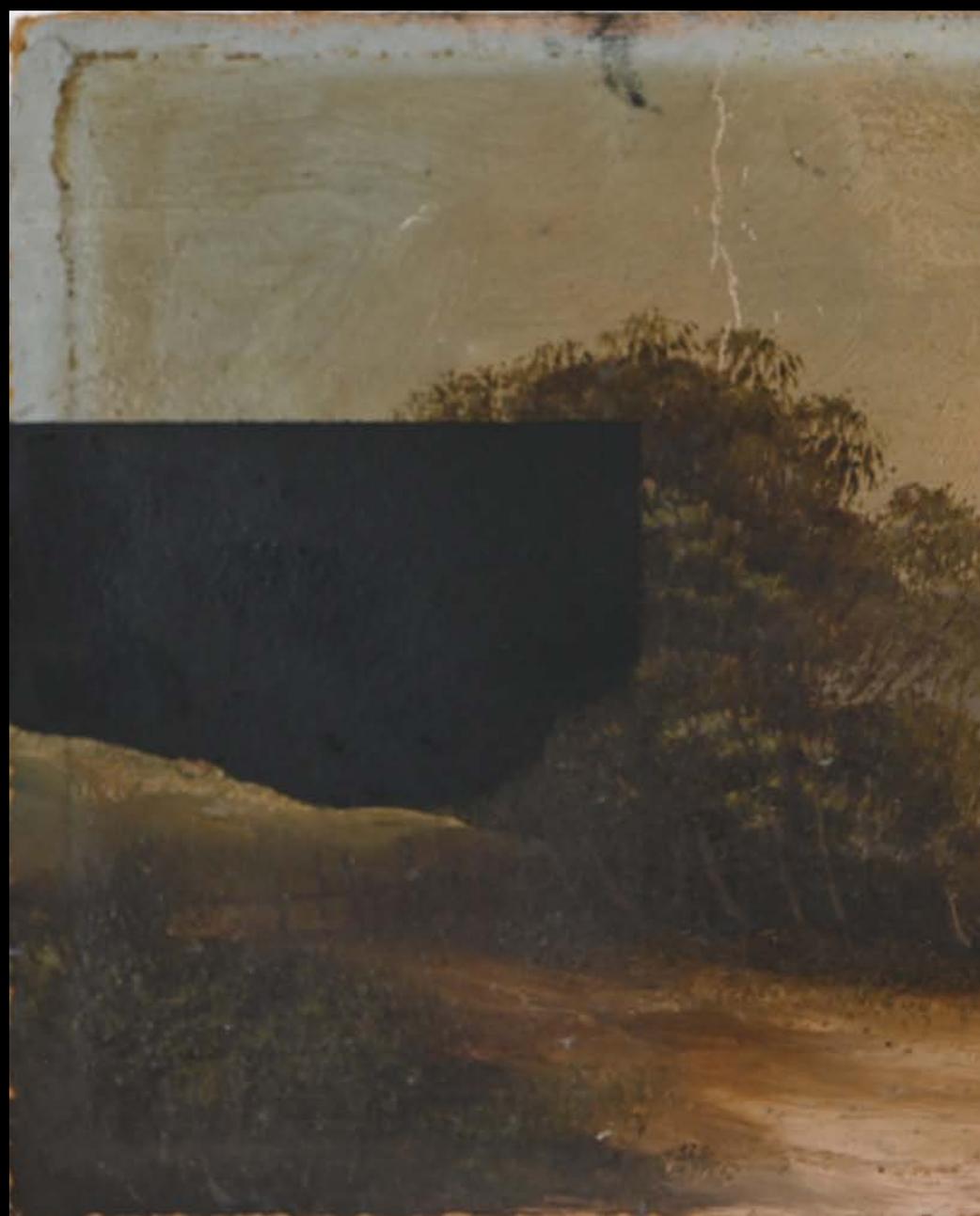












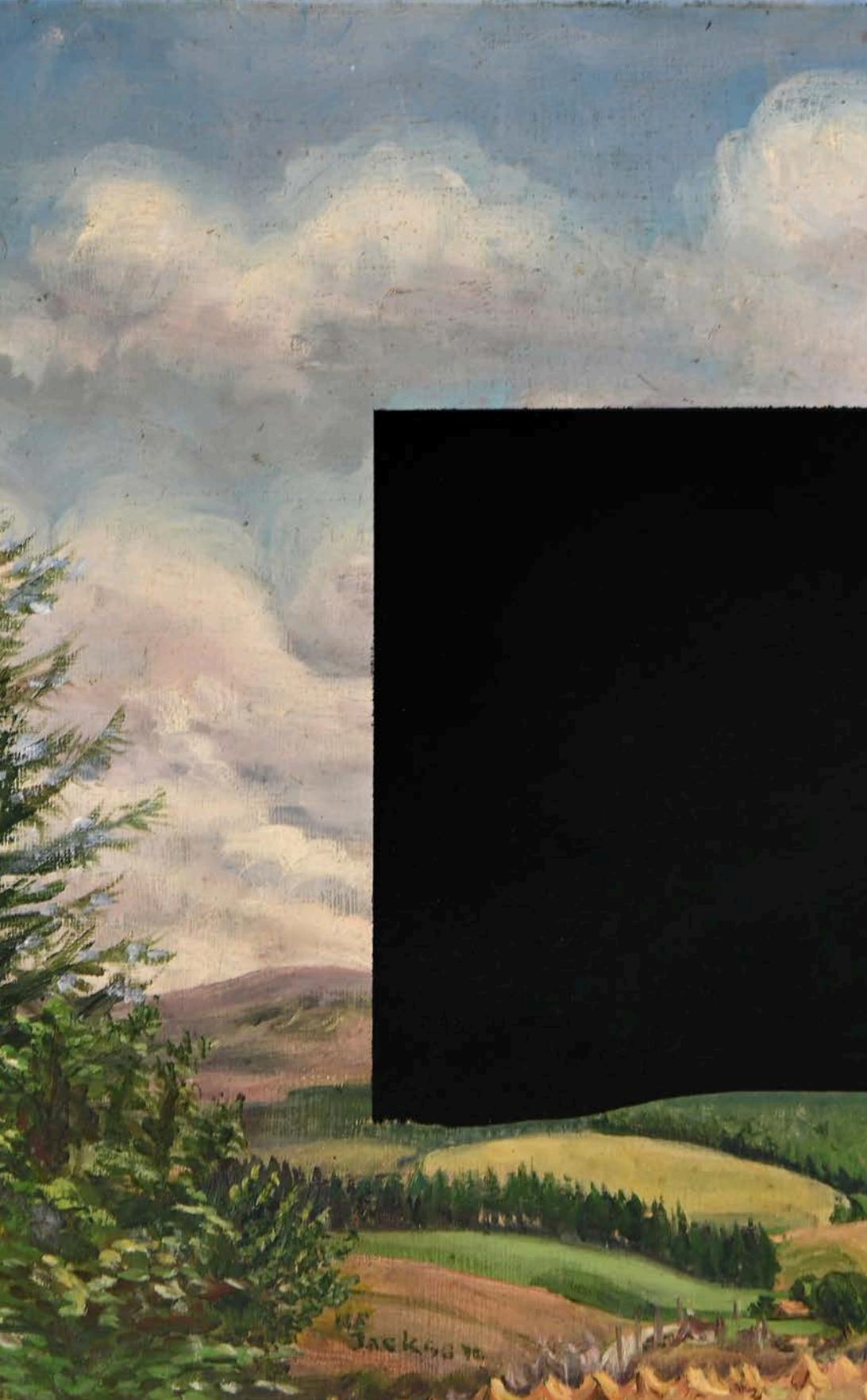




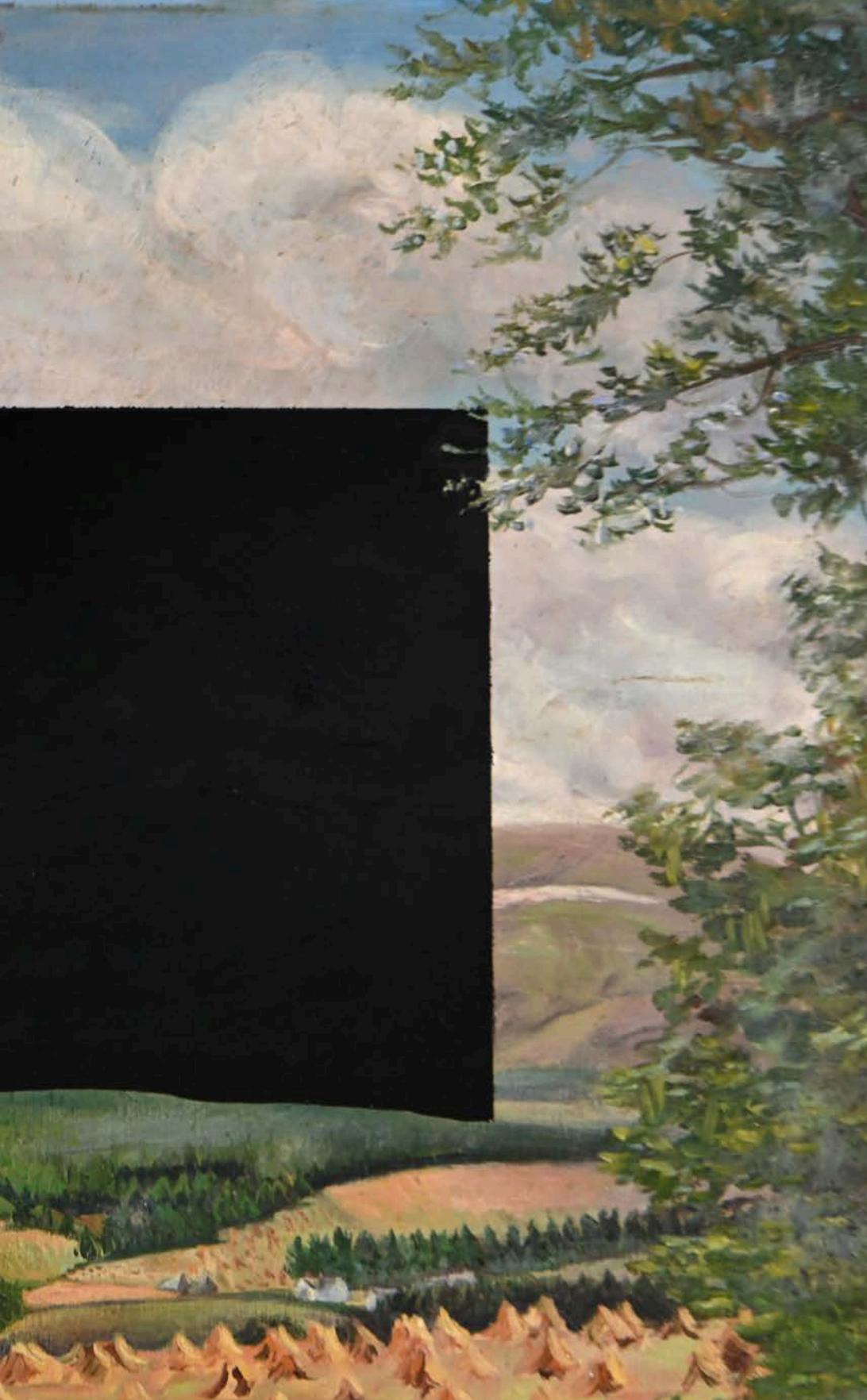








JACKSON





***"True, Master Doctor, and since I find you so kind, I will make known unto you what my heart desires to have; and were it now summer, as it is January, a dead time of the winter, I would request no better meat than a dish of ripe grapes."***

Christopher Marlowe: *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*

I mean, have you *seen* images recently? Can you even look when so many are so distressing? Can you even recognise images given the number and speed that they come at you? ***Can you make any sense of images*** when they are so often beyond comprehension?

Fleeting, flowing, streaming like quicksilver. ***All the frames from a film out of order, or the pages of a library scattered to the winds.*** The traditional systems of organisation shattered and replaced by feeds. Beginning and end replaced by infinite scroll (invented in 2006 by Aza Raskin). The end of the end.

Like a luxury hotel breakfast buffet serving breakfast, lunch and dinner all at once, chicken feet, black forest gâteau, pancakes, spaghetti, burgers ...Time and geography have collapsed, the hierarchies of menu, cuisine, sequence have been shredded. ***Everything all at once, anything-at-any-time.***

In what is unquestionably the era of images it has, ironically, become harder to look at them, more impossible to see. Images are now **the conduit of everything**. They act as the all-powerful organisers of the world from family memories to political power, yet they have become **ubiquitous** to the point of **banality**.

Here we are. Haunted by insistent ***phone-snap memories of things we can't remember***; immersed in a culture so entirely visual that visual culture itself has become ungovernable. How can anything — an image in an age of images especially — mean anything anymore? If images are the water we swim in, has the **significance of an image dissolved entirely**?

If you've seen everything, what exactly is the point of looking anymore? If every image has equal value, is anything significant

anymore? If we've become so numb, can anything make us feel again? How are we supposed to both truth and satire are dead?

**And what does it mean to be in the business of making images when they are now just an illustration proffered by a prompt. Just another contested truth brought into the world. The image is not something that is made but rather conjured into existence. Images might not even be there to be seen anymore. Perhaps the total ubiquity of the image coincided with its disappearance.**

How, in other words, can we resist this culture of images if we, **against the odds**, still believe in the image? **How can we make space or time or focus that an image needs to exist as a thing in the world?** As a site itself rather than an atom in a molecule in a drop in a raging ocean. When we are dragged down or drowned out, or washed away or otherwise...

**Perhaps our only salvation is irony.** That irony's ability to give us distance and connection simultaneously can offer us the **only remaining way to say I love you and really mean it.**

**In the after/image, in the age of screen burn, suffering from palinopsia: the recurrence of an image after the stimulus has been removed.**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century had its image crisis of course. The rise of processes and means of distribution and consumption: photography, mechanical reproduction, TV and the 'global village' etc. And it had its ways of responding and recouping: cubism, collage, pop etc as ways to re-see images as things that could contain concepts and ideas like time and space, category slips, forms of critique.

**For us though, deep in the digital mire, without the benefit of hindsight, things are less clear.**

Images were once location specific — contextual. They were printed on a specific page of a particular book with a specific caption. These physical and cultural sites, things outside of the image itself, gave meaning to the image. The same image encountered in different environments—the library or a newsstand—might acquire different meanings. Images in different forms of media were also framed by their context — the tabloid, say, or the broadsheet. *Where* images resided gave

**images particular meanings.** Captions that accompanied images changed how we understood them, how we engaged with them, often preceding the meaning we derived from the image.

With the advent of **search engines—Google Images—though, they...the images** became disassociated from context. Cut loose from the anchor of place or caption: **weightless, free floating in the infosphere like spores in the wind.** The organisational structures of culture and canon that once tethered image to context were vaporised by the search algorithm, breaking the html code that tied information together, cutting the bond between image and context. And in doing so, loosening the specific meanings that the images once served.

Now images exist in the multidimensional latent spaces of generative AI models.

At this moment RE-LAION 5B is the largest open image-text pair dataset. It contains 5.5 billion image-text pairs hoovered from the internet. This data is then processed using Contrastive Language-Image Pre-training. CLIP, itself an AI neural network, learns how to connect visual concepts with language which it uses to categorise images without relying on human intervention to label and categorise data. It detects for example the content of images and decides how closely they match their descriptive text. Machine learning and looking allows for the processing of such huge numbers of images.

Using recognition, detection and image processing algorithms each image is 'tokenised' or chopped up into fragments of image/text chunks and associating images with concepts even down to the pixel level.

Each of these image-fragments is referenced against an index (objects, colour shape, type etc), often with a single fragment tagged to many categories. The index retains the links between each label and its image-fragment referent to form the fundamental platform that allows future image generation.

**The internal logic of an image dismembered,** its own self decontextualized. Broken into micro fragments, into inventories of image-ingredients and ready to be reassembled to approximate the inputs of brief text prompts.

Architecture has had its own historical obsessions with logging, measuring, recording, sorting, naming. These acts, from the Renaissance to Charles Jencks, from Stuart and Revett antiquities through Banister Fletcher, in books from language of classical architecture to the language of postmodern architecture. A continuous project that organised orders, styles, windows, regions, periods. And its own history of using these as language models to generate new possibilities. What is John Soane's house except a (physically small yet incredibly dense) Language Model? All those fragments, casts, and models ready to be reassembled into new architectural propositions?

Digital culture might not have changed all images themselves. Architectural imagery might not all be produced by AI (yet). Much is not a product of collage (though a lot is). Drafting might still assert its truth in relation to construction. Renders as simply high-tech remakes of measured perspectives, Alberti with processing power and Hollywood aesthetics. The structure, intent and logic of the image remains the same. But digital culture does—and has—changed our relationship to images.

**A lament for a vanished order that could be disrupted.**

# **Transfer of Power**

## **A Calendar of Classical Contradictions from Trump to Biden**

**Kyle Dugdale**



## March 5, 2020

Around lunchtime on Thursday, March 5, 2020, the First Lady of the United States of America, Melania Trump (née Knavs), posted to Twitter an announcement of progress on the construction of a new tennis pavilion in the grounds of the White House.<sup>1</sup> It was the latest update on a project that had been underway for several months already—a project that she herself had announced toward the end of the previous year. In an earlier tweet she had made a promise: “This structure will be a testament to American craftsmanship and skill.”<sup>2</sup>

As word spread, the internet erupted in fury.

It was evidently bad enough to be twittering about tennis at the very moment when the nation was staggering under the rising threat of a pandemic—when hospitals not so far away would soon be setting up refrigerator trucks to act as temporary morgues. Suddenly tennis pavilions seemed terribly frivolous. But it was worse than that. This was no ordinary tennis pavilion. This was a *classical* tennis pavilion.

A glance at the design, by the architect Steven Spandle, would have revealed a scheme that was not, per se, unusually ambitious. It replaced a structure that was strictly forgettable: a thinly-built shed containing a toilet and various basketballs, presumably relics of the Obama administration. The new design, covering a little over one thousand square feet, was certainly more solid; but it was hardly obtrusive. If anything, it might have been accused of a lack of ambition. Much like the many other White House additions that came before it, it was explicitly “informed by the existing architecture”—partly on the logic that the presidential tennis pavilion, intended more for private retreat than for public performance, need not aspire to assert itself against the Executive Residence itself.<sup>3</sup> Two modestly scaled volumes, punctured by arched windows, bracketed a more open central portico with four columns evenly disposed across its length. The façade was cleanly detailed, without much in the way of superfluous ornament beyond a solid textbook rendition of the Tuscan order, as recommended by Vignola, via Jefferson. The whole thing was no less symmetrical and no more innovative than the layout of the adjacent tennis court—which was itself, of course, ordered according to the rules of a long-established tradition. No surprises here.

Be that as it may, the pavilion’s classical vocabulary compounded the problem.

After all, a few weeks earlier, someone had leaked the draft of a newly proposed presidential executive order—provisionally (but predictably) entitled “Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again.”<sup>4</sup> Complete with



Wikipedia footnotes, the document was not an exceptionally glorious affair; but it betrayed monumental ambitions. It suggested that newly commissioned federal buildings—courts of justice, government offices, even structures built for the nation’s most tedious federal agencies—should demonstrate a visible commitment to classical and traditional vocabularies. This was not only a vote of confidence in classical architecture’s capacity to meet twenty-first century challenges; it was explicitly framed as nothing other than a rejection of twentieth-century modernism and its legacy.

Members of the American Institute of Architecture promptly sent more than 11,400 letters to the White House condemning the proposal.<sup>5</sup>

It would be safe to assume that the vast majority of those architects were not, themselves, classicists, but trained instead to practice in a vocabulary that can trace its origins to such (embarrassingly Eurocentric) early-twentieth-century sources as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and the Bauhaus, via the so-called International Style that—for better or for worse—has shaped the canon of recent architectural pedagogy, informing global architecture of the past half-century from Kuala Lumpur to Kinshasa. In rejecting the legacy of modernism and of all that it encompasses, the vocabulary of the White House tennis pavilion therefore calls into question the pedagogy of almost all of America’s professional schools, and the qualifications of their graduates. That goes some way, no doubt, toward explaining those 11,400 letters, and the outrage that accompanied the announcement of progress on the president’s new pavilion.<sup>6</sup>

But there was more at stake here. This episode proved, after all, to be part of a longer story, of which the narrative outlines were still emerging.

## December 18, 2020

The plot thickened in the months that followed.

In fact, between the end of 2020 and the start of 2021, the reluctant handover of presidential power in Washington, DC was accompanied by a veritable fury of classical drama. On December 18, one month before the end of his term, outgoing president Donald Trump signed a more polished version of the previously leaked document, now registered as Executive Order 13967: Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture.<sup>7</sup> Critics noted with some glee that Trump’s own previous career in real estate was not conspicuous for its rigorous commitment to the classical vocabulary—excepting the letterforms occasionally used to spell out his name on his buildings’ façades. But his order recommended nonetheless that newly commissioned federal projects demonstrate a visible commitment to classical form. And again America’s architectural establishment protested.

- 8 For a representative selection of assessments (their titles only occasionally less nuanced than their contents, interspersed with a few bright counterexamples and supplemented by readers' comments) dating mainly to the days immediately after publication of the leaked draft, see Steve Rose, "[Will Trump Make Architecture Great Again? The Dark History of Dictator Chic](#)," *Guardian*, February 5, 2020, Lilly Smith, "[Trump's Executive Order Would Impose Classical Style on Federal Buildings: Should We Be Worried?](#)" *Fast Company*, February 5, 2020, Phineas Harper, "[Traditional Architecture Has Frequently Been Leveraged to Support Violent Political Agendas](#)," *Dezeen*, February 6, 2020, Philip Kennicott, "[Why Trump Shouldn't be Allowed to Dictate How Federal Buildings are Designed](#)," *Washington Post*, February 6, 2020, Michael J. Lewis, "[In Praise of Modern Architecture](#)," *Wall Street Journal*, February 6, 2020, Adam Rogers, "[The Trump Administration and the New Architects of Fear](#)" *Wired*, February 6, 2020, "[What's So Great About Fake Roman Temples?](#)" editorial, *New York Times*, February 7, 2020, Michael Kimmelman, "[MAGA War on Architectural Diversity Weaponizes Greek Columns](#)," *New York Times*, February 7, 2020, Kate Wagner, "[Duncing About Architecture: The Ignorance and Racism Behind the Right-Wing Push for 'Classical' Federal Buildings](#)," *New Republic*, February 8, 2020, Justin Davidson, "[Trump's Classical-Architecture Edict Is Dumb—But Not Worth the Outrage](#)," *New York Magazine*, February 10, 2020, Matt Ford, "[The Non-Fascist Case for Classical Architecture](#)," *New Republic*, February 10, 2020, Ross Douthat, "[Trump's De-Polarizing Architecture Plan](#)," *New York Times*, February 11, 2020, Kai Gutschow, "[Why So Many Architects Are Angered by 'Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again'](#)," *The Conversation*, February 12, 2020, Blair Kamin, "[How Should Trump Make Federal Architecture Great? By Ignoring the Ideologies Who Speak For Classicism and Modernism](#)," *Chicago Tribune*, February 12, 2020, Andrew Ferguson, "[Trump's Beautiful Proposal for Federal Architecture](#)," *Atlantic*, February 20, 2020, Curtis Dozier, ed., "[Not Just Hitler and Mussolini: Neo-Nazis Love Neoclassical Architecture Too](#)," *Pharos*, February 20, 2020, Anthony Paletta, "[Trump's Culture Wars Come to Architecture](#)," *Boston Review*, February 25, 2020, Samia Henni, "[The Coloniality of an Executive Order](#)" Canadian Centre for Architecture, June 21, 2020, and Lyra Monteiro, "[How a Trump Executive Order Aims to Set White Supremacy in Stone](#)," *Hyperallergic*, January 12, 2021.

Trump's order triggered instant condemnation from the American Institute of Architects. This was only to be expected, if not guaranteed to sway the undecided—the AIA being famous, after all, neither as a deposit of critical depth nor as a beacon of ethical clarity. But even in its preliminary form, the order had also elicited a good number of less explicitly institutional reactions, often from pundits possessed of a murky combination of deep-seated prejudice and shallow familiarity with classicism's history. Few acknowledged the origins or diversity of classical and traditional form, adopting instead the same narrowly European conception of classicism invoked by Trump's order. Liberal critics aligned briefly with far-right supremacists in equating classicism with whiteness—in obstinate refusal of classicism's polychrome history, both literal and metaphorical. Many cherry-picked their precedents from the lowest-hanging branches of the historical record. Invocations of 1930s Nazi architecture, in particular, were quick and easy, typically focused more closely on the commissioning of classicists to articulate the language of authority than on the hiring of modernists to construct the machinery of extermination. Few, in any case, questioned the order's own binary confrontation between the classical and the modern, and many surrendered fully to simplistic readings of a strictly linear architectural history. There was little room for complexity, even in reading the most obvious of local precedents. There was no space to acknowledge, for example, that the original design for America's Executive Mansion was hardly *au courant* at the moment of its proposal, or that the entirety of the White House interior dates to the 1950s or later; that precious little of the current US Capitol is original to its conception, that its current east front was completed in 1962, or that its current west front is in good measure a 1980s replica painted to look like marble. Architectural history is in fact bursting with apparent contradictions, yet the general preference, all around, was for conceptual tidiness and intellectual simplicity: the architectural-historical equivalent of an eighth-grade reading level.<sup>8</sup>

Average responses scored little better on pragmatics. There were countless assertions as to the importance of freedom of choice—architectural liberals reconciling with conservatives to demand freedom from government regulation—but few expressions of concern over the disastrous legacy of the past century's free choices: the global impact of thin, glassy architectures dependent on pumping massive quantities of conditioned air into artificially lit interiors, or the growing body of evidence on the extractive implications of glass, steel, and concrete, or the heavy addiction to chemical substances and toxic building materials—the synthetic membranes, short-lived sealants, and adhered surfaces of junkspace. There was little discussion of the building industry's intent to resolve the fundamental problems of a fossil-fuel

- 10 American Institute of Architects, "[AIA Condemns Executive Order Mandating Design Preference for Federal Architecture: AIA to Work with President-Elect Biden to Reverse the Executive Order](#)," press release, December 21, 2020. This followed a February 20, 2020 letter to "The Honorable Donald J. Trump, President," signed by thirty-four former presidents of the AIA, imploring the nation's president to reconsider the proposal that federal buildings "be executed in neoclassic style of design." In the fullness of time, public statements were also issued by the American Society of Landscape Architects, Archaeological Institute of America, Architecture Lobby, Docomomo US, Middle East Studies Association, National Council on Public History, National Organization of Minority Architects, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Organization of American Historians, Society for Classical Studies, and Society of Architectural Historians.
- 9 For various cautions, including one from the Institute of Classical Architecture and Art, see Julie Laskie, "[Why Classicists Are Against Trump's Draft Executive Order](#)," *Architectural Digest*, February 21, 2020, Michael Lykoudis, "[I Teach Architecture: Trump's Plan for Federal Buildings Is a Bad Idea](#)," *Washington Post*, February 10, 2020, and Cathleen McGuigan, "[Voices Rise Up in Protest at Prospect of Federal Classical Style Mandate](#)," *Architectural Record*, March 2020. For a brave but misleadingly titled attempt to summarize conflicting reactions, see Antonio Pacheco, "[Architecture Critics Shrug Over Trump's Classicizing Executive Order](#)," *Architect*, February 20, 2020.
- 11 Pew Research Center, "[Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024](#)," June 24, 2024.

mindset by offering more sophisticated, higher-order solutions extracted from the same mindset and delivered by the same suppliers. Few entertained the notion that some value might be derived from a concerted effort to revisit architectural forms and practices that emerged across centuries of building with minimally processed, locally derived materials, brightened by the light of the sun, and so forth. Few drew any connection to the debate over architecture's enduring commitment to fast fashion, where this year's looks must of course differ from last year's offerings, delivered at low up-front investment and high long-term cost. Instead, most bought into the assertion that classical architecture is inherently more expensive than its alternatives, without noting that building well will always be more costly—in the short term—than building cheaply. Neither the executive order nor its protesters engaged with substance at this level. The focus was on image, and on style.

But Trump's order also prompted more thoughtful expressions of unease from other groups, along with more carefully worded warnings from committed classicists, who worried that the executive order's actual effects on public discourse would be equivocal at best.<sup>9</sup>

The AIA's press release, meanwhile, was unambiguous. Its headline read: "AIA condemns executive order mandating design preference for federal architecture." Its subtitle struck a more optimistic tone: "AIA to work with President-Elect Biden to reverse the executive order."<sup>10</sup>

Among other things, Trump's executive order stated that the design of federal buildings "should uplift and beautify public spaces, inspire the human spirit, ennoble the United States, and command respect from the general public." More specifically, it asserted that classical architectural methods, "as practiced both historically and by today's architects, have proven their ability to meet these design criteria." Particular care must be taken, repeated its author (who was most certainly not the president himself), "to ensure that all Federal building designs command [the] respect of the general public for their beauty and visual embodiment of America's ideals."

To the word *respect* the author might have added (but did not) the word *trust*. Between 1958 and 2019 public trust in the federal government fell steadily from 73% to 17%.<sup>11</sup> The significance of this shift cannot be overstated; it is tied, after all, to a broader fear that democracy itself is under threat. All agree that the fear is legitimate, even if the allocation of blame is disputed. But the contribution (or legitimate response) of architecture is debatable, as is the responsibility of the architectural profession toward a public that is not guaranteed to share its assessments of contemporary design. Can architecture aspire not only to command respect but also to earn the trust of the general public? And is an architecture designed to accomplish

12 US Department of the Interior and National Park Service, "Design Guidelines: The White House and President's Park," December 1997, 1.

13 *Ibid.*, 5.

14 *Ibid.*, 6–7.

15 Cathleen McGuigan, "The People's House," *Architectural Record*, January 14, 2021. For an even higher assessment of the US Capitol as "the nation's greatest building and the world's foremost symbol of democracy," see Catesby Leigh, "Henry Hope Reed and the Golden City," in *The Golden City*, by Henry Hope Reed (Monacelli, 2020), 9. Reed himself identified the Capitol Rotunda as "America's supreme interior" (77).

the one also likely to achieve the other? Can architects succeed where politicians have so patently failed?

Earlier generations were not always ambivalent on this count. Design directives prepared for the US Department of the Interior under President Clinton started from the premise that adopting design guidelines for the White House (at least) would, precisely, “serve to protect the public trust.”<sup>12</sup> Not only the architecture itself, but even the open spaces around the architecture were to “reinforce a sense of dignity and power.”<sup>13</sup> More precisely, the guidelines appealed to “the classical concept of decorum in public architecture.” For unfamiliar readers, they spelled out the word’s significance:

Rediscovered by Italian Renaissance designers, this ancient concept refers to the selection of building styles and sites that evoke an appropriate public message of power and respect ...

The ability to illustrate the power of the executive in a republic has always been and continues to be the single most difficult challenge for designers. The attributes of the imagery that conveys this authority are subtle yet undeniably present, and they are immediately discernible to all who visit the site. The White House continues to serve as a symbol of power and authority largely as a result of designers over 200 years understanding the importance of these design principles and applying them with genius. As a result of their efforts, the White House and President’s Park today are international symbols of democratic power and participation in the government of a great republic.

The White House and President’s Park are first and foremost a public trust.<sup>14</sup>

Not every architect would articulate, today, a commitment to the design pursuit of “an appropriate public message of power and respect”—or, for that matter, “power and authority.” Even the predictably patriotic language of “a great republic” has faded from use within most architectural circles. Inasmuch as the vocabulary of the classical is associated with such words, it is likely to provoke unease.

And yet, to many readers, the connections between architecture and America’s national aspirations may seem self-evident. Even *Architectural Record* magazine, in an editorial deeply critical of President Trump’s executive order, described the Capitol as “the single most potent symbol of America’s republic,” an “essential emblem of democracy.”<sup>15</sup> Classical buildings more generally—including, especially, both the White House and the US Capitol—routinely top published lists of the nation’s most highly respected buildings. The AIA’s own survey of “America’s Favorite Architecture,” conducted in 2007 and not repeated, placed six of the nation’s top ten best-loved buildings in Washington, DC. Most were classical, or more prec-

- 17 For a (not entirely unbiased) definition of this category see James Stevens Curl and Susan Wilson, *The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford University Press, 2015), under "New Classicism."
- 16 For further disclaimers see Alex Frangos, "[In the Eye of the Beholder: Public, Designers at Odds On What's a Beautiful Building](#)," *Wall Street Journal*, February 7, 2007.
- 18 On the Capitol in particular, see for instance Alan Gowans, *Styles and Types of North American Architecture: Social Function and Cultural Expression* (HarperCollins, 1992), noting (at 85) that the architecture's image has been so potent "that forty-seven of the fifty state capitols unmistakably emulate it."
- 19 For an October 2020 survey commissioned by the (not entirely disinterested) National Civic Art Society, suggesting a striking unanimity across divisions of politics, race, ethnicity, gender, income, education, and age, see "[Americans' Preferred Architecture for Federal Buildings: A National Civic Art Society Survey Conducted by The Harris Poll](#)," National Civic Art Society, October 2020.
- 20 Barack Obama, November 16, 2016, quoted in Jazmin Kay, "[Behind the Scenes: President Obama Visits the Acropolis in Athens, Greece](#)," The White House, President Barack Obama, November 17, 2016.

isely, neoclassical. Perhaps predictably, the survey prompted criticism from architects—who argued, for one, that it focused too narrowly on external image, and on style.<sup>16</sup>

But popular opinion cares little about the AIA's scruples or the historian's distinctions between classical, neoclassical, and new classical.<sup>17</sup> Irrespective of its status relative to the movements of architectural modernity, the classical language of Washington, DC is held to fit the bill for the symbolic architecture of democracy.<sup>18</sup> Its defenders point to the rhetorical openness and symmetry of its porticos, the stability and balance of its constituent parts, the clarity and rationality of its masonry tectonic, the basic familiarity of its vocabulary, its translation of universal human experience into formal geometries, its popular association with legitimate authority, its willingness to reinforce its symbolic message through the use of ornament, and its capacity to calibrate its communicative ambitions between the poles of austerity and celebration. Classical architecture, they insist, communicates an appropriate governing tone, and its roots sink deep into the popular imagination across boundaries of political persuasion; as such, it has the capacity to bring the country together.<sup>19</sup> But above all, they point to its explicit participation within a longer cultural tradition.

Trump's predecessor, President Barack Obama, had himself been seen to endorse that message when, during a state visit to Greece in 2016, on the final overseas trip of his presidency, he paused before the film cameras on the Athenian Acropolis to give a brief architectural-historical lecture to his country:

We've got the Parthenon behind us, part of the Acropolis. It is here in Athens that so many of our ideas about democracy, our notions of citizenship, our notions of rule of law, began to develop. And so when you visit a site like this ... you're also sending a signal of the continuity that exists between what happened here, the speeches of Pericles, and what happened with our Founding Fathers.

And it's a very important role for the President of the United States to send a signal to the world that their culture, their traditions, their heritage, their monuments, are something of value, and are precious, and that we have learned from them. Because what that does then is send a strong signal around the world that we view ourselves as part of a broader humanity and a community of nations that can work together to solve problems.<sup>20</sup>

But in recent years others have questioned classical architecture's deliberate participation within that longer cultural tradition, just as they have questioned Athenian notions of democracy and citizenship. And when it comes to the classical architecture of America's own capital city, the popular visual imagination of the last four years has had to deal with an extraordin-

- 21 Eleanor Holmes Norton, longtime congresswoman for the District of Columbia, was vocal in protesting the normalization of this new and sleekly modern architecture: see Scott MacFarlane, "[Metal Fencing Around Capitol Increasingly Frequent and Controversial Security Measure](#)," *CBS News*, February 6, 2023.

ary barrage of conflicting images. Only some of them send a signal that America has learned lasting lessons of citizenship, of the rule of law, of political continuity. Only some of them might be deemed to command the respect of the general public for their beauty and visual embodiment of America's ideals.

## January 6, 2021

In the days after the signing of Trump's December 18, 2020 order Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture, America's architects voiced their protest. But on January 6, 2021, it was a different crowd that marched upon the US Capitol—its Corinthian columns forming an orderly background to the violence of the mob. The building served, in effect, as the backdrop to a dramatic performance, complete with lighting and effects and costumes. The scenery had been carefully chosen—such that it would not be entirely disingenuous to say that the tableau was *designed*: designed for effect, for representation and circulation within a highly image-conscious media culture. Whether hostile or sympathetic, those documenting the event invariably took care to include the classical architecture in the background. It made for striking images.

Rioters could be seen, for example, scaling the rustication—a distinctively classical motif that not only provides human scale but also reinforces the tectonic solidity of the wall by adding shadow lines to an otherwise sheer vertical surface, making its scale legible *and* literally making its scaling possible. Photographs documented Trump's supporters struggling to find a foothold on the pilaster capitals, pulling themselves up by the profile moldings, shuffling along the edges of the cornice, abandoning decorum to press their bodies spreadeagle against the rusticated wall. Here, framing a less than flattering portrait, the rustication provided the vertical module for a reversal of the image of Vitruvian man—or, perhaps, its Renaissance representation by Leonardo. *Man, the measure of all things*.

The hours immediately following merely added to the visual contradictions, generating unfamiliar sights. The US Capitol's rhetorically open porticos, and their soaring columns of solid stone, were soon closed off by visually transparent but non-scalable steel fencing topped with razor wire.<sup>21</sup> The classical was foreclosed by the modern, the white colonnade by the black wall. Soldiers in military fatigues were billeted in the Capitol during ensuing impeachment procedures, their recumbent bodies disposed like a low-level figural frieze around the perimeter of the Rotunda. Draped across the sandstone floors in orderly disarray, the unifying camouflage of their combat uniforms blended with the variegated patterns of the stonework, yet seemed



strangely out of place in a space more frequently associated with the civil liberties of civilian dress. As they slept, these representatives of the National Guard were guarded by upright representations, in bronze, of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Martin Luther King, Jr. Above them hung an 1843 painting by Robert Weir, depicting the Pilgrims praying for divine protection, their pastor raising his eyes up into the dome of the Capitol Rotunda, the words “God with us” inscribed onto the sail of their ship *Speedwell*. At the pilgrims’ feet lay musket, helmet, and armour.

On January 6, also in disarray, albeit not entirely un-ordered, the mob of Trump’s supporters had occupied the same space, their red caps and motley flags set against the flags and caps of the paintings on the walls behind them. In the typologically precise words of Senator Amy Klobuchar, the rioters “desecrated this temple of our democracy,” processing unceremoniously around the Rotunda and pausing from time to time to document their actions on social media. Their attitudes were curiously self-conscious; as the critic Justin Davison wrote soon after, “Having broken in, all those self-appointed patriots dressed like Visigoths went milling around the halls of power looking variously sheepish, awed, goofy, and murderous. Filing obediently between velvet ropes, they explored the Rotunda and Statuary Hall, places where, at another time and in another way, they would have had every right to be.”<sup>22</sup>

Had they raised their eyes above the figures of their fellow rioters, and past the figures in the paintings, they would have seen another set of bodies circulating around the Rotunda in the space of the figural frieze above, looking down on them in silent witness: Constantino Brumidi’s “Frieze of American History,” designed in 1859, begun in 1878, completed in 1953, and “representing in light and shadow events in our history arranged in chronological order.”<sup>23</sup>

As a calendar of sorts, that frieze is hardly representative; yet it may nonetheless reward closer study, if primarily by way of a warning built into the fabric of the architecture. Something similar might be said for Brumidi’s painting in the dome itself, high above, entitled “The Apotheosis of Washington” — after the Greek ἀποθέωσις, “deification,” or “elevation to the status of a god.” America’s president is here deified before our very eyes.

## January 20, 2021

On January 20, 2021, America’s 46<sup>th</sup> president was sworn into office “in the shadow of the Capitol dome,” as he put it in his inauguration speech.<sup>24</sup>

Despite security concerns and pandemic constraints, he had deemed it symbolically essential — now more than ever — for the inauguration to take place, as

- 25 See Peter Minosh, "American Architecture in the Black Atlantic: William Thornton's Design for the United States Capitol," in *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present*, ed. Irene Cheng, Charles L. Davis II, and Mabel O. Wilson (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 54.
- 26 For this idea in the context of Italian urbanism, albeit with cross-reference to participatory politics and to the public spaces of Washington, DC, see David Mayernik, "The Shape of Public Space: Place, Space, and Junk-space," in *Perspectives on Public Space in Rome, from Antiquity to the Present Day*, ed. Gregory Smith and Jan Gadeyne (Ashgate, 2013), 301–29, especially 302.
- 27 Klobuchar here offers a textbook rehearsal of the language of prior inauguration speeches, Lincoln's included, as discussed by Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in "Religion in America," special issue, *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 1–21.

usual, in front of the Capitol. In this he was not only honouring the original intent of a building specifically designed to offer a suitable public context for presidential inauguration ceremonies;<sup>25</sup> he was also endorsing the fifteenth-century humanist doctrine of Alberti, who held that sound classical urban form, particularly if designed with an eye to the drama of public performance, can represent and facilitate—although it will not necessarily create—a civil society.<sup>26</sup>

Given the conditions of the pandemic, the members of the public who would typically represent America's civil society at an inauguration were largely absent. They had been replaced by an array of 200,000 American flags, dutifully aligned across the public space of the Mall. But the event drew one of the largest TV audiences in history, next in rankings to the audience for the inauguration of America's first Black president twelve years prior.

Witnesses to the celebratory speeches might have detected a more vocal commitment than usual to the notion that DC's classical architecture served as an enduring symbol of democracy. Moments before Joseph Biden's speech, Senator Klobuchar had interspersed her welcoming remarks with more pointed references to the significance of the Capitol. In her account, its architecture played a central role in *placing* the event into the longer context of two hundred and forty-four years of an imperfect American democracy. Looking back to the 1861 inauguration of President Abraham Lincoln, which took place in front of the original temple portico of the Capitol's east front, she noted: "This conveyance of sacred trust between our leaders and our people takes place in front of this shining Capitol dome for a reason." The sacred trust of which she spoke evidently found its legitimate symbolic home in what she described as "this temple of our democracy." Ending with a flourish, she added: "Today on these Capitol steps and before this glorious field of flags, we rededicate ourselves to its cause."<sup>27</sup>

On that cold but clear inauguration morning, the bright white dome of the Capitol was indeed shining in all the fullness of its nineteenth-century-cast-iron glory, above a building decked out in the pomp and circumstance of the occasion, with highlights of red and blue. Gigantic flags hung between the paired Corinthian columns of the Capitol's west front, as if the portico had been invented for that purpose. Carefully selected citizens in smart dark suits and colourful overcoats were seated in orderly rows, present in person to bear witness to the proceedings. In the background, security personnel stood at watch. Both the apparatus of the inauguration and its dutiful documentation by the media played the architecture to full advantage. Classical architecture, approached on axis, was here the self-conscious backdrop to the free exercise of American democracy, witnessed by a watching world.

- 28 Silvester Beaman, "[Presidential Inauguration Coverage: Rev. Silvester Beaman Benediction](#)," C-SPAN, Washington, DC, January 20, 2021, 5 min., 2 sec.
- 29 Lilly Smith, "[Even the White House Logo Got a Makeover: See What Changed](#)," *Fast Company*, January 27, 2021.
- 30 India Block, "[Wide Eye Creates 'Dynamic and Architectural' White House Logo](#)," *Dezeen*, 17 February 2021.

- 31 In a different register altogether, every single American Ivy League university uses classical letterforms for its logo, although the presentation is today more typically digital than physical.

Just a few minutes later, in his closing prayer, the Reverend Silvester Beaman, pastor of Bethel AME Church in Wilmington, Delaware, qualified the assessment of that shining dome with a more circumspect reminder, appealing to “these hallowed grounds, where slaves labored to build this shrine and citadel to liberty and democracy.” As he spoke, the camera of America’s attention panned back across the Capitol’s classical architecture.<sup>28</sup>

But the same day saw the release of a new architectural logo for the White House—designed to be “forward-looking while having its roots in something very traditional.”<sup>29</sup> Its designers explained that it symbolized the new president’s “desire to bring the country together”—and that it came complete with classical letterforms intended to communicate “a governing tone.”<sup>30</sup>

It is not clear that this gesture was the product of extensive architectural-historical introspection, or that it should be invested with too much deliberate meaning. That said—as artefacts that suggest a more nuanced range of attitudes to architectural history, classical letterforms are not uninteresting. Each Trajanic capital—ultimately derived, like all such letterforms, from the architectural inscription cut into the stone at the base of Trajan’s Column in Rome—is effectively a small piece of classical architecture drawn into the present and reappropriated for new use. That monument’s original inscription “to the Emperor Caesar, son of the deified Nerva” (*imp caesari divi nervae f etc.*), was hardly a record of public-spirited democratic process; and yet subsequent adoptions of those same letterforms have turned their power to very different ends. The same forms can communicate radically different meanings. But two thousand years later, they still preserve something of their original elegance and weightiness, sometimes in harmony with and sometimes at odds with their new use, sometimes preserving their original three-dimensional materiality and sometimes thinned out into insubstantial vectors of digital form, sometimes adopted with intelligence and sometimes victims of misappropriation. Although the effectiveness of their use is uneven, federal agencies impose typographic standards upon their publications for good reason. Even the carefully serifed letters TRUMP on a building façade communicate greater gravitas than the cheap and rapidly aging curtain wall construction that typically stands behind them.<sup>31</sup>

## February 24, 2021

Four weeks after his inauguration, on February 24, 2021, President Biden revoked Trump’s December 18, 2020 Executive Order 13967 (Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture). It was a day filled with signatures, revocations, and new executive orders. The legitimacy of his action was



reinforced by the deployment of the full gravitas of the presidential office. Classical architecture's communicative power transferred peacefully from Trump to Biden. That afternoon, White House press photographs dutifully documented the performance of Biden's presidential duties at a desk placed carefully against the backdrop of the base mouldings of the State Dining Room's Corinthian pilaster order, behind a presidential seal rendered authoritative by the classical lettering that circulated around its perimeter.



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# **Re-enter Pliocene**

## **Irony and Sincerity in Speculative Architectural Fiction**

**George Papamattheakis**

1 Superstudio, "Salvages of Italian Historic Centers: Omens for Good Fortune for your Cities," translated by Lucia Allais, *Log 22* (2011). First published in Italian in 1972.

2 *Ibid*, Sheet No. 794.

3 The quote is from the project's website, *Planetcity*; see Liam Young, ed., *Planet City* (Melbourne: Uro Publications, 2020).

## Two Large-Scale Design Fictions

“Flood Florence permanently by building a dam at the Gonfolina ravine” suggested the Italian collective Superstudio in their project *Salvages of Italian Historic Centers*, which was featured in a 1972 issue of the journal *IN*.<sup>1</sup> An accompanying photomontage depicted the Brunelleschi dome surrounded by water and pleasure boats—as the last buoyant reminder of the history lying beneath. For “buildings,” Superstudio claimed, “are conserved better and longer when they are submerged [in water] than when they are exposed to atmospheric agents.”<sup>2</sup> The text was written on a document template crafted to look official and was accompanied by a map of the Arno valley showing the geographic expanse of the designed flood. The architects were responding to their contemporaneous discourse on the preservation of architectural monuments, which was particularly vivid in Italy. The proposal for the flooding of Florence was only one of six interventions targeting an equal number of important Italian cities. The rest of the proposals were no less bold: bury the center of Rome; drain and pave over all of Venice’s canals; nest Naples within an illustrated shed; tilt all buildings in Pisa; enclose Milan within a glass cage. Sometimes, Superstudio argued, one first needs to destroy, in order to be saved.

Cut to 48 years later. Picture “a city of 10 billion people, the entire population of the earth—where we surrender the rest of the world to a global scaled wilderness and the return of stolen lands”: 221,376 km<sup>2</sup> of buildings, 7,047 spoken languages, 49,445,671,570 solar panels, 42,877,520,340 fruit trees, and other precisely accounted for elements compose a busy, dense, and ever luminescent agglomeration fit to accommodate every person on earth.<sup>3</sup> This is *Planet City*, a 2020 speculative project by Australian architect Liam Young and a team of researchers he brought together, responding to the conversations on climate adaptation and planetary urbanization. The *City* is imagined in different mediums, including a film, a book, and a series of costume installations and dance performances.

Although half a century and many realizations apart, the two projects bear important similarities. Despite their distinct points of interest—historic preservation for Superstudio and planetary urbanization for Young—both projects essentially comprise design fictions that operate on territorial scale. More than oriented to any particular building or manmade construction, they both target a large-scale reformation of the biogeophysical environment.

In addition, despite their similarly gargantuan claims, both projects manage to remain suspended between seriousness and absurdity. The outrageous suggestion of a Pliocene era preservation baseline did not stop Superstudio from demonstrating their nuanced understanding of the preservation

4 Young, *Planet City*, 40.

5 For the phrase "demonstration per absurdum" see Adolfo Natalini, "On Drawing," *Drawing Matter*, 4 February 2016. For the argument on Superstudio's "grandiose style" see James Dunbar, and Editors, "Adolfo Natalini with Superstudio at Drawings Matter: A research Guide to The Collections," *Drawing Matter*, 29 July 2024. Both articles were last accessed on August 15, 2024.

discourse they entered, and from articulating an honest and serious vision that is more-than-technical: displeased with the prevailing attitudes that, in their opinion, paralyzed historic centers and opened the way for an economization of monuments, Superstudio sought to unearth a radical potential of preservation. Similarly, *Planet City*, Young writes, “is a city form that ... has evolved through the most rigorous pragmatism. ... [it] is a grounded and possible proposal developed from real calculations, cutting edge research, and the support of a distributed council of acclaimed environmental scientists, technologists, economists and authors.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, both projects are unavoidably marked by their extravagant claims, embracing absurdity as a form of conscious strategy. Adolfo Natalini, one of the outspoken Superstudio members, later made clear that their photomontage projects aimed at “demonstratio per absurdum,” a design-rhetorical device stretching the premises and claims of a proposal “in grandiose style” in order to make what they saw as a critical point.<sup>5</sup> In a parallel fashion, Young admitted that *Planet City* drives his hypothesis “almost to the point of absurdity,” perhaps pointing to the immense implications that such a plan would entail on the physical, and even more on the human geography of the planet. Balancing between honest intentions and rhetorical absurdity, both projects are posed not as realizable projects, but rather as provocations aimed at their contemporaneous ongoing discourses.

Yet, despite all other similarities, the two design fictions are uttered in markedly different tones of voice. With its colorfully dark, cyberpunk-saturated visuals, *Planet City* expresses a solemn agony. It transports the viewer to a near future where automated urban farms and festivaesque dance rituals have managed to coexist literally on top of each other, allowing enough space for an urgent global ecosystem restoration—that *some* decided they have to get serious about. *Salvages* on the other hand, foregrounds its bright photocollages and is surrounded by a certain playfulness. Superstudio wink at their readers as they frivolously suggest that preservation should be done otherwise. In other words, *Planet City* may be burlesque, but is perceived as a sincere, urgent, and action-oriented provocation, while *Salvages* is unavoidably read within an aura of balanced irony. Both projects are dismissive of their contemporaneous conditions and discourses, yet *Planet City* points to a positive project, while *Salvages* doesn't seem bothered to commit to one.

I am interested to examine this divergence, asking why the two projects are presented and encountered differently, and what these distinctions can tell us. Is theirs just a difference in attitude? My argument is that there is an evolution in the genealogy of design fictions that attempt to grasp the world at territorial scale, and in this evolution we are increasingly seeing a sort of

6 In launching this comparison, the reader may reasonably wonder why I have chosen *Salvages* over, say, the *Continuous Monument*, which more directly addresses a condition of planetary urbanization and could thus be a more fitting companion to *Planet City*. Although at first glance and content-wise the *Continuous Monument* and *Planet City* may seem closer, I argue they are not. The *Continuous Monument* uses building-scale architecture as its vocabulary and, crucially, is invested in the symbolic potential of maximum urbanization as an infrastructural monument in a sort of nostalgic plea. On the other hand, both *Salvages* and *Planet City* are rather forms of environmental management that claim to be more rational than symbolic, and that utilize a vocabulary that extends from buildings to biogeophysical elements (e.g. rivers in *Salvages*) and to organizational protocols (e.g. zones of exclusion in *Planet City*). Another point that may appear problematic in this comparison is that the one project imagines the annihilation of the city while the other imagines a form of an ultimate city. Still however, the premises are in essence very similar: because for Young's ultimate city to exist, some form of Superstudio-like city-annihilation will need to take place. One more qualification is due here: The emergence of speculative design after the 1990s and the work, most notably, of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby contradicts the tendency of architectural speculation to distance itself from irony and playfulness—that I will be elaborating below. However, the Dunne & Raby type of speculative design connects mostly to artistic practices and smaller scale objects, and as such, I believe, should be treated separately from the field of architecture and architectural speculation—especially as my interest here lies primarily with large-scale environmental design. On speculative design see Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); Matt Malpas, "Between Wit and Reason: Defining Associative, Speculative, and Critical Design in Practice," *Design and Culture* 5, no. 3 (2013): 333–56.

7 Hashim Sarkis and Roi Salgueiro Barrio with Gabriel Kozlowski, eds, *The World as an Architectural Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019). As they affirm in their introduction (3), this is a history that has remained underexplored, if not entirely suppressed. Among other reasons for this, they cite persistent ideological—and I would also add historiographical—fixations with the scale of the nation-state, as well as a systematic neglect of the historical reciprocity between architecture and the discipline of geography.

*operative speculations* substituting their rather rhetorical postmodern counterparts. In this evolution, probed by a sense of urgency for the environmental predicament, irony is displaced as an unnecessary—if not irresponsible—ingredient. However, irony, I will posit, still retains a radical possibility in reframing and questioning the premises of a speculative sort of thinking, something that the anxiously uttered operative fictions are less effective at.

Although I do not claim that *Salvages* or *Planet City* are necessarily the most comprehensive or representative examples, or even that they are the best match for each other, I do believe they are indicative of the speculative architectural thinking of the respective time periods they appeared in.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, translating a truism from science fiction studies, speculative design and landscape fictions can be a good barometer of the intellectual climate at a certain point in time, revealing the honest desires of artists, architects, and other creators, uttered as they are unconstrained by client pragmatics.

### From Sincerity to Irony and Back

Due to their scalar ambitions, the two projects considered here could be classified within a longer history of architectural attempts to negotiate large-scale environmental transformations. Hashim Sarkis and Roi Salgueiro Barrio with Gabriel Kozlowski mapped part of this domain in their 2019 book *The World as an Architectural Project*, which collected 50 designs aimed at a territorial or planetary scale in the period since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although until recently underexplored, this history is critical in understanding the lineage within which speculations like *Salvages* and *Planet City* emerged.<sup>7</sup>

As the volume by Sarkis and his colleagues show, to a large extent architecture's preoccupation with the world is developed as part of the ongoing modernist project with such authors as Arturo Soria y Mata and Patrick Geddes in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and more significantly with Le Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller, or Ivan Leonidov during the interwar period. One characteristic example recited in *The World*, consistent with the examples I am studying here, is the *Atlantropa* project by the German architect engineer Herman Sörgel. Within the context of the German colonial project, and influenced by the rise of international development infrastructural projects, Sörgel approached the distribution of water, earth, energy, and minerals around the Mediterranean basin as a design project, essentially proposing a unified treatment of Europe and Africa as one continental landmass, where the water of the Mediterranean Sea could be redistributed freely towards the drier areas of North Africa. Utilizing a system of kilometer-long

8 *Ibid.*, 80–89.

- 9 Extending this observation, it could be argued that certain radical groups of the 1960s and 1970s manifested early expressions of what later came to be called an accelerationist ideology—i.e. the belief that if significantly accelerated, the processes of capitalism would eventually collapse. See Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, eds., *Accelerate: the Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2014).
- 10 Natalini, “On Drawing.”
- 11 Lucia Allais, “Disaster as Experiment: Superstudio’s Radical Preservation,” *Log 22* (2011): 127.
- 12 Besides Superstudio and Archizoom, the movement included other groups such as *UFO*, *Gruppo 9999*, and *Ziggurat* as well as some individual architects. See Catharine Rossi and Alex Coles, *The Italian Avant Garde 1968–1976* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013); and Emilio Ambasz, ed., *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems of Italian Design* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972).

hydroelectric dams in the straits of Gibraltar and the Dardanelles, *Atlantropa* imagined a Mediterranean that was lowered by as much as 500 meters, revealing entirely new landscapes in the process. Interestingly, after Germany's defeat in the second World War, Sörgel reframed the project as a climate engineering intervention—a form of speculation that had slowly started to appear in both the West and the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> Sörgel's *Atlantropa* exemplifies an attitude towards territorial-scale architectural projects up until the 1960s, in which visions were megalomaniacal but still very earnestly proposed. Influenced by the understanding of an increasingly interconnected world, and expressed mostly by men of the global north, these visions reveal a heroic, positive, optimistic, and highly normative attitude towards the “design of the world.”

Such overly confident visions came to be radically challenged by a wave of anti-modernist reactions by architects and collectives in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the scalar ambition that modernism progressively rehearsed was not entirely discarded, but rather it was turned to its head: Radical groups including Archizoom and Superstudio embraced the engagement with the scale of territory and the reformation of the environment, yet purposefully exposing its absurdity. In 1971, Archizoom published *No-Stop City* as a paper project in *Domus*, positing an endless and ultimate programming of the surface of the planet. In a similar vein, from 1969 to 1971 Superstudio developed *The Continuous Monument*, a vision for architectural singularity in which a behemoth living infrastructure encircles the earth and envelops humanity in a terminal condition of ubiquitous urbanity. Despite their extravagance, projects like *No-Stop City* and *The Continuous Monument* were not meant as simplistic parodies. That is, their obviously ironic style should not be read as an attempt to un-constructive mockery of their contemporaneous architectural reality. Rather, they implied an earnest preoccupation with the radical potential of architecture's acceleration and eventual annihilation.<sup>9</sup> Adolfo Natalini, one of the Superstudio members later spoke of their work in this period as employing a form of “utopian irony.”<sup>10</sup> *Salvages* is conceived within this context, continuing the underlying critique of architecture's complicity with capital. The proposal to submerge Florence referenced the very recent 1966 flood of the city that Italians still had fresh memories of. As Lucia Allais has suggested, the logic of disaster is utilized for its radical potential to rethink certain givens, “upsetting the logic of capitalist hyper-accumulation by reshuffling the matter of architecture.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps not accidentally, the Florence flood is also the context within which the Italian *Radical Architecture* movement begins to coalesce, further pointing to the potential of bold shocks of the status quo.<sup>12</sup> But in *Salvages*, as in other projects suggested by Radical Architecture groups, while

- 15 Of course, this should not be treated as an absolute boundary; rather it outlines the main body of a general trend, the chronological limits of which always remain porous and dynamic. For an example with a later project by Rem Koolhaas and OMA/AMO see specifically note 41 below.
- 17 Reinhold Martin, *Utopia's Ghosts: Architecture and Post Modernism, Again* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxi. Martin believes that this proscription extended to the practice of speculation more generally. This may be true for the field of architecture, but the inverse is true for most other domains: finance, policymaking, technological forecasting etc; see my analysis below.
- 13 For Superstudio's reorientation in their practice after 1972, see Allais, "Disaster as Experiment," note 2; and Peter Lang and William Menking, eds., *Superstudio: Life Without Objects* (Milano: Skira, 2003).
- 14 Sarkis, Salgueiro and Kozlowski, *The World*, 17.
- 16 See Marco Deseriis, "Irony and the Politics of Composition in the Philosophy of Franco 'Bifo' Berardi," *Theory & Event* 15, no. 4 (2012). On Koolhaas apparent cynicism, cf. Emmanuel Petit, "Chapter 5: Koolhaas," in *Irony: Or, the Critical Opacity of Post Modern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 178–211.
- 18 For the project by Design Earth see their *Geostories: Another Architecture for the Environment* (New York: Actar, 2019). For the project by Plan B see their *City of Seven Billion: A Constructed World*, exhibition at the Yale School of Architecture, 3 September – 14 November 2015. Cf. Roi Salgueiro Barrio, "Reimagining Earth: Architecture and the critical and speculative uses of geovisualization," *City, Territory and Architecture* 10, no. 22 (2023): 1–16. In his review of Plan B's cartographic project, he reads it as a projective (rather than purely descriptive) one, yet I would contest that it is so only as far as the epistemology of architecture is concerned. For an overview of projects after the millennium, including Plan B's *City of Seven Billion*, see Sarkis, Salgueiro and Kozlowski, *The World*, 440–519.

the intentions were utterly sincere, the design gestures were rather ironic and absurd—perhaps suggesting a disillusionment with what architecture and design could really achieve.

The early 1970s, when *Salvages* is published, seems to mark a shifting moment in this irony-infused, larger-than-building focused attitude. This was true not only for Superstudio, who went on to focus on more grounded and anthropological materialist projects such as their *Fundamental Acts* and *Global Tools* projects, but also more generally for the domain of architectural speculation.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in *The World*, the editors acknowledge that the three decades that followed until the early years of the new millennium were significantly less dense in forms of ambitious design speculations: Following “a very intense moment of planetary speculation in the mid 1960s and early 1970s ... its cultural death comes after the late 1970s with the consolidation of a postmodernism that reacts against the architectural profession’s involvement with broader societal issues by reorienting design toward the internal conditions of the discipline, history, and the space of the city.”<sup>14</sup> Per the book’s analysis, Rem Koolhaas and Madelon Vriesendorp’s *City of the Captive Globe* concludes this phase in architectural history.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, in the latter, irony, it seems, has transformed into cynicism—a surrendered acceptance of the status quo also defended by some as pragmatism, a mode of work for which Koolhaas will become known.<sup>16</sup> Retrospectively, commentators and theorists noted that this was a period in which the future as a positive project waned. With regards to architecture, in his 2010 revision of postmodern historiography, Reinhold Martin indicates that among postmodernism’s rules of engagement was “a near universal proscription against utopian thought.”<sup>17</sup>

It wasn’t until the turn of the millennium that an interest in territorial-scale thinking in architecture was newly nourished. The rising environmental anxieties brought back the earth-spheres and expanded environments into architectural drawings. Even if many of those are analytical or diagnostic, such as Design Earth’s *Geostories* narrative series or the cartographies by Plan B in their *City of Seven Billion*, others do engage with propositional speculations, like Young’s *Planet City*.<sup>18</sup> Common among them is an earnest attitude seemingly driven by a sense of urgency, eventually forming what we could call operative speculations—fictions that are not necessarily made to be realized, but to instigate some sort of action. Yet, in their sincere utterances, this latter wave of territorial scale speculations, is also defined by a more reserved ethos compared to the excited pronunciations of their modern-era counterparts. What’s crucial in the context of this essay, however, is that in these contemporary speculations, the climate and biodiversity concerns, as well as the urge to understand and map the Anthropocene seems to

- 19 Steven Connor, "What is/was Post-Modern: Irony, Urgency (and So On)," Jencks Foundation, 2022.
  
- 20 David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 151–194.
  
- 21 Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, no. 1 (2010): 5–6. Interestingly—but less convincingly—their reading into Architecture uses the work of Herzog & de Meuron. A more nuanced and insightful reading of the intersection between metamodernism and architecture can be found in Jimenez Lai, "Between Irony and Sincerity," *Log* 46 (2019): 23–32.

leave little space for playfulness or irony. The recent additions in this longer genealogy, through their explicit claims to planetarity, detailed statistical accounting of metabolic and material processes, and persistent GIS aesthetics, communicate the sober and serious intentions of their authors.

### **Metamodernism, Technologies of Speculation, and Disciplined Imaginations**

The waning and substitution of postmodern irony that I observed above in the context of architectural speculation appears to extend to other domains of cultural production as well. In a recent commentary critic and scholar of postmodernism Steven Connor observed that the “as-yet unchristened era [of the] early decades of the twenty-first century has seen a drastic shrinkage in the capacity and appetite for irony and ambivalence and a return of absolute forms of belief, along with the desire for unqualified commitment.”<sup>19</sup> The tendency was noted earlier in literary studies, where by some accounts it followed the explicit call by influential postmodern writer David Foster Wallace in the early 1990s who urged creators to adopt a new sensibility that would steer clear of the ostensibly cool, yet cynical, detached, and often nihilistic irony of postmodernism, replacing it with an ethos of new sincerity.<sup>20</sup> In 2010, examining the fields of architecture, art, and film, scholars of cultural and urban studies respectively, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, observed a pattern in the “structure of feelings” expressed in these fields after the turn of the millennium, and suggested to name it “metamodernism.” According to them, the category represents an oscillation “between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.”<sup>21</sup> In their reading too, even if still present, irony was nonetheless displaced as a dominant strategy. For both commentaries the renewed cultural sensibility comes as a response to an experience of social reality characterized by financial, political, and environmental uncertainties. To be sure, their emphasis differs: While Vermeulen and van den Akker highlight “hope”—or better, a “melancholy for hope”—for a collectively “better world,” Connor rather focuses on “urgency” as the critical factor overshadowing irony. In both cases, however, the imperative is the same: an engaged approach. If the “melancholy for hope” means one wants to believe they *can* act meaningfully, “urgency” demands that one *must* act meaningfully. In both cases, disengaged criticism is not enough; the world requires practical responses.

However, it would be insufficient to explain this development from old irony to new sincerity solely on the grounds of an abstractly renewed

- 24 Williams, "World Futures," 524, and see also his appendix.
- 26 Donella H. Meadows, "The History and Conclusions of *The Limits to Growth*," *System Dynamics Review* 23, no. 2/3 (2007): 191.
- 22 See Andy Hines, "When Did It Start? Origin of the Foresight Field," *World Futures Review* 12, no. 1 (2020): 4–11; and Theo Reeves-Evison, "The Art of Disciplined Imagination: Prediction, Scenarios, and Other Speculative Infrastructures," *Critical Inquiry* 47 (2021): 719–46.
- 23 See John Williams, "World Futures," *Critical Inquiry* 42 (2016): 473–546.
- 25 Donella H. Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and Dennis L. Meadows, *The limits to growth: A report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).
- 27 Or, better, a few different fields of science, such as strategic foresight and climate modeling to name two. Examples of how the modeling culture evolved after the 1970s include the first simulated climate projection authored by James Hansen and his six colleagues in 1981, the socioeconomic Integrated Assessment Models (IAMs) that the IPCC adopted later in the 1990s, and all the way to the more recent computational simulation of a digital twin for the entire earth system by graphics company Nvidia—appropriately named Earth-2. As Isaac Held has argued with regards to climate modeling specifically, the primacy of simulation is such that it renders secondary the understanding of the very systems that are being simulated. See Matthias Heymann and Amy Dahan Dalmedico, "Epistemology and politics in Earth system modeling: Historical perspectives," *Journal of Advances in Modeling Earth Systems* 11 (2019): 1139–52; and Isaac M. Held, "The gap between simulation and understanding in climate modeling," *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* 86, no. 11 (2005): 1609–14.

collective sentiment. I want to suggest that the technologies of speculation are crucial in the creation of this feeling and rationale. The ways in which the future is thought, fictions are constructed, and projections are made are important in both the epistemological construction of the sense of urgency, and the promotion of the feeling of hope for the future. For the main question of this essay—that is the interrogation of the development from *Salvages* to *Planet City*—the postwar culture of future thinking, and especially the developments around the 1970s, play a central and consequential role.

Modeling, simulation, scenario planning, technological forecasting, and cybernetic thinking were all words in an emergent vocabulary of contemplating and designing the future in the western postwar world, following the shock of the second World War and later the insecurities of the Cold War. A practice that had started right after World War II, one that later came to be called strategic foresight research, was steadily formalizing into a discipline.<sup>22</sup> This field, primarily inhabited by technologists, engineers, and economists (and later many computer scientists), was coming to thoroughly shape planning, replacing architecture and design as the privileged fields of planning and propositional thinking. Certain institutions and researchers introduced and systematized novel techniques in thinking about the future. One of the better known stories is that of Herman Kahn, who devised a method of thinking through and comparing alternative plausible versions of the future while working for the RAND corporation in the 1950s.<sup>23</sup> In the next decade Kahn founded the Hudson Institute to elaborate on and disseminate his method, where he and his colleagues offered scenario planning workshops to corporate employees. As historian John Williams notes, by the 1970s more than sixty corporations such as IBM, Coca Cola, the National Bank of Mexico, and Royal Dutch Shell were using some form of scenario planning to lay out their corporate strategies.<sup>24</sup> The increasing computational power was key to this development, as it allowed not only for a wider consideration of future alternatives, but also for precision in modeling. The same year that *Salvages* was published, in 1972, the Club of Rome prepared its seminal report titled *Limits to Growth*, which was one of the first attempts at extensive modeling of future environmental change.<sup>25</sup> Engineer and computer scientist Jay Forrester's infamous "world model" that was used to produce the report factored in "66 Critical Problems" of humanity and produced projections for the future of the earth and its systems.<sup>26</sup> The culture of projective modeling only kept rising thereafter, further systematizing future thinking and turning it into a science.<sup>27</sup> In other words, while the *Architettura Radicale* movement in Italy and their architect contemporaries in the UK, the US and the USSR were creating their many times frivolous, quasi-

- 29 Backminster Fuller, "World Game: How It Came About," in *Fifty Years of the Design Science Revolution and the World Game* (Carbondale, Ill., 1969), 112; cited in Williams, "World Futures," 504–05.
- 28 Reeves-Evison, "The Art of Disciplined Imagination," 731.
- 30 Wei-Ning Xiang and Keith C. Clarke, "The Use of Scenarios in Land-Use Planning," *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 30, no. 6 (2003): 885–909.
- 31 Especially with regards to *Planet City*, which is more closely examined here, the connections become even more proclaimed through the references to scenario thinking, climate modeling, or Doxiadis and Fuller, that Liam Young and his collaborators in the book often employ. For a characteristic example see Benjamin H. Bratton, "On Speculative Design," in *The Time Complex: Post-Contemporary*, edited by Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik (Miami, FL: [Name], 2016).
- 32 In his case the phrase is used in rather positive undertones; see Paul J. H. Schoemaker, "Disciplined Imagination: From Scenarios to Strategic Options," *International Studies of Management & Organization* 27 (1997), 43–70.
- 33 See Melinda Cooper, "Turbulent Worlds: Financial Markets and Environmental Crisis," *Theory, Culture and Society* 27 (2010): 167–90; and Frederik Tygstrup, "Speculation and the End of Fiction," *Paragana* 25, no. 2 (2016), 97–111.

liberated visions, a few western think tanks, states, and corporations were establishing future thinking into a serious business and systematized task.

To be sure, it remains a question as to whether there was an interface between these two worlds. Although it is outside the scope of this essay to provide historical evidence of how specific speculative practices after the 1970s might have been influenced by the rise and systematization of futurological thinking, nonetheless, a few points can begin to make the case for this connection. Let me first note that, indeed, future thinking and foresight were coming to the attention of a wider public in what cultural studies scholar Theo Reeves-Evison called a “socialization of prediction.” Studying evidence from artworks and exhibitions of the 1970s he notes a “general diffusion of predictive thinking” that not only was the result of a heightened “confidence in the new social technologies of speculation,” but it also meant that “the speculative infrastructures developed within organizations such as RAND found their way into wider public consciousness.”<sup>28</sup> Secondly, received literature on a few personas influential in architectural circles attests to the existence of an interface between the then worlds of architecture and strategic foresight, even if thin. Buckminster Fuller is one of the people inhabiting this interface, perhaps most significantly with his late 1960s *World Game*. Initially proposed for the Expo '67 in Montreal, this was essentially a game of resource logistics, where players would compete to “make the total world work successfully for all of humankind,” producing scenarios of the future on their way.<sup>29</sup> In another instance, around the same time, Fuller’s close acquaintance Constantinos Doxiadis and his colleagues put their in-house super-computer at work, to produce “49 million scenarios” for the future development of Detroit.<sup>30</sup> It seems therefore fair to operate under the hypothesis that from the 1970s, the increasing systematization of future-thinking and strategic foresight began to seep into the practices of architectural speculation. Fifty years later, projects such as *Planet City*, *Geostories*, or *City of Seven Billion*, can be confidently placed at the resulting end of this lineage.<sup>31</sup>

The development of future thinking in these past 50 years is crucial for the argument pursued here, because the evolution of the new socio-technical apparatus of speculation effectively “disciplined imagination,” as management theorist and consultant Paul Schoemaker would evocatively phrase it close to the turn of the millennium.<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, this disciplining and its vocabulary of techniques has provided useful ways of navigating uncertainty and risk—while paradoxically it has simultaneously helped to reproduce them.<sup>33</sup> But what I want to focus on here, is the suggestion that a disciplined imagination is also usually a narrower one. In its early history, foresight and scenario planning could sometimes include quantitative reasoning based on

- 34 John Williams describes how Herman Kahn grew uninterested in his work on computational Monte Carlo simulations, and progressively developed an interest for more open-ended, narrative-driven, and creative-writing techniques; see Williams, "World Futures."
- 35 Tygstrup, "Speculation and the End of Fiction," 101.
- 36 The argument on plural futures is put forth in Williams, "World Futures."
- 37 Reeves-Evison, "The Art of Disciplined Imagination," 745.
- 38 See Lauren Rickards, Ray Ison, Hartmunt Fünfgeld, and John Wiseman, "Opening and Closing the Future: Climate Change, Adaptation, and Scenario Planning," *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 32, no. 4 (2014), 587–602.

computable factors, yet it was essentially a text-based, narrative technique, that often incorporated less plausible, imaginative, and far-fetched projections.<sup>34</sup> In some occasions the scenaria could even be informed or played out in game-like settings—like in Fuller’s *World Game*. But as the computational power increased, the focus on plausibility, high resolution, and precise calculations seems to have overtaken the imaginative and the playful. Cultural studies scholar Frederik Tygstrup puts it this way:

“Prediction technologies have made us awfully good at forecasting, at looking into things to come, but it is as if we no longer look at a wide horizon, but only into a narrow zone where what we know is prolonged, a future with a narrow scope and a high resolution, as it were. Feeding on such predictions, our historical imagination itself might eventually suffer...”<sup>35</sup>

In hindsight, speculative thinking since the 1960s has shifted away from a culture of multiple and divergent futures towards one of finer grained and more focused projections.<sup>36</sup>

## The Epistemological Potential of Irony

In his conclusion, Reeves-Evison observes that the particular ways of speculation that took hold after the 1960s, entrenched as they are in specific state, institutional, and corporate practices create certain path-dependencies in the thinking and making of futures, “at the expense of an expanded field of speculative practices.”<sup>37</sup> These path dependencies may be created by the dominant and taken-for-granted axioms of capitalist and growth-oriented logic. For example when Shell, with all its powerful lobbying apparatus and infrastructure embeddedness shapes its corporate strategy according to scenaria modeled after the maximization of hydrocarbon extraction and profits, essentially driving energy policies in that exact path for decades to follow. Or, path dependencies may be created when the climate of environmental and other emergencies dictate a particular quick-fix and solution-oriented type of thinking. For example when the IPCC chooses to only pursue “realistic” scenaria that are policy relevant (instead of utopian/dystopian), which often comes to mean scenaria informed by—and essentially perpetuating—the status quo.<sup>38</sup> But there is also another, less explored type of closure, that concerns the epistemological assumptions about how certain technologies and institutions work—or ought to work in the near future, and this is where I want to turn my attention.

In the “newly-sincere” search for mature and plausible scenaria, the former two conditions constraining imagination (constant growth and emergency logics) have grown immune to irony—neutralizing it as empty radicalism or nihilism. However, the third type of closure, the one concerning epist-

- 41 In a speculative project that is relevant to my discussion here in both scale and intention, OMA/AMO with Rem Koolhaas responded to this particular 1972 UNESCO Convention with a fake counter-convention, “noting that cultural heritage and natural heritage are overwhelming us” and suggested that an inverse operation to preservation is necessary to be pursued as well: “the collective demolition of cultural and architectural heritage that constitutes Insignificant Universal Junk.” The project, published in 2010 in the context of OMA’s exhibition at the Venice Biennale, can be placed as a later addition in the genealogy of more playful and ironic projects I described above. Still, one can quite confidently argue that both this project and Koolhaas’s attitude in general is not characteristic of contemporary architects’ main (environmental) concerns. For the counter-convention where the quotes are from and Koolhaas’s argument see Rem Koolhaas, “CRONOCAOS,” *Log* 21 (2011): 119–23. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the project to me.
- 39 Deborah Coen and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, “Between History and Earth System Science,” *Isis* 113, no. 2 (2022): 407–16.
- 40 Superstudio, “Salvages of Italian Historic Centers,” Sheet No. 794 (emphasis added).
- 42 By contrast, the more recent wave of architectural speculation doesn’t seem to perform this work, at least in the level of epistemology. For example, in all its daring illustration of a human exclusion zone that occupies 98% of the earth simultaneously restoring vital wilderness, *Planet City* relies on an urban epistemology that favors “citiness” and the city as the object of analytical attention, in an approach that urban theory is considering increasingly obsolete. See Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, “Towards a new epistemology of the urban?” *City* 19, no. 2–3 (2015), 151–82.

emology, seems to still be responsive to irony. In other words, irony can be operative in questioning epistemological assumptions that make future thinking too disciplined, and the gestures in *Salvages* testify to this.

When Superstudio proposed in jest to flood the Florentine basin, they performed a double epistemological leap. For one, they unsettled one of preservation's core questions, namely what era the preservationist should privilege, or in other words, how far back one should look at and dig about. Reasonably, in the preservation of human heritage, this question only makes sense with regards to the time span of human civilization. Yet, in an utterance that could be misinterpreted as just childish, Superstudio posited that restoring nature in the condition that it was a few million years ago can be at least equally beneficial. In hindsight, this leap feels even more significant as their proposition keeps challenging nature restoration practices still today, 50 years later. Recently, historians of science Deborah Coen and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson noted a historically constructed "Holocene nostalgia" permeating the sciences and Anthropocene discourse, and warned against a naturalization of certain restoration thresholds.<sup>39</sup> The discipline of earth systems science and the practices in ecology and conservation biology, they argue, have raised the Holocene in a privileged podium, only because it's immediately-before the industrial acceleration. Anticipating this critique, *Salvages* proposed to look at the combined natural and cultural heritage in a radically different way.

Superstudio's second epistemological leap had to do with the nature-culture interface. As they wrote, "As with any operation to restore a historical condition, [a return to the Pliocene geological condition] will be of the highest value in the eyes of anyone interested in *culture*."<sup>40</sup> That is, Superstudio posited natural conservation as a cultural operation, a thesis that also remains significant half a century later, when the institutional processes of natural and cultural preservation have grown progressively distinct. Once again, 1972 was a significant year in this history as UNESCO published the landmark Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, in which the two types of heritage were referred to in tandem, yet in subsequent years their treatment would take separate paths.<sup>41</sup>

Superstudio's cheeky attitude was meant to be provocative, yet examined closely, their irony seems fairly productive, especially in breaking away from certain epistemological givens. Irony surfaces as a tool with the capacity to enlarge the horizons of speculation. And it does so by opening up the possibility of epistemological novelty. Playfully against the grain, and as Superstudio would want it, epistemological deconstruction can indeed be creative.<sup>42</sup> Naivety, absurdity, antinomy, and irony can help escape from path-dependencies and epistemological lock-ins, exactly because they chall-



enge the unthinkable. And their practice feels even more relevant when the amassed ability to correlate and predict, model and simulate, tends to render obsolete—or altogether discard—any non-positive project.



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# **AI: Peter Pan's Runaway Shadow, Digital Twins and an Intelligently Artificial Architecture of Irony Rhetoric and Form**

**Ralitza Petit**



Artificial Intelligence is hot; and some architects are getting cold feet.

Those same architects would consider themselves socially engaged and culturally involved, and most definitely of their own time. While veritable contemporaneity often eludes architectural practice, and sometimes theory, the gap between cultural changes and architectural response has been attributed to the arduousness and length of the process of conception, design, and construction of buildings. The gap can further be described as the time lag between conceptual rhetoric of desired cultural effect and realized in physical materiality of architectural form; this gap — a discrepancy between the theoretical expectation and the physical reality of architecture — is perceptible but not insurmountable. Mostly, architectural form catches up with its desired rhetoric — eventually. The process of catching up is often revealed though irony.

The time lagged race from architectural theory to practice has been particularly pronounced with the ultra rapid infiltration of artificially intelligent tools in life, culture, society, environment — AI is seemingly in everything and everywhere. Such omnipresence is afforded by the rather loose definition of the term to encompass any digital operation appearing to be based in computer experience, or *machine learning*, which process is understood to be rooted in pattern recognition of source data; moreover, AI performance adapts and improves over time — in contrast to digital operations through previously explicit sequential computation.

The characteristically vast amount of source data and AI's incredulous speed of data consideration have produced a new situation in relation to architecture's notoriety of being slow to change. The unique problem for architecture is that this innovation has reached global acceptance and pervasiveness in an unusually short time and at an unusually large scale. In addition, the said innovation did find its place in buildings and theory at an unprecedented scale. Previously, it was only during major catastrophic moments in history, when destruction nearly obliterated the physicality of buildings. In such moments, the ideation of a societal change and its co-existing architecture were separated by a gap of such immense swiftness that the resulting juxtaposition of destroyed reality and dreamt up effect could be understood through irony.

Unlike in historically catastrophic situations, the AI-age is unusually productive and highly positive — yet, the gap between conceptualization and actualization, zeitgeist and buildings has appeared just as abruptly. This ensuing ironic engagement of AI with architecture is manifested in two ways: on the one hand, buildings manage to incorporate or find themselves endowed with the latest *AI-ness* — in the case of *intelligent buildings*; or on the other hand, the new technology — Artificial Intelligence — finds its way



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- 1 BRE Group, "The Edge, Amsterdam receives BREEAM Award for new office construction."

BREEAM, standing for Building Research Establishment Environmental Method is a British agency acting as a leading European assessor and regulator of sustainability. The Edge Amsterdam as assessed to be 98.4% sustainable at the time of its opening in 2015— the highest score ever recorded at the time.

- 1 The Edge — Amsterdam, the world's most intelligent and greenest building. Image: Wire Collective.

into the method of designing which is then termed *generated*. In both cases, an architectural theory of irony can conceptualize the connection between ultra-fast and highly flexible computation and the steadfastness of firmly grounded buildings.

As an intelligent building case of irony, one could consider The Edge Amsterdam, designed by PLP Architecture for Edge Realtors. The project began with the ambition to showcase the real estate group's net-zero strategy, and upon its opening in 2014, the forty thousand square meter office building was, indeed, pronounced the most intelligent building in the world. Its twenty-eight thousand sensors, installed throughout the building, directly assign (artificial) intelligence by making continuous electronic measurements which in turn initiate continuous adjustments to the functionality of its mechanical systems. Such a process of observation and optimization of patterns of functionality is typical of what is considered an AI system. An example of a characteristic undergoing such AI optimization is energy consumption; and the success of reducing the amount used thanks to a continuous cycle of measurement and adjustment has contributed to the Edge Amsterdam's rating as the world's greenest building.<sup>1</sup> The apparatus of sensors, tracking and chasing ideal constellations of measured patterns, literally pins (artificial) intelligence onto the physicality of a building in much the same way that smartness is added to telephones, watches, toasters et cetera. The irony of this *artificially* acquired intelligence is that the endeavor sidesteps the materiality or the appearance of the Edge—its architecture—in order to continuously optimize external and internal environments.

Environmental sensors have existed for some time, and their precision and versatility has grown to measure values for: temperature, humidity, electrical conductivity, mineral composition, light, wind speed and direction, air quality, solar radiation, rainfall and underground water levels, pressure and quality amongst a plentitude of measurables. In fact, almost every aspect of the environment can be measured and monitored through sophisticated sensors which create data that rarely if ever reaches conceptual architectural design. Yet, these devices sooner or later make their presence known and very visible in buildings. Moreover, the expansiveness and speed of AI allows digitally enabled gadget creation and continuous regulation to outpace the conception of architectural form. The often-mandatory devices appear almost parasitically attached to buildings of any type, nonchalantly dismissing architectural morphology.

The irrelevant, irreverent and ironic bid of AI-ing architecture through sensors often falls flat due to the fact that most of these sensors are measuring parameters that could not meaningfully affect architectural form. Unlike a farmer who could measure the soil's humidity and react in the direct benef-

2 Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, III.

3 The only strictly architectural comments refer to the orientation of the building with respect to sunlight and the transparent material of the glazing. The glazing material is frequently extolled for its functionality in harvesting solar energy.

4 Ackerman, *Distance Points*.

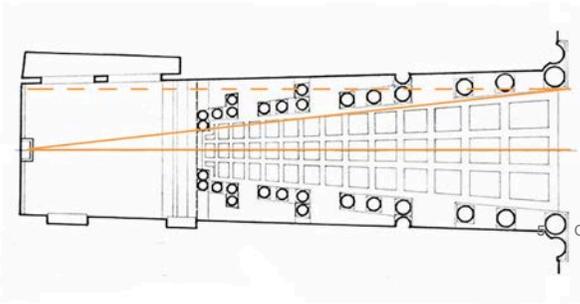
While Brunelleschi is credited with being the first to outline the construction of linear perspective, the method was described in print by Leon Batista Alberti in *Della Pittura* (*On Painting*) which was written in 1435. Notably, Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* (*On Building*) is presumed to have been written in the decade after 1443 and does not concern itself with representation but rather the understanding of architecture.

it to crops, an architect is often aghast at the utility of possible measurements as none of them relate to a building's Vitruvian obligation for *firmitas*, *utilitas* or *venustas*.<sup>2</sup> In fact, sometimes the most advanced AI-powered optimizations in buildings appear to function better without the building's elements or the occupants' actions. For example, forced air ventilation depends on the maintenance of a particular internal volume for the maintenance of pressure balance. An opened door — internal or external — immediately disrupts the carefully measured balance, followed by a disruption of temperature expectations, which in turn trigger the opening of more doors or windows while the entire optimization process becomes ironically superfluous.

Not surprisingly, the large number of articles on the most intelligent building in the world, the built epitome of blending the newest of technology with architecture, not once so much as mention the built project's architecture. Without exception, each description of the Edge extolls the technologically savvy way of measuring and continuously adjusting characteristics pertaining to the micro climate or the population of the building, but very little is noted in respect to the formal order of space.<sup>3</sup> AI optimization was not attempted through architectural means — such as material transparency for the modulation of light, or structural porosity for the modulation of air flow, as mere examples; instead, the mechanical systems of modulation are disconnected from the body of architecture; the result: an environment in ironic parallel to the physical presence of architecture.

Notwithstanding its unremarkable architecture, The Edge has been proclaimed as nothing short of a “cultural revolution” on the basis of its unusual occupation style: each day desks and offices are redistributed. The human occupant, through their subjective presence in architecture, becomes key to an architectural conceptualization of space, the subject-object relationship that is in a permanent repositioning and tracking becomes the mode of spatial definition. In the age of digitalization, the continuously tracked relationship between subject and object is partially or wholly digitalized. Understanding the method of digitalization requires revisiting of the historical positioning of the human subject while comprehending architecture's object.

Architecture as a spatial organization, a formal architectural order, ensuing from the directional relationship subject—object, is a theoretical stance placing the subject in the position of *understanding* architecture through vision. This geometrical relationship of the subject to the object is definable through optical laws of perspectival projection. The awareness of perspectival projection is often traced to the representation of architecture in painting during the Renaissance, notably described in Alberti's treatise *On Painting*<sup>4</sup>. Even more importantly, it became possible for the reverse construction of perspectival projection to be used as a design tool — allowing



Otto, "Francesco Borromini."

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2 Palazzo Spada, section along the gallery axis showing perceived space in dashed lines.

3 Character creation in an online game, Example from *World of Warcraft*. Image: Blizzard Entertainment, 2025.

6 Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building*. The subject-object connection with respect to architecture and perspectives has been discussed in much detail by Robin Evans as a conceptual connection between architecture and mathematics, geometry in particular. Furthermore, he describes a directionality from drawing towards building. "Translations from Drawing to Building," 165.

7 Reilly, "World of Warcraft Reaches 12 Million Subscribers."

*World of Warcraft* is one of the oldest and most popular games simultaneously connecting millions (over 9M in February 2024 and reportedly more than 140M over time) of participants at a moment in time in a digital environment the representation of which is shared amongst the digital replicas while the physical human players are geographically dispersed.

the assumption of perspectival projection to effectively modulate the perception of physical three-dimensional space. For example, Borromini's well-known visual "enlargement" of Palazzo Spada<sup>5</sup> is achieved by consciously using the optical illusion of perspectival projection as a design tool.<sup>6</sup> A gallery in the palazzo appears more than four-times longer than its actual length — a perception of a larger scale which is achieved by sloping the floor and varying the height of ceilings, column size and spacing. Spectacular as it may be, this illusion of an enlarged space only works if the viewing subject is standing within a specific optimal viewing position. Only from that position can one conjure a *subjective* opinion about the height and distance of the perspectivally foreshortened space based on *previously encountered* similar spaces and the awareness of his or her own height and distance from the implied flat composite image of a view. Thus, three-dimensional physical space is clearly dependent on the conception afforded by the two-dimensional image — through the construction of a perspective view. The human subject's awareness of his or her own figure and proportions gives measure and reference to the spatial order — the architecture.

An extension of the conception of spatial order in digital terms became quickly necessitated by the advent and popularity of video games. The urgency of the resolving overlaps and intersections of interacting co-players necessitated an order of digital spatiality. Geometrical projection-based visual representation of digitally defined and ideated space opened the possibility to imagine interaction within a digitally invented space, as if it were an optical illusion of another world. The resounding expansion of digital worlds through online gaming came shortly after the online game *World of Warcraft* was introduced in 2004<sup>7</sup>; the population of active paying subscribers quickly reached twelve million players. What happened in the early 2000s, and overwhelmingly so in 2004 with the launch of *World of Warcraft*, is that online communication — for business or leisure — evolved into an idea of space due to the persistency of the gaming digital subject which continues to exist, and be seen by other logged-in players, after the subject's human player is no longer connected to the digital world.

Even if digitally defined space were to be accepted as spatial by its theoretical definition though mathematical coordinates, the human subject could only be imagined within this Cartesian space through mathematical definition of *virtuality* — as a *Virtuvian Man*. This *Virtuvian Man* — not a misspelling but rather a virtual rendition of Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*, has been known by a few names already — an avatar, a char[acter], an emoji-con, recently and most overwhelmingly: a *skin*. What makes the *Virtuvian* subject, and his or her corresponding digital environment equivalently anthropocentric — or *avatarocentric* — is that this subject is inscribed in mathem-



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4 Bitmoji avatars positioned geographically and their *Snapchat* appearance modified accordingly to reflect a solar eclipse in 2017. Image: Alex Heath/Business Insider/Snapchat.

8 The overtly popular social app *Snapchat* maintains a bitmoji (avatar) continuously and references the real geographical location of the human subject associated with the bitmoji.

atically measured terms, algorithmically defined and geometrically represented by coordinate-based terms in exactly the same way as the environment's architecture. Gaming engines, i.e. coded computer software, often with the use of AI, in effect define Cartesian coordinates and then continuously check the veracity of this algebraic construction by converting (translating) the coordinates into a two-dimensional representation of perspectival projection which in turn is understood by the human eye as spatial.

While physical architectural order can be perceived and understood through a flat two-dimensional representation thereof, for example through perspective of a similar previously encountered projection as is the case in Palazzo Spada, the digital definition of space is already three-dimensionally conceived. In other words, digital *space*'s only mode of existence is in the form of mathematically formulated coordinates — that is, its conception is already three-dimensional by definition and two-dimensional projective representations on screens or VR devices are only a secondary representation, however indispensable in “accessing” the reality of digital space.

Hence, geometry, and particularly perspective, becomes the basis of the spatial comprehension which gives the possibility of conceptualization of algebraically defined objects in much the same way that the mechanism of real space perception is explained as an optical geometrical sketch of how the brain interprets the information captured by the eyes. In other words, the virtual gaming space is actually three-dimensional by definition since it exists only as a concept defined through three dimensional coordinates. Understanding and accessing this scientifically described three-dimensionality, however, necessitates a two-dimensional projection, constructed using the same rules as if it were showing physical architectural space. The Vitruvian and Vitruvian subjects, the skin and the human impose referencing control on their respective environments through the rules of projective geometry and with the premise of a subject's scale and proportions.

The World of Warcraft character remained in that “world,” it also did not disappear upon a player's exit from the game. However, with the proliferation of gaming worlds, a human could define multiple characters as multiple iterations and replications of a digital subject. Moreover, many of these characters can exist in more than one digital world. The character can further assume aspects of the appearance of their human and as alter-egos in the form of digital figurines; the characters can start to inhabit maps corresponding to real locations.<sup>8</sup> AI-generated alterations to the representations of the figurines adapt their appearance to reflect a real location's specificity. These adjustments to representation are often independent of the subject's perception but in direct response to the object of the digitally measured environment.

- 9 "The term 'sandbox' is aptly derived from the concept of a child's sandbox—a play area where kids can build, destroy, and experiment without causing any real-world damage. Similarly, a digital sandbox allows experimentation and testing without repercussions outside its confined space." via *Proofpoint* cyber security industry leader.
- 10 Game Developer (online publication on gaming) reporting on Will Wright's talk in Vancouver (June 9, 2008).

The absorption of real humans into representations, via digitally measured relationships to the environment — such as location, speed, proximities, frequency—has coincided with the relative loss of interest in traditional games — those with a predetermined quest to be fulfilled or a score to be bettered. The online games of the 2020s have moved away from the quest scenarios in favor of open-ended worlds. Popular titles, such as Fortnite, Minecraft and Roblox, which play out in open worlds, fall into a new category of “sandbox games” to signify both the absence of a preexisting goal and the possibility of modifying the environment. “The term “sandbox” is aptly derived from the concept of a child's sandbox—a play area where kids can build, destroy, and experiment without causing any real-world damage. Similarly, a digital sandbox allows experimentation and testing without repercussions outside its confined space.”<sup>9</sup>

In 2008, the creator of The Sims game—one of the two games that started the sandbox genre—Will Wright discussed gaming as a way to define “possibility space, build models of experiences, and collect reference knowledge called 'schema' that better enable us to successfully navigate through our reality.”<sup>10</sup>

The subject's engagement with a *sandbox* environment's object is simultaneously limited by the clear boundary of what constitutes the *box*, i.e. digital projective representation, but also freed by the countless multitude of digital objects to be created in the *sand* — digitally algebraically defined objects that can be perspectively projected like the subject. The veracity of representation and credibility of persistence of the digitally described subject is made possible through the geometrical projection and shared time duration. In other words: the human subject is replicated into a subject who is mathematically defined in time. The replicate is further kept into existence and continuous, often autonomous, evolution by the many versions (various worlds) of an interconnected digital environment, continuously redefined into persistence. Some of these open digital worlds are referring to geographically determined locations, i.e., physical places on Earth that have been digitally projected as to become accessible to the digital subject.

Gradually, with the abandonment of the demand for a *quest* and the adoption of the open world sandbox model on the one hand, and the naturalization of skins into social media interactions — complete with the geographical positioning of the skin, also called a *bitmoji*, digital representation has transformed into open multiplication in the creation of a digital entity, a subject-skin.

The digital subject was conceived in a mode of *avatarocentric* control of the digital spatiality through the reliance on projective two-dimensional representations, such as perspective. With the digital subject's continued

- 11 A related sociological/philosophical study on the question of identity in the age of social media was developed by Sherry Turkle. That study questions the idea of self from a Lacanian premise. Turkle, "Who Am We?," 148-152.

replication, or *spawning*, to use the gaming term, and the multiple entries into digitalizations, and marked proliferation of digital two-dimensional representations of physical environment — tracked and pieced together through the many games and digital medias that are connected — the definition of the subject has become less precise. While visual representation of the subject, through projection such as perspective, was intended to conceptualize digital interactions as taking place in visualized space, overwhelming digital representation of physical space has allowed the digital subject to be *scattered* across physical and digital, leading to an ambiguous ironic positioning of the subject in relation to physical or digital space.<sup>11</sup> The human subject underwent a complete re-definition to be “spawned” in the form of an avatar — entirely in digital terms. Subsequently, the semi-autonomous digital replicas, the bitmoji subjects re-entered the physical world through actual geographical positioning referenced from the physical world. Meanwhile, the physical, solidly built, environment’s response to digitalization has been to either exist entirely as a digital model represented similarly to the subject, or alternatively — to incorporate some electronic means of referencing the physical object, some digital connectivity as a common reference system.

The first appliance purported to have been connected to the internet (called ARPANET at the time) was a Coca-Cola vending machine located in a building on Carnegie-Mellon University’s campus — at some time during 1982. As the story goes, a graduate student unnerved by the vending machine’s location four minutes away from his office, and its irregular stocking, devised a way of checking on the availability of drinks without making the walk to the machine. After some creative wiring of the indicator lights and some programming, the computer science department fellow students were able to check the status of the vending machine from their respective computers. From the point of view of these students that surely appeared as a case of subject referencing object, a human subject describing, defining and ultimately controlling the inanimate object. Considering the manner of reference, however, the vending machine had to ‘communicate’ with the internet by sending the same kind of signals, or packets, in the same format, or protocols, as the human students did while exchanging thoughts via ARPANET-sent messages. That is the inanimate machine was behaving in a manner identical to the live humans. The objects in human environments able to communicate in a similar way will come to be described as participating in the Internet of Things (IoT) and by 2008–2009 close to thirteen billion such objects existed, which meant that more things than people were connected through IoT.

And while the Coke machine at Carnegie Mellon may have been a single device with a straightforward communication vocabulary of ‘full’ or

- 12 The episode discussed aired in 2019. By this date the number of IoT connected objects has reached 9.5 billion, while the entire Earth's population has remained under 8 billion.

'empty', the IoT would evolve and amass into an entire typology of 'smart buildings', smoothly allowing for the gradual loss of the hierarchical conception of subject referring to object, where the subject-object or subject-environment connection deeply embedded in the center of past architectural treatises becomes ambiguous: IoT allows 'things' — appliances, furniture, entire buildings and urban spaces to be interconnected in a similar way and with similar weight as people being interconnected, i.e., the internet is an equalizing *inter-net* where things and humans have equally defined access to an equally shared reality. The conceptual duality of coexistent digital and physical referent systems that equalize the description of subject and object through both representation system (computer generated perspective) and referent connectivity system (the Internet) aims at intentional ambiguity and renders the attempted ambiguity ironic and the subject-object physically and digitally referenced relationships as existing in parallel rather than in a complimentary or equivalent way.

For example, lest this loss of directionality or weight in the subject-object relationship remains lost on architecture, a popular sitcom capitalized on the comedic aspects of a now commonplace situation — conversing with a refrigerator. A highly discussed episode of the sitcom "Modern Family"<sup>12</sup> showed one of its main characters, Cameron, literally singing a duet with his smart fridge (named Brigitte) — a situation followed by an infuriated partner, Mitchell, finally resorting to unplugging of the intelligent appliance in a jealous fit of competition with the aforementioned device. The memorable scene is an instance of the contrariness of this relationship in a building to a subject-object relationship constructed through the commanding gaze of the human subject, as in the perspective-derived anthropocentric tradition of architecture, or in the orthogonally derived juxtaposition and clear differentiation (but not mutual negation) of the modernist subject-object relationship.

Similarly, a scene in the animated film *The Mitchells against the Machines* alludes to the concept of the inversion of object and subject. The operating system of what appears to be every consumer object imaginable has gone rogue and turned predatory towards humans. Toys, toasters, laundry machines, refrigerators, devices of any kind have come to "life" and the live humans are in the center. While the premise of the film focuses on the control and power of an operating system, the image of centrality alludes to the repositioning of the subject in an observed spot. The subject is not projecting the gaze, the subject is being objectified, it is being studied, measured, contained. The former objects, on the other hand, are finally *orbiting* around the studied humans — in a reference to digital modeling and digital twinning, the human subjects are digitally repositioned in the focus of



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- 13 Ferguson, "Apollo 13: the first digital twin." The conditions for a simulator to be considered a digital twin are listed by Siemens (the producer of the lighting elements in the Apollo 13 aircraft). While unlike contemporary digital twin which rely on IoT, the aircraft was in constant contact with the mission center in Texas through "two-way data transfers."

a controlling omni view of objectifying data collection devices and revealed as a twin model to be destroyed and reconfigured.

Finally, the premise of the IoT rests with an idea of geometrical representation of the *Things* connected, regardless of the parameters reported, as it is the perception of the Thing's presence that is being manifested to the subject's self-location on the outside of the object, i.e., measured parameters are being transmitted to the Internet in order to ascertain their visibility in connection to a human subject visible to a shared internet, as a system of geometrical projection.

The representation of a physical environment, the architectural object, becomes indispensable for the object of architecture's entry into a relationship to the digital subject. Enter the concept of the *Digital Twin*.

A digital twin was first intended as an insurance policy for an object in crisis.

Building physical models of various scales is not a novel design practice. The use of such models is unidirectional — from model object to real object — and any change in a representational model is initiated from outside the object and actuated unidirectionally towards the eventual *real design* product. The original and the copy are clearly defined, whereas the model, even if historically preceding the real, is considered a replica. Moreover, the unidirectional connection is maintained only for the duration of the design process. A digital *twin* is conceptualized in an entirely different way, made evident by the adopted term. Twins are not replicas; one twin may be identical to another but neither one is the copy, nor is either one an original. Twins are their own selves. Considering a physical and a digital entity as twins assumes their equivalency.

While the actual term *digital twin* came in use in practice through a NASA report from 2010, the concept has been deployed by astronauts for at least the past fifty years. The digital twin's usefulness, however, was highlighted during the narrow averting of disaster during the Apollo 13 mission. The characteristics of the simulators of the aircraft modules, which qualified these particular simulators as the first digital twins are as follows: the physical object twinned is out of reach (for example in outer space, but can also be otherwise inaccessible) but also continuously connected.<sup>13</sup> Further, digital twins are adaptable and responsive to which two characteristics are relatively easy to achieve in a digital model; the lunar aircraft's more than a dozen models and simulators were physically changed and re-engineered multiple times during the three day duration of the crisis.

While a sequential record of the events is feasible, it was the possibility to maintain a continuous two-way connection between an aircraft's changes far away in space and the multiple re-engineered responses of the former



duplicates housed in a building in Texas, on Earth, that makes the duplicates format of existence comparable to digital twinning. The remote connection between aircraft and control center required both devices and coding to make the continuous re-referencing possible — digital twins construct a relationship as an entity in itself; further, the object of the link as a persisting element becomes essential for the continuous intelligent (AI) existence of both the digital twin and the twinned reality. If indeed, it was a Coca-Cola vending machine that introduced the IoT, it is not surprising then that the possibility to conceptualize a link as an entity, a function, a service such as vending, outside of both subject and object, that would allow the IoT to facilitate digital twinning.

Since the connection between physical and digital twins does not need to be rigidly predetermined, it is a connection that is based on learning between the two entities in what would be described as artificially intelligent way of observation, however limited or expanded the similar situations could be found. A smart building, like the Edge, then is performing similarly to sandbox online game, like Fortnite. Both the building and the game claim as their main purpose accommodating people, for work or entertainment, both claim ingenuity and innovation based on a similar digital system of geometrical projection as a twining relationship and mathematical positioning. Architectural experimentation in the early 2000s relied heavily on the use of sensors to provoke spontaneous responsive change in buildings. Building elements connected to a particular monitoring sensor performed a function predetermined by the algorithm embedded in that system — most often the actuated alterations concerned the actual geometry of the building in question. It was only through the use of sensors through AI-powered twinning that alterations did not need to be actuated: an action became based on similar situations. Most importantly, and most ironically, in both the building and the game, functionality of the work place or the gaming experience is not compromised vastly because of the individual compliance of participation — whether an employee opts out of tracking or a gamer takes a break — the building/gaming place persevere in physicality and as digital twins, and the missing participants in work/game are smoothed over by the best guess of the digital intelligently generated compensation. Ironically, this flexible indeterminacy is achieved by the fastest and most precise of contemporary tools — the artificially intelligent ones.

Non-ironic architecture, on the other hand, is an object of determinacy and certitude; it is the antithesis of an object in crisis — it solemnly acknowledges its own heaviness rather than hide or question it. Non-ironic architecture is monumental, it echoes and reflects a subjective presence without re-instantiating it — instead of replicating, it reaffirms. Light and



WENDY SEWING ON PETER'S SHADOW

6

14 Unwin, *Shadow. The architectural power of withholding light*, Routledge 2020. As an acknowledged master of shadow, Louis Kahn has been known to pronounce "Our work is of shadow."

6 Vintage illustration of Peter Pan Story - Wendy Sewing on Peter's Shadow. Image: Michelle Bridges / Alamy Stock Photo

shadow in such monumental architecture become the measurement and validation of presence and solidity. The human subject in the context of monumental architecture, for example in a Louis Kahn building, is grounded; his or her shadow stretching across the surfaces and following the outlines of heavy architectural form. Analogously to an avatar establishing reference measure in gaming space, relying on the assumption of a player's knowledge of perspective of one's own dimensions. A Kahnian shadow<sup>14</sup> establishes the boundary and reference between human and architecture through the explicit projection of shadows on the solidity of a building. In both cases, the projective mechanisms are used to reconfirm credibility and stability.

Shadows have been used to indicate the passing of time, they have also been cultivated to articulate space through distance, scale and form and to sharpen and intensify atmospheres of place. There is also a particular case of a shadow in crisis and the ensuing ironic reading of a spatial subject-object relationship as seen with the fictional persona of Peter Pan, especially in the latter one's capacity as an antecedent of the avatar in digital space.

First introduced in 1902 by the Scottish novelist and playwright J. M. Barrie, Peter Pan is most famously endowed with eternal youth and an ability to fly. While perpetual childhood has been discussed at length in literary, psychological and philosophical studies, it is the ability to fly that sets Peter Pan's presence inside a house that is at odds with the house's inhabitants. Buildings being grounded, and architecture conceptualized through the experience of a similarly grounded human subject, Peter's independence from gravity during interactions with other children in the house displaces the stability of the subject-object relationship. The shadow of the flying child is expectedly disconnected from his body — while in flight. It stands as a reference to the surrounding space and a marker of the solidity of the walls and the distance between the body and the environment the length between subject and object. The naturalness of a body-shadow connection, however, is overturned when Peter touches the floor, a chair or a windowsill while his shadow does not connect to his body and alludes to a disembodied experience — a detachment of the subject reference marker to the object. The continued presence of a shadow, nonetheless, attempts to establish this marker of the subject as an entity in and of itself — while the idea of a subject without a visible reference to the object, a creature without a shadow is not novel — Barrie must have been well-versed in his native Celtic lore describing demons as creatures without a shadow, or a reflection for that matter, as an allusion that those non-corporeal beings might exist only within the mind of the beholder. Returning to an avatar's reliance on perspective as a tool in ascribing subjectivity to the digital object by simulating Borromini's technique of immersion, it is noteworthy that the relationship between Peter Pan

- 15 **Barrie, *Peter Pan and Wendy*,  
Hodder&Stoughton, UK, 1911. Boldface type is  
added to highlight references.**

and his shadow only enters the realm of irony by virtue of that referential object momentarily taking the subject's role and space — thus allowing for the shadow to become both a measure of space and a creator of an alternative space — a digital twin so to speak. Curiously, the excerpt introducing the free will of Peter Pan's shadow reassures of its "normality" as a mere projection and simultaneously normalizes the possibility of relating to that projection as a physical entity in its own right — the shadow can be "folded" and "put away in a drawer":

“...You may be sure Mrs. Darling examined the shadow carefully, but it was quite the ordinary kind.

...She decided to roll the shadow up and put it away carefully in a drawer.”

“If he thought at all, but I don't believe he ever thought, it was that he and his shadow, when brought near each other, would join like drops of water, and when they did not he was appalled. He tried to stick it on with soap from the bathroom, but that also failed.

...[after the shadow has been sewn to the soles of Peter Pan's shoes]...  
And he clenched his teeth and did not cry, and soon his shadow was behaving properly, though still a little creased.”<sup>15</sup>

The independent movement of a shadow which is both made accessible to perception by adhering to building surfaces and inaccessible by defying the geometrical principle of light projection as well as gravity's force on the subject casting the shadow. The runaway state of Peter Pan's shadow conjures up alternative modes of inhabiting architecture, as well as alternative ways of subject projection.

In Peter Pan's case, the marker of body in space appears to be only temporarily detachable, foldable and even trappable. The shadow, as a pure signification of a relationship between a subject and an object, is behaving as an entity which alternates between referencing the space and referencing the subject, or behaving as a copy and behaving as an independent runaway subject. The identification of a relationship between a subject and an object as an entity allows the constructive use of ironic tension between intention and reality. Identifying this relationship as an entity outside the subject or the object defines an entry into the concept of the digital twin.

While the simulators at hand during the Apollo 13 crisis can be retrospectively theorized as digital twins, it was only in 2010 that the idea took shape and was named. During a University of Michigan conference, the NASA scientist John Vickers presented a “Technology Roadmap” that would

- 16 LAIIER inc, "What is a Smart Building," September 2022. <http://blog.laiier.io/what-is-a-smart-building-the-edge-amsterdam>

introduce the idea and implementation of something called a *digital twin*. In that report, Vickers defines the concept as “a set of virtual information constructs that fully describe a potential or actual physical manufactured product from the micro atomic level to the macro geometrical level”. Digital models had existed for several decades before 2010. What differs in the concept of a digital twin’s implementation is the third component: original, copy, and *link*. The link between the physical and the digital twins is continuously maintained and, moreover, it is a two-way link that permits the digital twin to actuate changes in the physical one. Most of the time this link is created as an AI entity.

Returning to the example of The Edge Amsterdam to re-examine the subject-object relationship in the context of digital twins.

“[The Edge Amsterdam] uses machine learning algorithms [i.e. A.I.] that are focused on optimizing not only for energy consumption and performance but also for user comfort and productivity. The building uses only about 30% of the energy of a conventional office building of the same size. The network measures and manages a range of things that affect people’s comfort in the space: lighting, temperature, CO2 levels, and humidity.

The Edge also employs an app as part of its IoT network: through their phones, workers can find parking spaces, open desks, report issues to facilities management, and see their own energy consumption while within the building.”<sup>16</sup>

As discussed, the Edge sensors continuously measure and monitor any parameter prone to change — temperature, humidity, occupancy, light, air flow, water usage and local climate conditions, functionality, paper stock in printers and even the readiness of coffee machines and assignments of desks while the occupants are free to move around and change their workday spot with the help of a dedicated telephone app:

“The Edge has unparalleled vision into the behavior of its inhabitants and an artificial intelligence-like ability to provide them whatever is needed when it is needed. For instance, The Edge uses a mobile app to track when an employee leaves their house to go to work so when they arrive it can direct them into an open parking spot. It also sees when fewer employees are expected in certain areas of the building so sections can be shut down if deemed not in use, cutting lighting and heating costs. At every location the building will adjust lighting and temperature to an individual’s preference. For example, if someone is

- 17 Tracy, "Meet the world's most intelligent smart building: The Edge in Amsterdam," *RCR Wireless News*, November 10, 2016.

- 18 Julia, "The Edge, Amsterdam: showcasing an Exemplary IoT Building," Dept of Architecture, University of Cambridge, 2018.

- 19 Idem.

more sensitive to bright lighting, The Edge can dim the lights to a predetermined point the moment they enter a new location.”<sup>17</sup>

The relationship between building and occupants, object and subject, is designed to achieve extreme precision of coordination by replicating physical reality into a digitally defined “identical model”, a *Digital Twin*; the impossibility of a precise relationship or an accurate replication becomes clear when occupancy produces ironic incoherencies: to facilitate the link between building and digital twin, the building’s client and main tenant, Deloitte Netherlands, distributed smartphones with a pre-installed Mapiq app to all employees. The dedicated app can be used before any activity is undertaken — apart from finding a suitable workday spot, it can also locate colleagues, read a meeting’s location from one’s online calendar and suggest the route to that location, check the schedule of trains for after the meeting, track progress in the on-site gym, order food and otherwise continuously micro-coordinate life in the building for over 2800 employees. Rather than architecture revealing and ordering the space of the human subject, the movement and the view of the latter are engaged and guided through a digital device system that references the building and the humans in a deliberately non-architectural manner. According to a case study produced by researchers from the Architecture Department at the University of Cambridge,<sup>18</sup> not everything in the building can function by sensor command alone. The clash between the intended effect of optimal occupancy — digitally defined and optimized by AI learning from existing databases of building usage — and the reality of spontaneous humans at work can be described in ironic terms. For example, since the existing number of desks available to be assigned within the building are only half of the number of employees — presuming meetings, home-office days, vacations, etc. — some days, most often Fridays, the mass of “surplus” employees arrive looking for a desk only to find themselves crowded in non-working areas like the cafe, gym, and lobby. While the full convivial cafes might enhance the experience of the building, the unintended distribution is clearly at odds with the precisely monitored optimized spaces exactly because of the precision of the intended occupation. Moreover, in another problem in this complex orchestration of architectural experiences through digital devices is that the sensors embedded in the building can only communicate with ‘willing’ smartphones; “Deloitte’s employees can select, and often do, to not be tracked by their Mapiq apps.”<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the responsive features of the building are not able to be accurately adjusted to the reality of physical humans. Ironically, the perception of digital markers that the building seeks would be most accurate at the times when the building is entirely empty as tracking noncompliant



nce would be theoretically impossible only at those times. The physical and the digital realities, the building and its digital twin, bypass each other even if conceived and conceptualized as identical.

Digitalization has allowed replication processes to achieve a speed and accuracy unattainable in previous times. The change of terminology from replication to twinning," however, is not a casual one. The digital copies are likened to identical twins inasmuch as these become entities of their own — the physical original and the digital equivalent. Unlike identical copies of the industrial age, digital copies are identical only in definition and not in material composition. The precision of replication is greater but the copies are entities of their own existing only through mathematics and perceivable only through geometry. It is then natural that AI methods would attempt to lose the circle of replication and base further mathematical definition, i.e., further entity creation, on the basis of perceptible visualization only — the AI approach is not unlike a projective geometry system. Yet, perspective and axonometry assumed either a single, mono vision construction of perspectives space with a single point focus or the omni vision parallel projection of axonometrical space with a focus on infinity. AI projection foci are dispersed and multiplicitous, but definable.

The process of creating digital copies of the environment, i.e. to objects, extends to defining digital copies of humans. Many copies. Both subjects and objects are twinned, duplicated and interlinked through multitudes of sensors and algorithms. Unlike the IoT which equalizes subjects and objects through attributing "smartness" by a process of access and connection, digital twinning equalizes by attributing intelligence by a process of referencing, controlling, adjusting, correcting and monitoring any potential difference. Continuously. The Edge Amsterdam is touted as the world's smartest and most intelligent building in part thanks to its more than twenty-eight thousand sensors controlling the capacity of rooms, tables, parking spots, bathroom usage and cleaning staff, occupants' location and personal habits down to individual humidity preferences, solar energy usage among other controlled values. Perfect twinning of all imaginable criteria is the ambition. The emergent actual disparity between twins and duplication processes, especially the disparity between intent and result as in irony, occurs when the individuals supposed to be observed and tracked in order to enhance the occupied building by literally becoming a part of a symbiotic organism refuse to adhere or participate<sup>20</sup>. Hence, smart buildings can open to constructively actuated juxtapositions of the scattered subject to the architectural environment, the ironic relationships of simulated discreetness or incompleteness of a subject to a similarly unevenly defined environment.



With the conception and actualization of “reals” as human subjects and “copies” as inanimate digital subjects in interaction, succeeded by things and beings interacting over the IoT—which happens to also be the Internet of humans—thus animate and inanimate internet-connectees are equally digitized, the equalizing smoothness of AI proliferation is different from the scaling of the Industrial Revolution, rather than being expansive by means of multiplication, the digital AI revolution is densifying within creative boundaries of existing architecture by means of proliferation.

*A Provisional Conclusion* with respect to the irony in architects' fear of technologically anachronistic architecture: “Technology is the answer but what was the question?”<sup>21</sup>

If AI is used for *optimization* in digital twins, especially in large models like smart buildings and smart cities, then generative AI would have to anticipate rather than react and optimize.

On the back of the pre-histories of digital twins interconnected with their originals through the IoT, ambiguity has befallen architecture's form since 2022 when ChatGPT and other visual *generative AI* tools were introduced—seemingly at everyone's disposal. Ironically, what would normally be data flowing from physical objects or subjects to be used in optimization functionality tested on digital twins, has become data accessible “mid-stream” and utilized for the free generation of not optimized but fantasized representation of essentially a digital twin.

The availability of easily accessible methods of digital visual generation, even *creation*, is an availability that has reached the top of the Gartner hype curve<sup>22</sup> and it appears that every aspect of life is eager to claim some AI-ness; the speed, ease and sheer sleekness of particularly of AI-generated images has been nothing short of amazing. Nevertheless, it is the AI images' two-dimensional nature which makes them relevant to architecture, and it is the artificially or rather superficially intelligent way of surfacing with immense precision and speed, without the help or the need of depth or even translation of any three-dimensionality defined mathematics as with previous digital images. AI generated images are perspectives that are not revealed through construction, movement that is not expressed through vectors and they are disconnected from both sides of digital twining from subject and object to achieve ultimate lightness.

If indeed, architecture relied on the connection between mind and eye and the conception of space occurred in a mechanical geometrical manner, which explicates the three-dimensional order onto a two-dimensional plane, then computing is different because digital space is already three-dimensionally represented through coordinates, algebraically represented in matrices. The possibility for a human to “access” computational or algebraically

23 Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Philosophy*, Volume LIX, Issue 236, pp433-460, Oxford University Press, 1950.

24 Turing, 'Chess (1953)', in B J Copeland (ed.), *The Essential Turing*, Oxford, 2004.

expressed space is only through a graphic representation. The *appearance* of perspective is, on the one hand, the mental expectation of a geometrically constructed monocular perfect perspective and, on the other hand, the algebraic matrix divided by a  $z$  as a depth coefficient which provides a way of “understanding” and touching of the two conceptions.

Moreover, it appears that the very instantaneity of transition from conceptualized responsive architecture, which constituted an architectural conceptual search for responsive form, to a near-total abandonment of formal ideation and giving in to the seduction of singing with a fridge, might have also suspended architecture's rhetoric. Such an ironic suspension of architecture is precipitated and actuated by the disheveling of its subject's integrity in a more profound way than ever before — rather than a Frankensteinian recomposing of the entity or the idea of the subject from parts, that subject — in parts and as a whole — is simultaneously multiplied and scattered.

The subject is no longer observing but being observed while data is “extracted” from the human, formerly acting as a subject, by the object. Each of the data extractions, in turn gives the possibility of a digitally defined subject — definitions are multiplied as many times as the number of data set types. The digital twins of the human subject are multiplied; they are also scattered to respond to the temporal or positional optimizations initiated by the digitally twinned object.

Thus, in the digital era relationship between subject and object, the multiplied scattered state of the subject(s) is being referenced by a multitude of twinned objects. Such a reiterated subject-object digital continuum is dependent on the optimizing processes of functional pattern detection, i.e. artificial intelligence. The equalizing—optimizing—agency of artificially intelligent processes linking twinned subject(s) and object(s) operate within a boundary “around” all acceptable sources which are digitally referenced and can be used to generate new combinations, AI-generated form. In the context of AI's manner of operation from and within a boundary of possibilities, it is important to notice here the contribution of Alan Turing who created the very concept of artificial intelligence, or in his words, machines capable of thinking — at the time only as a theoretical conjecture. Turing devised a method for ascertaining the intelligence of machines, where the ultimate test consisted of the ability to understand and generate human speech, the Turing Test.<sup>23</sup> The test, conceived as a playful conversation scenario, was originally called the “imitation game” in reference to the computers' pattern-based decision making — significantly in the discussion of a boundary around possible data, around the same year, 1948–51, Turing co-programmed an example of machine learning — *Turochamp*<sup>24</sup> which can be considered the first digital game...a chess game. While the program proved

- 25 A *collab* with computing here would refer to the embedding of sensor-driven IoT objects are activated by AI-tooled digital optimization that finds expression in the physicality of the building — for example, by changing light, color, and other appearance of building elements.

too complex to be run successfully by the computational devices of the time, it is noteworthy that this early form of an AI method was applied to a form of *gaming* and solutions were sought in a finite pool of possible moves, a *sandbox* open to internal progressive *complexification*.

Because the source data possibilities are finite in quantity — regardless of the vastness of the boundaries around the available pool of data — an eventual saturation of AI derived outcomes can be theoretically reached. In anticipation of such saturation, AI processes lead to a smoothening of all results and variability being sought in “unusual” combinations from within. This anticipatory saturation of AI normality appears to have been taken up by a culture of *collabs* — superseding the “both/and” credo of postmodernism from fragments to an amalgamation of formerly singular entities — superheroes like Batman and Superman, Godzilla and King Kong begin to feature together in films, former fashion adversaries like Gucci and Balenciaga team up to rebrand in collective and collectible items. The collaborations have even become more desirable than the “single origin” entities — accordingly, it appears that architecture is steadily attempting a formal collab with computing.<sup>25</sup>

The irony of such a collab, however, is revealed as not only are the subject and object in a relationship with continuously switching directionality and questioned ends, but the plentitude of physical sensors, or AI-ready data, which should produce this “collab” conspicuously do not include any architectural generation sourced from intrinsically architectural data and [A]Intelligent buildings’ architecture intelligently continues to react to the ever stable “sensor” for gravity showing 9.8m/s<sup>2</sup> and [A]Intelligently generated architectural design continues to be dependent on 2D representation and geometrical projection.

Finally, the object itself, the architectural environment, which has most recently been through the consequences of rhetorical purification (modernism), recomposition (postmodernism), dematerialization (parametricism) appears to be in a relationship with a “naturally artificial” subject through an AI-induced digital *smoothening*. The smooth AI-generated images often appear “retro” and nostalgic, as a romantic vision of an easy life from the past which is co-linear with the promised easiness of the present, this outcome is a ready-for consumption imagery. But if irony is an *act* rather than a *significance*, then architecture which is “activated” through AI is about to come into being through constructive irony.

The scattered self, measured and tracked, defined continuously with precision — not only geometrically described but defined by measurable parameters — and the change measured in time is related to a fragmented and layered environment. The intelligence of learning from observation, as

- 26 In reference to Plato's allegory of the cave, described in his *Republic*. Eyer, "Translation from Plato's *Republic*."

opposed to experience, is only as thorough as the view, hence the visual nature of artificial intelligence as well. All the information or thoughts that fall outside the view are outside of consideration, all generated “artificial” knowledge” is added to the pile of examples.

AI generative tools — creating something new in textual, graphical, spatial form — rely on the super-fast examination of super vast databases of past examples (to “learn” from) but the multiple duplication, replication, multiplication, re-equalization and twinning already described is creating a pool of examples that are already quite similar to each other. In this relative homogeneity, architecture is left with the ironic task of finding order by searching for hierarchies and proportions in the sameness. Enactments of artificial intelligence rely on a mimicry of a process rather than product — i.e. AI tools “let the data do the programming” ; and while irony stems from a disparity of intention and effect in the process of duplication, it is the mixing of the different kinds of duplicates during in the digital twinning, and their subsequent accessibility through the IoT that allows a “smoothing over” and the legitimization of instances of newness as products of generative AI that are non-traceable simulations. Is it possible that an AI cave cannot be exited?<sup>26</sup>

The parallel existence of technology and buildings, as in the intelligent building approach, has precluded a meaningful co-relation of the AI optimized environment of a building and its structure and image. For example, the mechanical systems in any contemporary building that can be, and are, controlled by sensors to make that building intelligent and can be continuously optimized and adjusted through artificially intelligent solutions are not necessarily a part of that same intelligent building’s architecture. The creation of digital doubles has produced an entirely new layer of devices associated with a building — quite independent of the form, style or architecture of said building. In such case, architecture might not have to question its own conception and order in response to the AI world but rather consciously disassociate from all the IoT measuring equipment and rethink itself?

In the case of intelligent buildings, artificial intelligence glides past the object of architecture, concerning itself with concurrent optimization of experience that may not be architectural. The object of architecture and (artificial) intelligence are sidestepping each other through the creation of a digital twin. The creation of the “artificial” architecture of the digital twin, defined by tracked values, arguably removes physical architecture, in body and concept, by the *tracking* process.

Conversely, but no less ironical, in the case of architectural design through intelligently generative “artificial” space, which is accessible in representation only, the necessary step of 2<sup>d</sup> projective geometry such as pers-



pective for the re-instantiation of a digital-space-dependent avatar subject, arguably removes the human subject outside of the time dependent *tracing* process of digital subject-to-subject relationships. In both cases, the AI-intelligent implementations in buildings and AI-generated architectural design, the dialectic of irony in architecture is expressed in that the sophistication of the digital twin and the capability of artificial intelligence appear to be focused in a direction that does not directly alter architectural conception or perception — yet.



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# **Feral Surfaces**

A More-Than-Human  
Perspective on New York's Wild  
Side

**Ariane Lourie Harrison**

- 1 Richard J. Weller, Claire Hoch, and Chieh Huang, *Atlas for the End of the World*, 2017.
- 2 "Map of Life," September 1 2024.
  
- 3 Richard Deakin, *Flora of the Colosseum of Rome*, (London: Groombridge and Sons, 1855).
- 4 Matthew Gandy, *Natura Urbana* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2022), 51.
  
- 5 Martin Puchner, *Literature for a Changing Planet*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 28.

It could be ironic that formerly apocalyptic visions—flooding and fire—describe a new normal for many American cities. Just as New York City floods, so too do its burnt orange skies broadcast the simultaneously near and far presence of the March 2023 Canadian wildfires. The end of the world has been a reality for non-humans for some time now. The *Atlas for the End of the World* maps the apocalyptic collapse of species biodiversity in the wake of human urbanization and industrialization of agriculture.<sup>1</sup> So does the *Map of Life*, documenting the impact of urban land expansion projected to 2050 and the concomitant loss of other species.<sup>2</sup> These data visualizations point to the seeming inevitable increase of urban territory, and the concomitant need that wilderness—habitat for other species—be designed and built into cities.

And architects have dreamed this for centuries: Piranesi's overgrown ruins of Paestum from the 1770s depict the margins of a city inhabited by animals and outcasts; that in the demise of human buildings, emerges living space for species seen as foreign to the city. Some hundred years later, the ruins of classical architecture provided novel ecosystems meticulously noted by the naturalist Richard Deakin in his 1855 *The Flora of the Colosseum*. He catalogued and illustrated 420 different species of plants growing spontaneously on and in the Roman Colosseum.<sup>3</sup> In *Urbana Natura*, urban geographer Matthew Gandy describes multiple examples of ruin fostering new life: for example, fireweed appeared in many of London's ruins in 1944.<sup>4</sup> This article argues that rather than the demolition of the city, it is the rethinking of building surfaces that can dramatically expand non-human's potential habitats. New York offers a site for several projects that indicate a “non-human turn” in architecture.

## Urban wildlife

The city as a historical form has a conflicted relationship with biodiversity preserve. The global literature scholar, Martin Puchner, suggests that the earliest urban precincts, such as the city of Uruk described in the Epic of Gilgamesh, celebrated its successful separation of human and non-human realms: the city of Uruk as a walled enclosure that separated humans from the wilderness.<sup>5</sup> Yet when disaster strikes the city, biodiversity is secured within walled enclosures, from Noah's Ark in the Hebrew Old Testament to Utnapishtim's giant boat safeguarding fauna in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Both arcs were built expressly for the focus of safeguarding human existence in the wake of disaster, as it was understood—even then—that human existence depends on biodiversity.

- 6 Oliver Hillel, "The UN in the Urban Anthropocene," September 1 2024; United Nations, "68% of the world population projected to live in urban areas by 2050, says UN," October 1, 2024.
- 7 World Wildlife Federation, "What is the sixth mass extinction and what can we do about it," October 1, 2024.
- 8 Catherine Finn, Florencia Grattarola, Daniel Pincheira-Donoso, "More losers than winners: investigating Anthropocene defaunation through the diversity of population trends," *Biological Reviews* 98, no. 5 (2023): 1732-1748.
- 9 United Nations Environmental Programme, "A City in a Garden," July 30 2018.

Today, the conflict between biodiversity and urbanization reaches new extremes. Massive urban development characterizes the current Anthropocene period to the degree that the UN has proposed the “Urban Anthropocene” as a more descriptive way to characterize human activity on the planet, while the UN Population Division estimates that seven in ten people will live in urban areas by 2050.<sup>6</sup> For non-humans, this period represents the sixth mass extinction of global species.<sup>7</sup> Recent reports on planetary biodiversity indicate the alarming extent of the global decline of animal biodiversity: “global biodiversity is entering a mass extinction, with ecosystem heterogeneity and functioning, biodiversity persistence, and human well-being under increasing threat.”<sup>8</sup>

The biodiversity crisis, which implicates human survival from food supply to clean air and water, has turned to view cities as a new opportunity for relatively new coexistence among planetary species. Singapore sets a global standard, from the design of its “Gardens by the Bay” nature preserve / public park to the work of its National Biodiversity Centre in developing media allowing a broad public to participate in geotagging the city’s biodiversity. New York follows suit in a more dispersed format. In 2019, NYC Local Law 92/94 mandated green and/or solar roofs on all new construction or significant alteration, designating rooftops as a potential harbor for biodiversity. Other projects seek to secure urban ground against rising sea level. SCAPE’s Living Breakwater, a project that had its inception in the MOMA Rising Currents exhibition (2010), has been realized off of the south shore of Staten Island as an artificial reef that supports aquatic fauna while protecting the Long Island shore from storm surges. SCAPE’s project is noteworthy for its sensitive address of aquaculture, kayaking and marine education in communicating the value of coastal biodiversity. The Eastside Resilience project proposes a series of habitats and wildlife pockets, communicating the value of biodiversity as it relates defensively to protecting Manhattan from rising waters; and the Manhattan Waterfront Greenway as a whole demonstrates the currency of a more biodiverse approach to the city.<sup>9</sup> These projects suggest that certain of the less developable horizontal surfaces—waterways, floodzones—can somewhat pragmatically be allocated to biodiversity support. That a limited footprint be allocated to biodiversity, seems to replicate the limitations of Noah’s and Utnapishtim’s arcs, or the slivers of biodiversity corridors that emerge in West Coast cities. Yet the city harbors far more potential for biodiversity support in its vertical surfaces.

- 10 The NYC Bird Alliance (formerly Audubon) estimates that 90,000–230,000 migratory birds are killed each year in New York City by crashing into glazing. On a single day, September 14 2021, Audubon volunteers counted 261 dead birds around One World Trade Center and its neighboring structures. Maddie Bender, "Why did hundreds of birds die at the World Trade Center in one morning," September 16, 2021.
- 11 "COOKFOX and Buro Happold Design Bird and Bee Friendly Façade for Architectural Ceramics Assemblies Workshop, June 23, 2022. Also discussions with Spencer Lapp in Harrison's Feral Surfaces seminar at Yale School of Architecture, Spring 2023.
- 12 Lydia Kallipolitti, *Histories of Ecological Design, an unfinished cyclopedia* (New York: Actar, 2024), 206–214.

## Feral Surfaces

New York City buildings comprise about one hundred square miles of facades, many of which signify dazzling wealth with glazed surfaces that can fry sidewalks as well as kill birds.<sup>10</sup> Developments such as Hudson Yards reach new heights while extolling their proximity to the High Line; BIG's recent Spiral promises in graphics writ large on its façade to extend "From the High Line to the skyline," somehow glossing the fact that the combination of extensive glazing and greenery presents a certain death to migrating birds. Hudson Yards participates in the proliferation of glazed towers that compound urban heat and decimate avian biodiversity. If even a small portion of these walls—for example adding to facades whose orientations to the sun are preferred by native pollinators—could be adapted and dotted with niches and nesting spaces, the city would become more of a living fabric with ecological benefits for many species.

The notion that a building surface could host other forms of life seems to lie deep in the architectural imaginary: if one views the bee-framing roundels of Borromini's St Ivo alla Sapienza in Rome more literally, one sees an advertisement for cavity-dwelling bees. Likewise, the vermiculated stone of certain city-buildings—the Porte Saint Martin, the Louvre in Paris, the former Vanderbilt residence at 647 Fifth in New York—relate to this idea. Vermiculated, pecked, honeycombed, such treatments of stone surfaces refer the marks, burrows, holes that register animal habitation, as if architects of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century desired a vestige of the non-human presence to remain inscribed across the city's buildings. This raises the question for contemporary architecture, which offers a checkered scenario: architecture schools teem with multi-species studio projects; clusters of designers have produced multi-species installations, yet the larger integration of more-than-human habitats as new building products and components remains minimal. CookeFox's terra-cotta multi-species screening may present one of the sole examples of a façade-product addressing non-humans, yet it has yet to be deployed on an actual building façade.<sup>11</sup>

As Lydia Kallipoliti notes in her recent *Histories of Ecological Design, an unfinished cyclopedia*, practices such as Ants of the Prairie, Terreform One and Harrison Atelier represent a "non-human" turn in architecture.<sup>12</sup> Each practice has created small scale structures and installations featuring the creation of artificial habitat that effectively signals and anchors non-human species within the fabric of the city. Shared among these practices is a commitment to magnifying the problem of biodiversity collapse and building artificial habitat. Yet the modes by which to manifest the physical presence of other species differs. With "For Our neighbors" at the Brooklyn

- 13 Anna L. Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman  
Saxena and Feifei Zhou, *Feral Atlas*, *Feral  
Atlas*, September 1 2024.

14 *Ibid.*

Botanical Garden, *Ants of the Prairie* has created stunning examples of installations prompting coexistence among humans and birds, drawing on the new proximities between humans and the less charismatic “middle species” for whom Joyce Hwang has addressed her research and design over two decades. The Brooklyn Navy Yard hosted a modular cricket farm designed and built by Terreform ONE, a striking structure that magnified the chirps of its cricket inhabitants while demonstrating the compelling logics and aesthetics of insect sourced protein. Terreform ONE has underscored design that raises awareness for endangered species, eloquently summarizing this message as “Design against extinction” in their 2019 book, *Design With Life*.

The idea that the city harbor surfaces that are “feral” draws on the stunning research of Anna L. Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena and Feifei Zhou in articulating a more-than-human cityscape as the *Feral Atlas*.<sup>13</sup> The project description invokes “feral” ecologies as those “that have been encouraged by human-built infrastructures, but which have developed and spread beyond human control.”<sup>14</sup> In the exquisite drawings of the *Feral Atlas*, we find that the detritus of human activity can create now habitats for opportunistic species such as maribou storks nesting in dumped styrofoam mountains. Zhou described the drawings as a way to test the non-designed consequences of human infrastructure. The debris of human design forms a feedstock for installations such as Terreform ONE’s Bio-Informatic Digester, that prompts mealworms to feast upon Styrofoam packaging, creating a compostable mulch as a beneficial byproduct. The feral quality of these projects alludes as much to the wildness of the non-human species as it does to the untamable amounts of waste material produced by human activity. Yet the term *feral* harbors another meaning which is important to invoke in multi-species work: it derives from the Latin *feralis*, meaning funerary, or belonging to the dead. The term *feral* is useful in its potential conflation of meanings—that the wild things are dying. How design can begin to inscribe the reality of biodiversity loss into a series of design proposals, forms the starting point for our own firm Harrison Atelier’s approach to designing artificial habitats that seek to stem yet acknowledge the loss of biodiversity.

### The aesthetics of number

The immensity of planetary biodiversity, as well as its high rate of loss, makes it difficult to comprehend alarming rates of extinction against the background rate. To be fully feral, then, suggests that the dying dimension of wild things be given some if not equal footing. Designing feral surfaces

- 15 Julia Janicki, Gloria Dickie, Simon Scarr and Jitesh Chowdhury, Illustrations by Catherine Tai, "The Collapse of Insects," December 6, 2022.
  
- 16 Kelsey Kopec and Lori Ann Burd, "Pollinators in Peril," *Center for Biological Diversity Report*, 4, 2017, 1-14.
  
- 17 Elaine Scarry, "Speech Acts in Criminal Cases," in *Law's Stories: Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law*, ed. Peter Brooks & Paul Gewirtz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 166, referenced in Ariane Lourie Harrison, "Feral Architecture," *Aesthetics Equals Politics* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2019), 259.

would address this representational challenge as an aesthetics of enumeration capable of addressing the large numbers of biodiversity loss.

For example, insect populations, which represent about 80% of animal life on the planet, are collapsing so rapidly that scientists term our period one of “global Insect Apocalypse” and hazard a 75% decline of insect populations over the last 50 years.<sup>15</sup> The loss of insect life can only be estimated, because it forms a relatively large knowledge gap: only 1% of the estimated 1 million known insect species (of an estimated possibility of 5.5 million species) has been assessed. For native bees, the knowledge gap is equally significant. Many are familiar with the charismatic European honey bee, successfully domesticated globally for agricultural pollination for several centuries. Yet of the approximately 20,000+ species of bees on the planet, only about 10 of these are honey bees; the rest are native bees, responsible for pollinating about 80% of flowering plants across the planet. Native bees do not produce honey, nor do they live in hives, yet these critical specialist and generalist pollinators anchor a base of the food web. North America hosts some 4,000 species of native bees, for which the Center for Biological Diversity Report assessed that there was data on only 7% of these, of which over half were endangered.<sup>16</sup> This sequence of figures is likely quite boring to the design-motivated reader, and herein lies the design challenge: how to render these numbers—that address the dying of wild things—compelling, accessible, and urgent?

In wrestling with the aesthetics of number, I return to Elaine Scarry’s distinction of “narrative compassion” (that felt by one human identifying with the trauma of another, individual) and “statistical compassion” (that capacity to identify with people that one never experiences as individuals and knows only through numeric data).<sup>17</sup> She suggests that statistics often fail to inspire interest or compassion. The numbers somehow close down an empathetic response. Yet many examples of design demonstrate how numbers can represent a difficult story: from the 58,281 names of Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial, to Höweler+Yoon Architecture’s Memorial to Enslaved Laborers at the University of Virginia, inscribed with 577 names of enslaved men and women who labored on the UVA Grounds, along with 4,000 more stone marks estimating the number of the site’s enslaved laborers who remain unknown. The visualization of the estimated loss—as a scale that identifies individual and collective loss—seems significant as a way to evoke statistical compassion. Perhaps then we have some models for invoking this elusive type of “statistical compassion” as a design that recognizes the dual valences of the term feral as an accounting.



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18 Toke T. Høyea, Johanna Årjea, Kim Bbjerged, Oskar L. P. Hansena, Alexandros Iosifidish, Florian Leesei, Hjalte M. R. Manna,b, Kristian Meissnerj, Claus Melvad, and Jenni Raitoharjuj, "Deep learning and computer vision will transform entomology." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118, No. 2 (2021).



2

1 Harrison Atelier, 2024 Feral Surface, Barcelona, Reusing Rooftops, Honorable Mention © Harrison Atelier.

2 Harrison Atelier, Feral Surfaces Installation, Barcelona Architecture Festival, 2023 © MODEL / City of Barcelona.

3 Harrison Atelier, Pollinators Arch, The Bee Conservancy, Governors Island, 2024 © Harrison Atelier.



3

## How design can count

The recent work of our firm, Harrison Atelier, demonstrate how design can build habitat and “count” species, and in doing so, can create design that contributes to a planetary accounting of biodiversity. One dimension that differentiates our work is its enumerative quality and focus on monitoring systems; another is the focus on native bees as our “insect clients,” for whom we seek eventually to claim urban vertical surfaces as new habitat. Design can count therefore in its contribution to urban conditions (attenuating heat, increasing air quality and absorbing water) as well as adding to reconciliation ecology and scientific efforts to monitor biodiversity.

The accounting is literal in our design: 363 concrete panels each containing a maximum of 50 nesting tubes for the Pollinators Pavilion in Hudson NY, 2350 mycelium panels each containing a single nesting hole for the Feral Surfaces installation in Barcelona, and 63 hempcrete blocks each containing 80 nesting tubes for the Pollinators Arch on Governors Island, NY—allocate space for native bee nests as well as for the cameras and micro-processors that do the counting. Cameras and sensors can record in a non-invasive and continuous fashion, as any building surveillance system can demonstrate. We shifted the camera away from the human and towards the non-human native bee, creating building cladding that can accommodate both monitoring systems and habitat. The “counting” occurs outside of the building as we use AI technology to read and identify bees recorded by our monitoring system.<sup>18</sup>

Harrison Atelier’s Feral Surfaces, commissioned for the 2023 Barcelona Architecture Festival under the artistic direction of Eva Franch i Gilabert, transformed an impervious urban surface into a billboard for native bees by introducing a constructed landscape of native bee-friendly plants and 2,350 diamond-shaped mycelium panels. The Feral Surface installation sought to enumerate, visualize and count these pollinators as denizens of the urban space by framing each habitat: each panel was about 6 cm thick with a 10 cm diagonal tubular cavity drilled into it as a potential habitat for a cavity-dwelling solitary bee. Each panel has a single hole about 1 cm in diameter as the entrance to the habitat. The hole offers a body count, a visually tally of non-human presence. As an aperture, the hole functions to give some sense of the size of the inhabitant within, recalling Auguste Perret’s equation of the portrait window with the human figure. Each panel served as a framework protecting the potential habitat of one bee. Cameras and monitors embedded in the landscape surveilled the installation surface. Framing the hole, enumerating potential habitats: this temporary installation sought to



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- 19 Harrison Atelier's models for assessing bee family have been supported by Microsoft's AI for Earth program, see <https://microsoft.github.io/AlforEarth-Grantees/>.
- 20 Jennifer Gabrys and Helen Pritchard, "Just Good Enough Data and Environmental Sensing: Moving beyond Regulatory Benchmarks toward Citizen Action," *International Journal of Spatial Data Infrastructures Research*, Vol.13, (2018) 4-14, 6.

bring visibility to the habitat loss of native bees, while proposing that the city could provide a productive space for biodiversity.

Moving closer to the vertical dimension of urban building, Harrison Atelier was invited to develop an entryway for The Bee Conservancy at the Urban Farm within framework of Governors Island's Climate Campus. The arch is comprised of a grided structure that is temporary and transportable, the scaffold for hempcrete habitat blocks which contain nesting tubes for native bees, monitoring systems and pockets for vegetation / rainwater capture. A large, ear-like lobe shielding the nesting tubes from rain while "framing" these habitats, amplifying the example provided by Sant Ivo's roundel format. How does this design count? Of the 63 hempcrete blocks, half of these hold nesting tubes (approximately 2,400 tubes in the entire structure). Endoscopic cameras are trained on the nesting tubes and operate for 3 hours a day taking real-time video that can be monitored remotely and provides a collection of images that help train our AI model to identify native bees at a family level.<sup>19</sup> Family gives us a low resolution portrait of native bees, yet following the article, "Just Good Enough Data," we are aligned in suggesting that lower tech monitoring or "citizen sensing" methods can contribute new perspectives—broader but fuzzier—rather than being dismissed as non-compliant data sets.<sup>20</sup>

The Pollinators Arch is a temporary prototype that participates in a much larger vision for New York Harbor, one that envisages Governors Island as a Climate Campus, that triangulates with the Brooklyn Navy Yard and Brooklyn Army Terminal as centers for innovation in Climate Tech. Each site envisions a transformation of the building industry and with that, hopefully, the surfaces with which buildings are clad. Fabricating and testing monitored species habitat as cladding could return some urban surfaces to the textural richness of vermiculated stone while generating ecological services for the city.

## Conclusion: the floating pig

The pig floats between the chimneys of London's Battersea Power Station during the filming of Pink Floyd's music video in December 1976. In this context, the pig is funny. It symbolizes the unlikely. When pigs fly so to speak. And yet, a more literal reading could ask why does the urban presence of the non-human seem so implausible? Prototypes that enumerate, represent and support biodiversity in our urban fabric suggest we no longer view the juxtaposition of animal and city as an impossibility. The French philosopher, Jacques Ranciere's *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible* offers the insight that the political appears when those who are not offic-

- 21 Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2004).

ially counted make themselves heard and seen.<sup>21</sup> Politics involves becoming seen and becoming counted among planetary entities. Consider the 2000+ nesting tubes and monitoring systems in each of these installations a proposal for architectural surfaces that count every solitary bees among urban denizens and brings them into our ethical regard, extending political status to entities that formerly had no place in a singular (anthropocentric) worldview.



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# **Humorous Irony in Guild House and BEST Products Stores**

How an Architecture of Communication Can Fail to Communicate

**Katerina Zacharopoulou**



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- 1 Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 114–17. This article refers to the facsimile of the manifesto's first edition, published in 1919 to celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, along with a second volume featuring new relevant scholarship. Despite its official publication date stated as 1966, the book became available in 1967. See Martino Stierli, “Robert Venturi and MoMA: Institutional and Outsider,” in *Complexity and Contradiction at Fifty: On Robert Venturi’s ‘Gentle Manifesto’*, eds. Martino Stierli and David B. Brownlee (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 12–19.

- 2 staffy [anonimised user], “I Live in Philly And...” (comment), Reddit, August 23, 2016. The thread [r/ArchitecturePorn](#) is dedicated to “interesting architecture and individual images of buildings.”

- 3 This article refers to the abridged, revised edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, which was first published in 1977 with the added subtitle *The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* and aimed to clarify the argument and stay consistent with the authors’ critique of modern design. See Denise Scott Brown, “Preface to the Revised Edition,” in *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), xv–xvii.

- 4 The quotations for the following comparison were taken from Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 114–17; Robert Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 87–103, 130.

## Communication Breakdown

In 1966, Guild House, a residence for the elderly which had recently been completed by Venturi and Rauch, Copp and Lippincott in Philadelphia, was featured in Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, as part of the projects list concluding the architect's manifesto.<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the book, a photograph of Guild House was posted on the Reddit thread r/ArchitecturePorn, under the title "The many windows of Venturi's complex and contradictory Guild House in Philadelphia, one of the most influential buildings in the last sixty years."

A Redditor commented:

I live in Philly and drive past this thing all the time. I have no clue why people think it is aesthetically pleasing. Little details always bugged me — the dinky antenna (which I think is gone now) [ 1 ], the white line through the fifth story that stops at the facade [ 2 ], how the arched window 'sits on' the smaller windows on the floor below it, the crappy balcony railings, the stupid-ass lettering on the front [ 3 ], the chode column, the white first story in front [ 4 ], the weak little windows at the first story of the wings, the ugly shades, and the totally lame cornice. One of the only things I ever liked about it is the shadow cast into the entryway. It also is this ugly lump squatting on Spring Garden street, affording lovely views of the blank Red Cross building across the street. Check out google maps street view to look at this building in context.

It might have some kind of historical significance, but it is not attractive, and I don't get how it is some sort of celebrated landmark.

I'm a fan of architecture that looks good. I am sad that previous forms were rejected for this type of bauhaus-y circle jerk stuff. Philly has some great buildings — Most row houses I see look better than this building.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding its informal language, the comment could qualify as architectural criticism, considering both its structure and level of detail. Moving downwards from the antenna on the roof to the entrance, the commentator gives a meticulous description of the main elements of the façade, before considering the building in its immediate and aesthetic context.

On close reading, parallels can even be found between the comment and the way Guild House is described in *Complexity and Contradiction*, and even more so in *Learning from Las Vegas*, co-written by Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour in 1972.<sup>3</sup> For almost every detail in the Reddit comment, there is a corresponding statement by the architects. This correspondence is in fact so great that one begins to wonder whether the comment's author was not writing from a lay perspective but was familiar with the content of the two architectural treatises.<sup>4</sup>



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- 5 "[informal] disappointingly small, insignificant" (Google dictionary)
- 6 The antenna is paralleled to the bronze deer and hunting dogs on the top of the portal of Anet, a 16<sup>th</sup> century chateau in northern France designed by Philibert de l'Orme, and to Lippold sculptures.
- 7 "[vulgar slang] of extremely poor quality" (Google dictionary)
- 8 "[vulgar slang] a penis, especially one characterized as being short and thick; a stupid or contemptible man" (Google dictionary)

9 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 116.

10 Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 93.

11 *Ibid.*, 93-100.

Specifically, the architects see the “dinky”<sup>5</sup> antenna as a banal, functional object that might, however, when gold and unconnected, evoke a monumentality akin to representational or abstract sculptures, celebrating the elderly’s obsession with TV.<sup>6</sup> The white, glazed-brick line intercepting the windows of the fifth floor works together with the disproportionately large arched window and the “white first story” to divide the facade into three uneven sections. The grand scale of this “giant order” or “classic jukebox front” is supposedly reminiscent of a Renaissance palace, and is meant to contrast the smaller scale of the six actual, equal in height floors, suggested in the composition of the windows. The “crappy”<sup>7</sup> balcony railings are intentionally conventional perforated steel patterns, just on a blown-up scale, while the “stupid-ass” lettering is “particularly ugly and ordinary in its explicit commercial associations.” The black granite column, “chode”<sup>8</sup> in the Reddit comment, “exceptional and fat” in *Learning from Las Vegas*, both enhances and undermines the monumentality of the entrance, by placing focus on it while simultaneously impeding entry. The “weak” windows, featured in a close-up photograph in *Learning from Las Vegas*, are yet another unconventional manipulation of a familiar form, in this case the double-hung window, through changes in shape, scale, and context.

The commentator concludes that Guild House is an “ugly lump” which resembles, but does not equal in beauty, Philadelphia row houses. But it is exactly their conventional brown brick walls and double-hung windows that the architects of Guild House used as inspiration.<sup>9</sup> Once again, the Reddit comment does not radically differ from the way Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour describe the building. “Crappy and Totally Lame,” after all, might as well stand for a cruder alternative of “Ugly and Ordinary”:

The technologically unadvanced brick, the old-fashioned, double-hung windows, the pretty materials around the entrance, and the ugly antenna not hidden behind the parapet in the accepted fashion, all are distinctly conventional in image as well as substance or, rather, ugly and ordinary.<sup>10</sup>

However, while both the Redditor and the architects name Guild House ugly and ordinary, the latter don’t really mean it. Guild House may feature conventional, traditional, and vernacular elements, but it simultaneously alludes to what the authors call “Heroic and Original” architecture. Through its classical, tripartite, and symmetrical composition, along with the ornamental sculpture at its top, the building’s façade becomes “ironical.”<sup>11</sup>

Guild House is not purely ugly and ordinary. Through subtle twists in conventions and expectations, it intentionally subverts the language of heroic and original architecture, acknowledging its necessary contradictions. Ugly and ordinary elements are used, but not wholeheartedly; the intention is still to create beautiful and exceptional architecture.



5

- 12 Suzanne Loudermilk, "Tilted Best to Tumble in Towson Architecture," *The Baltimore Sun*, May 14, 1996; Suzanne Loudermilk, "Best Store Tilted Wall Tumbles down Towson Landmark Goes in Center Renovation," *The Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1997.
- 13 James Wines, *De-Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 143.

- 14 Loudermilk, "Best Store Tilted Wall Tumbles down."

- 15 Wines, *De-Architecture*, 133.

And yet, the Reddit comment does not seem to get the irony. If asked “Is boring architecture interesting?” its author would probably reply, “No; boring architecture is boring.” What the comment eventually highlights is a failure of communication.

Not much more than one-and-a-half-hour drive away from Guild House, but more than 20 years earlier, a similar communication breakdown occurred. In 1996, *The Baltimore Sun* reported the decision to demolish Tilt Showroom in Towson, Maryland, following up with the coverage of the event next year.<sup>12</sup> The retail store had been completed in 1976 by the architectural office SITE (Sculpture In The Environment), founded by Alison Sky and James Wines in the beginning of the decade. Tilt Building was part of a commission of nine retail stores by catalogue merchant Best Products Company, a collaboration which lasted from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. The owners of the company, Frances and Sydney Lewis, were art collectors interested in merging commercial architecture with public art, offering a twist to the banal and operational “big-box” store type of the US roadside.<sup>13</sup>

As suggested by its name, the Tilt Building’s entrance façade appeared lifted at one side, with only one corner touching the ground. As a result, the openings which normally signify and function as entry points were suspended in mid-air. Below them, a gaping hole was formed, seemingly allowing free access to the interior space. [ 5 ]

The articles in *The Baltimore Sun* included comments by local residents, company employees, and demolition onlookers. Apart from enthusiastic endorsements and appreciation for the building’s humour, there were disapproving remarks too, ranging from reasonable to ridiculous. A resident found it “hideous,” because it looked “like an unfinished building.” The store manager recalled, “with a laugh,” people asking if the façade was an accident, and recounted the following, seemingly improbable interaction:

“A lot of older people wouldn’t go into the building,” she said. “They were afraid it was going to fall.”<sup>14</sup>

As with Guild House, one of Tilt Building’s designers, James Wines, wrote a book to explain and justify SITE’s work. *De-Architecture*, published in 1987, culminated in an extended description of SITE’s projects, including Best Products Showrooms, as an application of the concept of “de-architecture.” Wines defined de-architecture as a design process meant to question the architectural status-quo, by “dissecting, shattering, dissolving, inverting, and transforming” its assumptions and rules. De-architecture would metaphorically break architecture apart and make something new out of its ruins.<sup>15</sup>

16 Ibid., 147.

18 See part I of Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), for an overview of architecture's role in the theorisation and institutionalisation of postmodernism, and the introduction to Emmanuel Petit, *Irony, or, the Self-Critical Opacity of Postmodern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), on the origins and development of an interest in irony in post-modern architectural discourse.

17 Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), 35–41.

19 On postmodernism, see Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, ix–xiii, 3–21; on irony, see Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 43–53, in an attempt to categorise different theoretical approaches on irony, based on their affective charge and on whether they are celebratory or critical of the concept.

Tilt Building shows that SITE's mode of questioning was not merely a figurative attack on architecture, but also a literal employment of images of incompleteness and destruction to challenge the expectations that architecture should appear stable and functional. Rather than expressing its internal organisation and structure symbolically on its façade, the store reveals its interior through lifting the barrier separating it from the outside, ridiculing the idea of "form follows function."<sup>16</sup>

Since de-architecture is preoccupied with themes of destruction and impeding function, Wines would agree that SITE's building looks unfinished and accidental. However, in the firm's case, unlike the building's commentators, this is perceived as intentional. And obviously, the building only appeared destroyed and dysfunctional; to properly operate as a store, a second, glass façade behind the tilted one separated interior from exterior space.

In this case too, part of the audience did not get the irony.

## Double Standards

For literary theorist Linda Hutcheon, it is exactly this potential of irony to fail that is distinctive about it—even more so than its commonly agreed semantic interpretation as "saying something other than what is meant." She emphasises the importance of this affective quality, which she names "irony's edge," by using it for the title of her book on irony as a political discursive practice.

Contrary to irony's perception as intellectual detachment, Hutcheon argues that as a social interaction, it is necessarily involved in relationships of power and evokes affective responses. Exclusion is its undeniable part. There are theories, Hutcheon points out, that argue irony necessarily requires an audience that does not understand it; irony might even require the perception of such an audience as "other" by those who understand it. When one fails to get irony, negative emotions can ensue, ranging from discomfort to derision. With its "attribution of an evaluative, even judgmental attitude," irony can then be seen as involving "perpetrators," "targets," and a "complicitous audience."<sup>17</sup>

And yet, the way irony is usually talked about concerns what happens when it succeeds. This is certainly the case for the critical discourse on postmodernism, which architecture has played a major role in shaping, with irony considered one of its constitutive elements.<sup>18</sup>

Hutcheon argues that there is a tendency to view both postmodernism and irony comprehensively, either in a celebratory or critical way.<sup>19</sup> Her observation applies to the polarised debate over the revolutionary or reactionary potential of the version of ironic postmodernism promoted by the

- 20 To Giamarelos, the dominance of Stern's ideas undermined the potential the Biennale initially had for presenting a diverse array of critical responses to a growing distrust in modernism at the time. Stylianos Giamarelos, *Resisting Postmodern Architecture: Critical Regionalism Before Globalisation* (London: UCL Press, 2022), 31–58.
- 22 Giamarelos, *Resisting Postmodern Architecture*, 50–53.
- 24 Charles Jencks, *The Story of Post-Modernism: Five Decades of the Ironic, Iconic and Critical in Architecture* (Chichester: Wiley, 2011), 13–14. On the same year, a special issue of AD was published, guest edited by FAT and Jencks, as part of yet another argument for a renewed interest in postmodernism. See Charles Jencks and FAT, eds., "Radical Post-Modernism," *Architectural Design* 81, no. 5 (2011).
- 21 Venturi, Scott Brown, and Wines, however, do not always define themselves as postmodernists.
- 23 On the role Jencks and AD editor Andreas Papadakis played in the postmodernisation of architectural culture, see Stephen Parnell, "Architecture's Expanding Field: AD Magazine and the Post-Modernisation of Architecture," *Architectural Research Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2018): 55–68.
- 25 Jencks, *The Story of Post-Modernism*, 21.
- 26 Giamarelos, *Resisting Postmodern Architecture*, 33, 54.
- 27 Kenneth Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism," *Perspecta* 20 (1983): 149.
- 28 Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 10.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 4–6.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 13.

1980 Architecture Biennale in Venice, “The Presence of the Past.” In his recent account of the exhibition, Stylianos Giamarellos uncovers the neglected, defining role of Robert Stern in establishing the canonical, narrow conception of postmodernism as a style, focused on communicative architecture and popular symbolism with consumerist and historicist references.<sup>20</sup> It is within this conception of postmodernism that Guild House and Best Products Stores are usually located.<sup>21</sup>

Charles Jencks, who was invited to join the Biennale’s preparatory committee of critics by curator Paolo Portoghesi, eventually embraced Stern’s approach, as an opportunity to continue his project of conceptualising postmodernism as a movement.<sup>22</sup> Looking back at his work as a self-proclaimed “participant, partisan and sometime critic of PM architecture”<sup>23</sup> in the 2011 book *The Story of Post-Modernism: Five Decades of the Ironic, Iconic and Critical in Architecture*, Jencks identifies irony as a recurrent theme of his yearlong theorisations.<sup>24</sup> Naming “Post-Modern Classicism” the “ironic international style,” Jencks sees irony as a historical and ornamental communicative tool—postmodernism’s “necessary mental set”. He emphasises that this kind of irony is a positive one—a way to revisit the past with enjoyment.<sup>25</sup>

Kenneth Frampton, however, who was also invited to Portoghesi’s preparatory team, was suspicious of irony. Not satisfied with the turn the exhibition took, he withdrew from the committee. He opposed the Biennale’s totalising, stylistic, and historicist message, and instead developed a divergent approach focused on how architecture could respond to specific locales.<sup>26</sup> Frampton’s stance on irony is explicit in his 1983 *Perspecta* article on “Prospects for a Critical Regionalism,” where he clearly separates his approach from ironic quotations of place whose main purpose is to function as communicative signs.<sup>27</sup> This postmodern embrace of popular culture ultimately functions, for him, as advertising, and is therefore politically and socially complicit in perpetuating the very culture it attacks.

Linda Hutcheon reminds us, though, that there is no inherent relationship between irony and specific political or ideological positions. Irony is not radical or conservative in essence. Rather, it can function as either, depending on the context of its use.<sup>28</sup> This is what Hutcheon calls the “transideological politics” of irony.

She uses the verb “happen,” rather than “get,” to describe how irony operates, as it only occurs when interpreted—either by its designer or its audience.<sup>29</sup> It is not a fixed device, but a result of a complex process of communication, where intention and interpretation can be in tension.<sup>30</sup>

It is important, then, to look at how irony operates in individual cases, not only in terms of how it is intended to achieve communication but also in

31 *Ibid.*, 10–11.

32 *Ibid.*, 4.

33 The authors occasionally praise the same examples for their complexity and communicative potential, such as Piazza San Marco and Villa Savoye. Wines cites Venturi's and Scott Brown's work as inspiration for de-architecture, and includes Guild House and other projects in the main text and in the de-architecture "project portfolio" at the end of the book. Wines, *De-Architecture*, 33, 167–87. Besides the metahistorical approach in selecting examples, the books are also similar in layout, in how they juxtapose image and text.

34 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 18.

35 James Wines in Patricia Leigh Brown, "Currents: What Exactly Is 'De-Architecture?'" *The New York Times*, 3 December 1987.

how it fails to do so.

When architects use irony intentionally, which exactly is the audience they aim to address and who do they want to leave out? Who finally gets the irony? And most importantly, what happens with those who don't?

## A Common Tool

To Hutcheon, irony is more than a phenomenon observed in everyday speech; it is a “discursive strategy” which can also operate in the formal level of text, music, and image. While recognising that ironist and audience cannot be separated in the study of irony, Hutcheon uses the perspective of the ironist to define the practice as “the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented.”<sup>31</sup>

Guild House and Best Products Stores add another level at which irony can operate to Hutcheon's list; architectural form. With them, irony “happens,” at least from the perspective of the ironists, in this case, the architects. *Complexity and Contradiction*, *Learning from Las Vegas*, and *De-Architecture* describe the buildings as examples of architecture that can successfully communicate, employing irony as an intentional, strategic design tool. The texts defend this kind of irony in a very similar way and offer a chance to look at irony as Hutcheon does, “from examples,” “*in use*,” in its unequivocally political and social context, and beyond grand, general claims.<sup>32</sup>

Although *De-Architecture* was written 20 years after *Complexity and Contradiction*, both texts detect the problem of architecture in lack of communication with its audience. The solution the authors propose, after presenting their inspirations from various historical examples in thematic rather than chronological order,<sup>33</sup> is to employ mass media and consumerist iconography over modernist formal abstraction, as a more appropriate architectural language, more easily understood by the public. Venturi does not shy away from the operative character of his criticism:

This book is both an attempt at architectural criticism and an **apologia** -an explanation, indirectly, of my work. Because I am a practicing architect, my ideas on architecture are inevitably a by-product of the criticism which accompanies working.<sup>34</sup>

Wines, in an interview on his book, echoes this idea by conceptualising SITE's buildings as materialised manifestoes:

One regrettable characteristic of many architectural theories and philosophies has been their function as **justification** for the author's own architectural oeuvre. [...] This book is no exception.<sup>35</sup>

- 36 On the distinction between irony as a practice and other approaches, see Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 2–3. For a detailed, historical analysis of approaches to irony, see Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- 37 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 22–23.
- 38 Wines, *De-Architecture*, 20.
- 39 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 51–52.
- 40 Wines, *De-Architecture*, 46.
- 41 Colebrook, *Irony*, 6–7.
- 42 Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 2.
- 43 See Petit, *Irony*, 49–55.

Before considering how the texts view irony as a specific, applied practice, it is worth noting that irony pervades them in other ways too, for example as a rhetorical trope.<sup>36</sup> While criticising modernism for simplistic universality and impossible utopian solutions, both Venturi and Wines use the paradigm of the manifesto to propagate their ideas. The title of *Complexity and Contradiction*'s first chapter describes the work as a "gentle manifesto," defending a "nonstraightforward architecture"<sup>37</sup> and prefiguring the use of irony as both a writing and design practice. A manifesto is not supposed to be gentle, and architecture that is not straightforward must mean more than what it appears to mean. Similarly, *De-Architecture* argues that the 20<sup>th</sup> century "manifesto mania" shifted architectural writing from establishing sets of aesthetic rules to presenting architecture as a means for political or social revolution. Even though Wines criticises these approaches as too strict, absolute, and uncommunicative, he presents his own work as just another manifesto, a contribution to a continuing tradition.<sup>38</sup> The authors are not completely sincere in their use of negative, derogatory terms like "boring," "ugly and ordinary," or "de-architecture" either.

The authors' response to utopian modernism becomes a more detached, less serious approach to architecture. Their proposed solutions, although new, are not there to save the world, but to make a comment about it. Venturi, in *Complexity and Contradiction*, explicitly connects irony with the acceptance of a decreased capacity for architects to bring about change:

Ironic convention is relevant both for the individual building and the townscape. It recognizes the real condition of our architecture and its status in our culture. [...] Architects should accept their modest role [the lack of financial investments in them] rather than disguise it [...].<sup>39</sup>

Wines detects a decrease in architects' power during his time too and similarly suggests acceptance as a solution:

The crisis of communication in architecture is a crisis of sources. Architects have become incapable of filtering out, comprehending, and utilizing new sources in the design of buildings [...] It is also time to recognize that architecture cannot really solve any long-range problems. Like any art form, it can only comment on their existence and bring them into sharper focus.<sup>40</sup>

This move from solving social problems to highlighting them brings to mind the romantic conception of irony as a distanced approach to life, marked by indifference, intellectual detachment, and a continuously questioning attitude to any established worldviews.<sup>41</sup>

The romantic conception of irony also acknowledges a necessary opposition between reality and appearances, an idea that influenced the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American New Critics,<sup>42</sup> who in turn provided an inspiration for *Complexity and Contradiction*.<sup>43</sup> In its third chapter, "Ambiguity," Venturi

- 45 On the connection of this idea to Venturi's champion Vincent Scully and his view on both Venturi and Le Corbusier as ironists, see Petit, *Irony*, 37–44.
- 44 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 27. Petit argues that the failure of modernism to change society through architecture led postmodernists to accept the clash between ideas and forms as inevitable. The result was the transformation of the unintended irony of modernism to a conscious architectural tool. Petit, *Irony*, 7.
- 46 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 72.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 88–89.
- 48 Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 87. The comparison between Guild House and Paul Rudolph's Crawford Manor, representing a "duck," reveals that Rudolph's building features ironic contradictions between its appearance and structural or functional organisation too. What the authors criticise is that these ironies go unacknowledged. See note 44.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 91–92. As Hutcheon highlights, irony here is not a mere opposite of what is 'said.' Guild House both defies and includes expressive techniques associated with modernism; the interior is still revealed through the common room window, and the design of the side wings is still dictated by programme, lighting, and view.

explains that one way of seeing complexity and contradiction is as a response to the paradoxical relationship, in life and art, between an image's essence and its appearance.<sup>44</sup>

The necessary split between things and images, reality and perception, is translated by Venturi in architectural terms as the necessary split between the interior and exterior of a building.<sup>45</sup> In the ninth chapter of *Complexity and Contradiction*, "The Inside and the Outside," Venturi argues that this is a chief way in which contradiction is manifested in architecture.<sup>46</sup>

This forms part of a direct critique on what Venturi thought that modern architecture required: that the outside needs to result from or to express the inside. In the chapter, he offers a series of historical examples which symbolically differentiate inside and outside, ranging from Roman to modern architecture, and utilising differences between top and bottom or front and back, residual spaces, and enclosures within enclosures. It is here that it starts to become evident how irony can operate as a design practice. The point of tension where it plays out, is eventually the façade:

Designing from the outside in, as well as the inside out, creates necessary tensions, which help make architecture. Since the inside is different from the outside, the wall—the point of change—becomes an architectural event [...] the spatial record of this resolution and its drama.<sup>47</sup>

Irony then becomes a contradiction between the expectations created by the shell of a building (equivalent to an utterance) and the experience evoked by its interior organisation, function, or structure (equivalent to meaning). This approach becomes explicit in *Learning from Las Vegas*, which moves from the complexity and contradiction of historical examples to the popular symbolism of Las Vegas as a starting point for a new, communicative architecture. In the second part of the book, Guild House acts as the paradigm for the ironic category of the "decorated shed," which features applied ornament on a conventional fit-to-purpose structure, against the seemingly honest "duck," which symbolically unites and subsumes spatial, structural, and programmatic systems.<sup>48</sup>

As shown in the beginning, Guild House is intentionally composed with an aim to make its exterior imply something "other than" its actual structure and programme. The priority for its façade design is the creation of a unified composition, rather than an expression of function. The front elevation is apparently divided in three parts, instead of the actual six, and a higher first floor is implied by the ornamental white glazed bricks. The façade includes elements that are not structurally required, such as the arched window, and conventional elements, such as double-hung windows, which, through their different shape and size, are not expected to fit this type of building.<sup>49</sup>

- 50 Wines, *De-Architecture*, 118.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 120.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 133.
- 53 The ninth building commissioned by Best Products to SITE, Antisign (Ashland, Virginia, 1978) was not a store but a distribution centre. It did not employ the technique of false revelation but the application of multiple, overlapping versions of the word "best" across the height and length of its façade.
- 54 Compare with how "the purest decorated shed" is described in Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 100. Similarly to these authors, Wines thinks that the irony of de-architecture is strangely honest, in "doing nothing more than exposing what the average architect would go to great lengths to cover up." See Wines, *De-Architecture*, 150, and notes 44, 48.
- 55 Wines, *De-Architecture*, 119.
- 56 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 2–16. See also Jameson's "Robert Venturi: 1925–2018," *Artforum* 57, no. 5 (2019): 39–40.

Similarly, when defining de-architecture, Wines talks about architecture as a comment on the human condition through contradiction to expectations.<sup>50</sup> Just like Venturi and Scott Brown, he locates the most powerful established architectural conventions in the split between exterior and interior, and finds the façade the ideal point of tension where these can be contradicted. His emphasis is also on communication—where Venturi talks about drama, Wines mentions narrative:

Architecture can, and should, become an extension of the public/private dichotomy so prevalent in contemporary psychology. The walls can tell this story.<sup>51</sup>

His technique called “inversion,” in its subversion of conventional meaning attached to form, space, and function, is very similar to the irony of the “decorated shed”.<sup>52</sup>

Eight of the nine stores by SITE for Best Products Company, including Tilt Building, constitute applications of this technique.<sup>53</sup> The façade of the Peeling Project (Richmond, Virginia, 1972) looked as if it was peeling away, the Indeterminate Façade (Houston, Texas, 1975) appeared crumbling and roofless, and the Notch Building (Sacramento, California, 1979) featured no apparent openings apart from a retractable corner. The Rainforest Building (Hialeah, Florida, 1979) created the impression it incorporated local vegetation in its interior, and the Forest Building (Richmond, Virginia, 1980) appeared cut in half to let a local forest pass through it. The façade of Cutler Ridge Showroom (Cutler Ridge, 1980) looked violently torn from the building’s main volume and further deconstructed into two more parts, the entrance canopy and the doors, scattered across the way to the parking lot. Finally, two facades of the Inside/Outside Building (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1984) appeared partly torn away, to reveal the store’s interior space, including false ceilings, electromechanical equipment, and even merchandise.

All facades seemingly break, tilt, or split to reveal part of the buildings’ interior, while in reality a glass façade behind them operates as a second, functional exterior. The stores therefore use irony like a “pure” decorated shed and attack the idea of expressing function in form by essentially utilising false-fronts as applied decoration to conventional big-box sheds.<sup>54</sup> The advanced, laborious technologies used to achieve the effects of each ornamental façade is another ironic attack to what Wines sees as the symbolic celebration of technology by modern architecture.<sup>55</sup>

The conception of irony as a strategic tool in Guild House and Best Products Stores reflects Fredric Jameson’s view of postmodernism as a product of its era, a cultural expression of late, or consumer, capitalism, characterised by depthlessness and aesthetic populism.<sup>56</sup> The architects of both projects view irony’s potential to function as a comment on their contempor-

- 57 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1993), 125.
- 58 Vincent Scully, "Introduction," in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 15.
- 59 Leigh Brown, "Currents: What Exactly Is 'De-Architecture?'"
- 60 Wines, *De-Architecture*, 14.
- 61 See Ellen Posner, "Books: De-Architecture," *Architectural Record* 176, no. 7 (1988): 77; Brian Carter, "Bottling Vintage Wines: De-Architecture," *Building Design*, no. 889 (1988): 30–31; Michael McDonough, "Books: De-Architecture," *ID: The International Design Magazine* 35, no. 6 (1988): 74–75, all slightly sceptical, to differing degrees, about Wines's ideas.
- 62 Stanley Moss, "James Wines," *BOMB Magazine*, April 1, 1991.

ary culture as largely confined to the visual realm and concentrated on their buildings' surface. Their ironic semi-false fronts deny depth figuratively and literally, towards a conceptual and visual flatness. "Reading" irony on these surfaces is enabled by a dissolution of the boundary between high and low culture, as the buildings embrace the language of consumerism, instead of resisting it.

Jameson argues that any position on postmodern culture is necessarily a political position on late capitalism. However, he leaves the question of whether postmodern architecture can produce radical politics instead of aligning with consumer values open.<sup>57</sup> In the case of Guild House and Best Products Stores, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Wines argue, like Jencks, that surface, through irony, can produce meaningful engagement and subversive social critique.

### Degrees of Communication

Despite sharing a common conception of irony and an aim to engage and bring together communities, the two projects, along with the texts defending them, had divergent, even contrasting communicative effects, succeeding and failing in various ways.

Irony's edge becomes evident in how Vincent Scully, in the introduction of *Complexity and Contradiction*, accuses orthodox modernists who reacted to Venturi's ideas of an "utter lack of irony."<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, the book, along with *Learning from Las Vegas*, quickly became part of the canonical discourse of the discipline, and can be found in most university course reading lists on Western architectural historiography.

"I'm not sure my mother will read it," Wines jokingly admitted in an interview on *De-Architecture*.<sup>59</sup> Still, he had high hopes for the book's communicative potential, wishing that it could reach out to audiences beyond the discipline of architecture.<sup>60</sup>

The book did not go unnoticed at the time,<sup>61</sup> but despite the similarity of approach, format, and message with *Complexity and Contradiction* and *Learning from Las Vegas*, and its simpler language, it does not enjoy the same status. Unlike these books' continuous reprinting, *De-Architecture* is difficult to find, most of its available copies now sold second-hand.

Wines claims that SITE's buildings, especially at the start, were not exactly welcomed with enthusiasm from the architectural professional and academic world. Their first building was, to him, what made the firm famous, but also destructive for their reputation within the field.<sup>62</sup> The most canonical inclusion of SITE's work in the architectural discourse of its time was indeed hostile. The catalogue of the 1988 exhibition *Deconstructivist*

- 65 "SITE | MoMA," The Museum of Modern Art. SITE have a continuous relationship with MoMA, their work featured in 12 exhibitions so far, related to themes ranging from politics and citizenship to collage, landscape, and ecology.
- 67 Addison Philadelphia Historical Commission, "Philadelphia Register of Historic Places (OPA-Compliant Addresses)," City of Philadelphia, June 26, 2024.
- 69 See "Best Products, SITE, and the Nature of Nostalgia," *Cultural Ghosts* (blog), March 7, 2013; Claire Sewell, "'Darndest Thing You Ever Saw!': BEST Products and Houston's Indeterminate Facade," *We Are the Mutants* (blog), September 17, 2018; Violet LeVoit, "Best's 'Tilt' Showroom, 1978–1997," *Baltimore Or Less* (blog), May 29, 2012.
- 63 Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, eds., *Deconstructivist Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 11.
- 64 "Letters," *The Architectural Review* 158, no. 944 (1975): 192. Wines expressed his dissatisfaction with the caption, and the journal made amends with a review of SITE's ideas and projects in Lance Wright, "Through the Looking Glass," *The Architectural Review* 163, no. 973 (1978): 132–35, including a response by Wines.
- 66 Best Products Stores are included, for example, in Jencks's famous evolutionary diagram, the catalogue of the 2011 V&A exhibition on postmodern architecture "Style and Subversion", and Petit's study on architectural irony.
- 68 For an account of the stores' fate, see Margaret McCormick, "The Ironic Loss of the Postmodern BEST Store Facades," *Failed Architecture*, July 22, 2014.
- 70 James McCown, "Best Thing Going," *Metropolis*, April 1, 2003.

*Architecture* at New York's Museum of Modern Art used an image of the Notch Building to dismiss it, along with similar works that appeared broken apart, as mere simulations of deconstruction and "some of the most formidable projects of recent years."<sup>63</sup> Likewise, a caption under an image of Indeterminate Façade in a 1975 issue of *The Architectural Review*, not convinced by the irony of the building, makes it and its architects the target of irony instead:

Are you finding it hard to design new buildings, to add some meaning to the language of modern architecture? This showroom in Houston, Texas, [...] has the answer. [...] The 'artist' involved, James Wines, [...] sees his work as 'a dialogue between constructive and reductive processes' and 'a tentative and precarious imagery'... precarious is the word.<sup>64</sup>

This is not to say that the reaction to Best Products Stores was pure rejection. The buildings did appear in the press, Wines gave interviews and lectures internationally, and SITE featured at art and architecture exhibitions such as the 1980 "Buildings for Best Products" at MoMA.<sup>65</sup> Eventually, the stores became part of the disciplinary canon, but maybe slightly later than needed for them to be preserved.<sup>66</sup> Unlike Guild House, which was added to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places in 2004,<sup>67</sup> after the liquidation of Best Products in 1997, most of the buildings were changed or demolished, and none survives in its original state.<sup>68</sup>

They do survive, though, as images, not as much in architectural books and academic articles than in multiple blogs and forums online, usually created by local fans not necessarily familiar with architectural history.<sup>69</sup> Their comments, expressing love and nostalgia for the now lost buildings, betray a success in communicating with a general public, an opinion that Wines shares. In an interview on Tilt Building, he appears to value the thoughts the store provoked to multiple visitors and passerby much more than getting approval from architects.<sup>70</sup> Guild House, however, cannot be said to enjoy the same level of popular fascination.

Similarly to the architects who designed the two projects, the examples of criticism presented above focus mostly on the irony of facades, rather than on space use, accessibility, comfort, or performance. Whether originating from the architectural discipline or from a wider public, these positive or negative evaluations of the works revolve around the question of whether irony succeeds, on whether its message can pass, as intended, from the architects to their audience. The tension between these various interpretations points to the instability of architectural meaning, and to the possibility of miscommunication always underlying intentions of communication.

71 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 48.

72 Wines, *De-Architecture*, 91.

73 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 70.

74 Wines, *De-Architecture*, 143.

## Degrees of Expectation

On a theoretical level, *Complexity and Contradiction*, *Learning from Las Vegas*, and *De-Architecture* favour complexity over simplicity and enjoy breaking rules by using irony to subvert architectural expectations. Venturi calls this the use of “convention unconventionally,”<sup>71</sup> and Wines the use of “the familiar as the basis for exploring the unfamiliar.”<sup>72</sup>

But since the process of translating irony from a figure of speech into architectural form involves necessary gaps, when it comes to specific buildings, contradiction to expectations is not always achieved in the same way. A closer look at the composition of Guild House and Best Products Stores reveals an underlying difference in how each project materialises architectural irony, implied by their diverging communicative effects: in the type of expectations that are to be contradicted.

As the quote below reveals, the architecture of Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour attacks the expectations that the architects thought modernism created regarding forms:

Contrast between the inside and the outside can be a major manifestation of contradiction in architecture. However, one of the powerful twentieth century orthodoxies has been the necessity for continuity between them: the inside should be expressed on the outside.<sup>73</sup>

SITE’s buildings, on the other hand, deal with more general conventions regarding the processes of the creation and decay of structures:

What conventions do exist in SITE’s buildings have usually derived more from the logic of construction (or demolition) practices than from any conscious creation of forms or orchestration of space.<sup>74</sup>

Venturi and Scott Brown attack modern architecture; SITE attack architecture itself.

If irony is a matter of interpretation, as Hutcheon argues, and if it is necessarily based on the system it attempts to defy, then an understanding of that system is required for its successful interpretation when intended. Taking this back to architecture, an understanding of the language of modernism is required for the interpretation of postmodern forms as its ironic critique.

The ironies of Guild House, such as the continuity of its façade’s surface despite a change in material, or the revelation of its curtain wall by hints at the structural columns through the windows, can be easily missed even by those well-versed in the language of modern architecture.

The architecture that Best Products Showrooms subvert, the suburban big-box store type, is, on the contrary, much more embedded in the collective unconscious. On top of that, the language of destruction used for this subversion, also has to do with more commonly shared assumptions, regardi-

75 On Best Products Stores subverting the romantic conception of the ruin, turning it from sublime to comic, see Jessica Robey, "Appetite for Destruction: Public Iconography and the Artificial Ruins of Site, Inc.," *InVisible Culture* 6 (2003).

76 Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 17.

77 Reinhold Martin, *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xix, 70–73.

78 Wines, *De-Architecture*, 146.

ng function, material, or construction. Almost anyone expects an interior space to be protected from the outside, or a building to have a roof. This interest in literally attacking architecture is evident in the inspiration SITE drew from artwork that renders structures uninhabitable or dysfunctional, like Gordon Matta-Clark's dissected or pierced buildings, Gianni Pettena's houses covered with ice or clay, and Duchamp's single door serving two rooms simultaneously. In their adaptation of high art to everyday, insignificant structures, SITE translated instability and unusability to a plain image, meant to signify the decay of consumer culture and uncertainty of contemporary life.<sup>75</sup>

According to Linda Hutcheon, irony does not result in the formation of new groups that share a context, but rather is allowed to happen because of pre-existing ones, which she calls "discursive communities."<sup>76</sup> The two architectural approaches, in a way, are saying the same thing; that buildings should not necessarily look strong or functional, that their form need not express the capability of performing their purpose. SITE, however, seem to include more people in their intended discursive communities.

The lack of a universal acceptance of architectural rules and conventions points to an additional problem for critiques of postmodern irony—one that extends beyond its ability to communicate to the extent of its successful communication. This problem can be reinstated, in Jameson's terms, as a problem of depth. Referring to the populism of Venturi's and Scott Brown's work, Reinhold Martin argues that postmodernism might have replaced modernism's esoteric language with one of its own, classicising the popular instead of popularising the classical.<sup>77</sup> In this way, modern associations with depth can be retained within postmodern discourse. SITE's irony, instead, is often seen as too superficial and too steeped in popular culture, too communicative. There is, in other words, a point beyond which postmodern depthlessness and aesthetic populism cease to be appropriate. Maybe one of the reasons why the firm's buildings received such strong negative reactions in academia was that the public liked them too much.

## Funny Business

Part of what made Best Products Stores popular was certainly their humour. In *De-Architecture*, Wines mentions a series of criticisms Indeterminate Façade received by architects, academics, and publishers, including: "SITE's work is some kind of joke," "it's not real architecture," "humor of this kind has no place in architecture," "nothing but a one-liner."<sup>78</sup>

A closer look at these comments reveals that behind the rejection of the buildings as jokes lie implications of offensiveness, fakeness, and inappropri-

79 John Morreall, "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought," *Philosophy East & West* 39, 3 (1989): 255.

80 Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 25.

81 Morreall, "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought," 257.

82 Venturi et al., *Learning from Las Vegas*, 161.

83 Wines, *De-Architecture*, 26.

84 Wright, "Through the Looking Glass," 135.

riateness, the same reasons which, according to humour theorist John Morreall, caused a rejection of humour in Western philosophical thought. A negative perception of laughter, originating in antiquity, and gaining strength with Christianity, led to the perception of humour as immoral and irresponsible, for its use at the expense of others and its practice solely for pleasure.<sup>79</sup> Along these lines, humour against the integrity and stability of architecture might not be easily welcomed.

While Hutcheon recognises that not all irony is humorous, she acknowledges the common ground between theories of irony and humour in their affective aspect and their dependence on incongruity and discursive communities. Still, she admits avoiding to consider humour in her study, in order to prevent an automatic rejection of irony as trivial just because of a potential association with amusement.<sup>80</sup>

Maybe not all irony is humorous, but the irony of Guild House and Best Products Stores is. Their design strategy, beyond contradicting expectations, is also meant to provoke amusement. As Morreall argues, mirroring the way the architects of both buildings describe their design tool, “the best humor gets us to see familiar things in unfamiliar ways.”<sup>81</sup>

The authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* use the terms irony and humour without a clear distinction and in the same context, while still ensuring their audience that being humorous does not preclude being serious:

Helping this [architecture as the people want it] to happen is a not-reprehensible part of the role of the high-design architect; it provides, together with moral subversion through irony and the use of a joke to get to seriousness, the weapons of artists of nonauthoritarian temperament in social situations that do not agree with them. The architect becomes a jester.<sup>82</sup>

Wines also argues that architecture needs humor, irony, and fantasy.<sup>83</sup> In a response to a review of SITE’s work, he clarifies that this humour is meant to be “a kind of black humour more than a casual giggle” or “the ‘ha, ha, falling bricks’ category of analysis.” Downplaying the element of amusement is here part of an attempt to make sure that SITE’s irony is seen as serious enough, that it is not dismissed as frivolous:

Obviously the humour is not just an effort to be amusing. It is about certain issues—architectural, psychological, sociological—which cannot be simply dismissed as ‘funny’.<sup>84</sup>

These clearly stated humorous intentions did not necessarily matter for critics. They might instead have aggravated criticisms and contributed to the buildings’ perception as superficial, with irony rejected for none other reason than being amusing.

When defending an architectural work, emphasis tends to be placed on the way humour renders irony uncritically rejected. Humour, however, can

- 85 It is not surprising that the *Architectural Record* issue Wines drew the criticisms at the start of this section from, also included praise of the stores for their humour alone. "Letters to the Editor," *Architectural Record* 161, no. 5 (1977): 4.
- 86 Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 34.
- 87 On the questionable subversive attitude of Venturi's and Scott Brown's work when juxtaposed with the social and political movements of their times, see Dianne Harris, "Complexity and Complacency in Architecture," in *Complexity and Contradiction at Fifty*, 130–41.
- 88 Thomas C. Veatch, "A Theory of Humor," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 11, no. 2 (1998): 161–216.
- 89 Vladimir Belogolovsky, "Interview with James Wines: 'The Point Is to Attack Architecture!'" *ArchDaily*, March 9, 2016.
- 90 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Ropley: O Books, 2009), 13.

also render irony uncritically accepted.<sup>85</sup>

The irony of Guild House and Best Products Stores is presented by the buildings' architects as subversive, a self-critical approach attacking hierarchies and dominant perceptions of the world. The fact that irony uses the language of the system it attacks is here positive, making it possible for the message to be understood and showing the instability of a supposedly stable system. But according to Hutcheon's transideological politics, although irony is usually presented as taking only one side of an argument, it actually operates as both doubting a system by exposing its conventions and supporting a system by emphasising its conventions. Irony can be "both political *and* apolitical, both conservative *and* radical, both repressive *and* democratizing."<sup>86</sup> This quality creates a suspicion of irony as an oppositional tool.<sup>87</sup>

Humour theory, often interpreting amusement as the result of perceiving incongruity, similarly casts doubts on the degree of humour's subversiveness. Benign Violation Theory, specifically, holds that to perceive something as humorous, one needs to overcome the concern over a violation of a norm, but also to value that norm to an extent.<sup>88</sup> Not only the breaking of the rule, then, needs to be seen as non-threatening, but also the rule itself.

Even when humorous irony succeeds, Guild House both attacks *and* reinforces the language of modernism. The work of Venturi and Scott Brown, not surprisingly, is often interpreted as a continuation, rather than a rupture, with that tradition. Equally, Best Product Stores both attack *and* reinforce the language of consumerism. The more popular and understandable the language that SITE used was, the more attention it would attract, which is exactly what happened. Wines, for example, narrates how customers of Forest Building, the most profitable Best Products store, would typically return inside to buy more things while having picnics in the garden which appeared to divide the building.<sup>89</sup>

Behind the view of postmodern irony as overtly superficial, as expressed by critics like Frampton, lies this complicity with consumerist values. It is exactly the surface-level application of irony in Best Products Stores that allows, and even reinforces, the uninhibited continuation of consumerism within otherwise conventional store interiors.

To Mark Fisher, even successful conceptual subversion of capitalism is subsumed under capitalist realism, the pervasive belief that no alternative political and economic system is possible. Fisher exposes how the communicative potential and outreach of postmodern irony becomes a problem by quoting Slavoj Žižek's point that "even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them.*"<sup>90</sup> The irony of Best Products Stores fails to fight the system it purports to subvert because it alleviates the guilt of participation in capitalist exchange by suggesting that



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- 91 Galia Hirsch, "Irony, Humor or Both?: The Model Revisited," in *The Discourse of Indirectness: Cues, Voices and Functions*, eds. Zohar Livnat et al. (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2020), 19–38; Joana Garmendia, "The Clash: Humor and Critical Attitude in Verbal Irony," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 27, no. 4 (2014): 641–59.
- 92 See online sources cited in note 67, for more puzzled reactions towards Best Products showrooms' seeming precariousness.

mere disapproval is sufficient. Irony, in this case, succeeds in passing a message, but fails in action.

Critics' suspicion of SITE's humour could be justified considering Fisher's concerns. Studies of the intersections between humour and irony have found that irony is usually seen as more critical, its affective and evaluative attitude ridden with more negative connotations.<sup>91</sup> Humour, considered light-hearted, less confrontational, even trivial, can make irony more benign. It can allow bypassing irony's subversive side and targets, more easily accepting its complicity. In other words, humour can soften irony's edge.

### Communication Breakdown, Again

Architects and critics who believe in the subversive potential of superficial irony rely on its successful communication. Those who oppose irony, on the contrary, are sceptical precisely because it communicates successfully. Irony's supporters think its strength is its operation in the realm of thought—irony's critics view this as the problem. But when putting emphasis on humorous irony as a means of communication, these architects and critics overlook that irony might be defined not only by its success, but also by its inherent potential for failure.

In the responses to buildings that began this article, the danger of irony, its exclusionary potential, is at work. The irony there does not “happen”: the ironic details of Guild House and the destructive symbolism of Tilt Building are taken at face value.

While the architects-ironists leave the possibility of such interpretations open by embracing the instability of irony, their authorial intention recedes into the background. If architectural communication is understood as the transfer of a message from an architect to an audience through a building, then misinterpretation is seen as failure. But if communication becomes the interaction between a building and its audience, interpretation still takes place – meaning is still transmitted.

When irony fails, and it might do so because of lack of knowledge or proximity, it is very possible that an observer of Guild House will see yet another ugly and ordinary, modern, “bauhaus-y” building—one that follows the very principles that Venturi and Scott Brown meant to attack [ 6 ]. But in the case of Best Products Stores, during the time they were still up and running, a speeding driver or an inattentive passer-by might, for a moment, see what they would now, after the company's demise; dangerous, crumbling, and decaying buildings [ 7 ].<sup>92</sup> In such cases, however rare and improbable they might seem, an architecture of consumerism might end up failing to convince its target audience to enter it.

93 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 16–20.

This communication breakdown ultimately contests the position that post-modern, surface-level irony is necessarily unable to produce acts of resistance. The misalignment between the intended impact of visual critique and the expectations of an audience might fail to communicate subversive thought, but nevertheless succeeds in subversive action. Miscommunication and depthlessness then work together to highlight what Fisher calls for, an unexpected inconsistency, a possible break in the pervasiveness of capitalist realism, a hint at a failure, however tiny, for its “reality” to remain as all-encompassing as it presents itself to be.<sup>93</sup>

Counterintuitively, it is this potential for failure that is most radical about Best Products Stores.



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# **Cold War Architectures** Global Discourses, Slovenian Practices, and Ideological Fractures

**Nika Grabar**



## Introduction

The post-WWII period was marked by reconstructions and the advancement of the welfare state in the West and the socialist state in the East. Despite numerous collaborations between architects from both sides of the Iron Curtain, many dilemmas concerning architecture and its role in development projects remained unresolved. The article analyses how, after the WWII, the inter-bloc collaboration of architects in the context of the UIA (International Union of Architects) allowed for a fruitful exchange of ideas while at the same time its protagonists produced a discourse that made the intertwining between architecture and ideology an untouchable subject. A similar situation can be discerned in the proceedings of the AYP (American-Yugoslav Project), a 1960s bilateral project for developing Cold War planning methodologies. The Slovenian architects worked within both conflicting conditions in Yugoslavia and abroad given the urgency for reconstruction and modernization. The socialist project collapsed by the 1990s, but its architectural achievements stayed, including the ones in Yugoslavia. However, the transition from socialism to capitalism changed the symbolic framework of their meaning. Since they were built to represent values antithetical to the ones of capitalism, their perception was accompanied by an embedded sense of irony. The same sentiment, however, can be traced back precisely to the fractures of the discourses and the failures of Cold War planning. The article therefore focuses on elucidating them through examining specific historical moments in Slovenian architectural history, which at the same time show how ideology co-shaped socio-political relations with architecture, both locally and globally. The first part is devoted to the question of beginning of the activities of the UIA immediately after WWII and to a reflection on the involvement of Slovenian architects in it. The circumstances hindered a thorough reflection on the fundamental relationship between architecture and ideology, thereby separating the discussion of architectural form from its purpose and various social realities. This became particularly evident during the UIA's activities in Morocco in 1951, which are explored in the second part of the paper. The third part of the article focuses on the question of spatial planning strategies during the Cold War, which were conditioned precisely by economic interest of the Eastern and Western blocs. The evolving dynamics of spatial planning, marked by larger-scale projects and organized international networking, often led to ironic situations due to conflicting ideological positions of those involved. This irony highlighted the dual nature of architecture, which both anticipated and co-shaped the transitions of the 1990s. The shifting meanings evident in these historical accounts added to the irony of contemporary perceptions.



## Changing Perceptions

It is axiomatic that architecture can be simultaneously perceived as a physical and symbolic object. When a situation arises in which an architectural form is seen as a vehicle for values antithetical to those rendered at the time of its construction, irony cannot be dismissed as mere amusement. The fact that the same building can influence different modes of perception over time raises the question of its content and purpose within a wider spatial context that is directly linked to visions of progress and thus to constant technological and social transformations. There's a certain irony in the numerous (re)constructions that no longer inspire confidence in a fair and hopeful future. Contemporary spatial effects are accelerated or decelerated by the voraciousness of a commodified fragmental—image-biased—media. Often overlooked is the evolution of digital technologies related to architectural design and its two parallel trajectories, both of which were shaped after the WWII. One is related to *architectural form*, the other, however, concerns less visible but no less important *spatial planning methodologies*.

The process of organizing the exhibition on the architecture of Yugoslavia for the occasion of the second UIA Congress in September 1951 provides an illustrative example concerning the role of modernist ideas of Slovenian architects in a specific geo-political situation. Despite the initial UIA ambitions to build a new, more collaborative world with architecture, the discourse in the UIA's international arena suggests that these goals were not easily achievable. As the protagonists of the UIA tried to avoid political questions focusing on formal issues, a discursive gap was produced hindering a meaningful and supportive inter-bloc collaboration. The situation made it difficult to reflect on the fundamental interplay between architecture and ideology, which consequently distanced the question of architectural form from purpose and different social realities. When UIA's activities took place in Morocco in 1951, there Slovenian architects organized an exhibition on Yugoslav architecture presenting architectural influences of the east and west, showing spaces of social inclusion, urbanization, folklore, media, etc.; none of which concerned economic issues.

When advanced methodologies of regional planning began to take hold in the mid-1960s, American and Slovenian architects adapted them for societal planning of Yugoslav socialism in the context of the AYP. By this time, planning methodologies had become a cross-disciplinary field, whose implementations gradually included the use of computer technology. As a collaborative project, the AYP had an impact on several fronts—in Yugoslavia it influenced the role of architects in the design of development projects, in America the lessons learned from the AYP were incorporated in the

- 1 Part of the article dealing with the background of the UIA's activity and exhibitions was produced in the context of the research project *Art and Architectural Exhibiting Between Art and Ideological Concepts. The Case of Slovenia, 1947-1979 (J6-3137)*, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

formulation of planning theory; it further evolved in the context of John Hopkins' University planning programs, and at the same time the findings of the AYP were amongst several that co-shaped the UN's global development guidelines, which contributed to the expansion of the American sphere of influence beyond the Iron Curtain.

The AYP is thus a symptom of the times, from which it is possible to discern how the conditions of societal planning in Yugoslavia transformed and reformed the role of architects in the production of space. In Ljubljana this was a period of intense modernization under socialism, with the conditions of spatial planning being redefined through professional activities (centered on rethinking the question of form in the new social context) and the effects of the economic forces of the Cold War (shaping planning methodologies to become more scientific, leading to the production of space becoming increasingly opaque and driven by top-down processes).

The evolving dynamics of spatial planning were closely intertwined with architecture

culture. Projects expanded in scale, and international networking became increasingly organized through numerous professional meetings and exhibitions. However, the differing ideological positions of the participants often led to ironic situations. In this context, design experiences, approaches, and architectural achievements were framed differently, and their perception altered and influenced a transfer of their meanings. This irony consequently reflects the dual nature of architecture, which not only anticipated but also laid the groundwork for the transitions of the 1990s. As a result, the meanings of these buildings shifted, and irony permeated everyday life.

### **UIA – A Democratic Organization of Workers in Architecture?<sup>1</sup>**

The pioneering spirit of the architects of the post-war period, navigating between the interests of the Cold War, inevitably collided with the barriers of different ideologies in the context of East-West collaborations. One of such occasions was UIA. Since there was no easy answer to these questions, they were often avoided at professional meetings. Were the architects' opinions valued equally in such situations? Could their exchange of expertise provide mutual support for their practices despite ideological differences? International engagement impacted the architects' standing in their respective countries by facilitating the sharing of knowledge on a rapidly advancing technological foundation. This influenced new ways of designing architectural form. However, despite rapid social changes, political topics were seldom addressed. Through many intense debates the view prevailed that only by



avoiding political topics, the UIA could facilitate truly ‘professional discussions.’

The UIA congress was founded in June 1948 in Lausanne, Switzerland. With its headquarters in Paris, it aimed to bring architects together around the issue of post-war reconstruction on a global scale, regardless of nationality, ideology or architectural doctrine. After Lausanne, congresses were held first in Rabat, Morocco in 1951, in Lisbon, Portugal in 1953, in the Hague, the Netherlands in 1955, in Moscow, USSR in 1958, and so on, all over the world. The organization is still active today and is the only association of architects officially recognized by the United Nations. Architectural exhibitions have regularly accompanied all their congresses.<sup>2</sup> The driving force behind the organization was Pierre Vago. Vago’s efforts to enable all architects, without exception, to be involved, were marked by personal experience. He was born in Budapest in 1910 and later studied at the *École Spéciale d’Architecture* (ESA) in Paris, where he collaborated with Auguste Perret and worked for the magazine *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*. During this time he maintained links with Eastern Europe, seeking opportunities for Soviet architects to join the UIA. The Bulgarian architect Luben Tonev and Helena Syrkus from Poland, one of CIAM’s protagonists, helped him in the process.<sup>3</sup>

This proved to be more challenging than anticipated. While the UIA sought to function as a bridge-building institution, it encountered ideological and political questions from the outset. A particularly contentious issue during the drafting of its statutes was the concept of democratic governance, with members expressing diverse views on its definition and significance. The divide was especially clear in discussions surrounding this topic, as the USSR and Eastern European delegations advocated for democratic principles, whereas delegates from France, Switzerland, Italy, and Belgium adopted an anti-democratic stance, as will be explored in more detail in the following sections. The argument for a democratic organization was emphasized by the USSR’s Karo Alabin’s desire for the UIA to become an international bulwark for the authority of the architectural profession. This was accompanied by his observation – often made also in Yugoslavia – that architects in capitalist countries do not have the opportunity to develop their social goals through creative enterprise. Alabin, one of the first Soviet architects working within the UIA, and chief architect of the reconstruction of Stalingrad, appealed to the leadership to make the UIA “an association of progressive democratic organizations of workers in architecture who are fighting for lasting peace, the establishment of democracies and the development of culture.” He envisioned the UIA’s role as an important agent in promoting these values.<sup>4</sup>

- 5 Zubovich, "Debating 'Democracy'"
- 6 Zubovich, "Debating 'Democracy.'" 8 Marcela Hanáčková, "CIAM and the Cold War – Helena Syrkus between Modernism and Socialist Realism," (doctoral dissertation, ETH Zurich, 2019), 228–229, 450.
- 7 Many Yugoslav organisations in this period tried to establish connections with the West. For example in 1949, the Association of Engineers and Technicians of Yugoslavia, which included many architects, established a Commission for International Liaisons, which linked up with a number of Western associations: the International Association of Structural Engineers in Zurich, the International Association of Architects in Paris, the International Commission for High Rise Defences in Paris, the International Commission for Large Electric Networks in Paris, the World Energy Conference in London, the Society of Soil Mechanics and Foundation Engineering in Cambridge, USA. *Zapisnik zasedanja Sekretariata za Mednarodne povezave Zveze društev inženirjev in tehnikov Jugoslavije* [Minutes of the Meeting of the Secretariat for International Liaison of the Federation of Associations of Engineers and Technicians of Yugoslavia], 24 Nov 1949, Komisija za međunarodne veze [Commission for International Relations], 1949–1973, Savez inženjera i tehničara Jugoslavije, Archive of Yugoslavia, no. 50.
- 9 Tamara Bjažić Klarin in Marcela Hanáčková, "Networking into the International Union of Architects (UIA)-Poland vs. Yugoslavia," in *Transnational Networking Practices of Central and Southeast European Avant-Garde*, ed. Liljana Kolečnik, (Zagreb: Institut za povijest umjetnosti, 2014), 26–28.

His appeal was, however, rejected by a section of Western architects, notably Paul Vishcer and Ralph Walker, who argued that the UIA should not have political aims, as these might prevent the free exchange of opinions and ideas.<sup>5</sup> Culture, after all, had a different role in post-war socialism and capitalism. Opening debates on democracy and planning strategies along with the related financing of spatial development and infrastructure could lead to direct political engagement and ideological confrontations. The final UIA resolution of the Lausanne Congress underwent several heated debates and modifications. For example, Luben Tonev argued that the reconstruction of Europe required architects working hand in hand with technicians, engineers, specialists, and at the same time with economists, sociologists and politicians. And yet, the final text of the UIA resolution was worded differently. Architects were to work with engineers, economists, sociologists, lawyers and others;<sup>6</sup> politics and ideology were clearly topics to be avoided.

### **Some Socialist Architecture in Colonial Morocco**

Yugoslavia joined the UIA in 1948 after it had been expelled from the Cominform and started to reorient its politics, which made UIA's fractures even more notable.<sup>7</sup> When organizing the Second Congress, originally planned for 1949 in Warsaw, the Polish members halted preparations, partly because they opposed Yugoslavia's entry. The move was to some extent blackmail in light of the criticism of the UIA leadership when it refused to sign the Peace Declaration.<sup>8</sup> The main criticism was, however, directed at the organization and content of the second congress by Helena Syrkus, who opposed Yugoslavia's participation in the UIA as well.<sup>9</sup> The situation was resolved in 1951 when the location for the venue was relocated in Rabat, Morocco, rather than Warsaw. Under the title "How Does the Architect Perform His New Tasks?", architectural production results were showcased in an exhibition by representatives from Brazil, Greece, England, the Netherlands, Italy, Morocco, Mexico, and Yugoslavia.

Rabat seemed a more appropriate venue for the UIA Congress. Morocco was at the time declaratively neither socialist nor capitalist, but nonetheless undergoing rapid political transformations regarding its striving for independence from French colonial rule. The exhibition, which became a standard accompanying program of the UIA congresses, did not show any projects from behind the Iron Curtain. Yugoslavia was the only socialist country to present its projects. After the federation started opening for collaborations with the west, architectural accomplishments and development projects in Yugoslavia were not the appropriate material for exhibitions and



congresses in the Eastern bloc, but apparently convenient for the colonial context. Rabat was a less electrifying venue, as ideological issues were more easily overlooked in the face of immediate local problems.

The “Architecture of Yugoslavia” exhibition was organized by the Architecture Section of the Yugoslav Society of Engineers and Technicians. While many architects from all the republics of the federation participated in the preparation, the final editing was done by the Slovene architect Edvard Ravnikar, who was also the exhibition curator and author of the introductory text to the catalogue. The material covered the presentation of buildings, but also the organization of the state with the emphasis on modernization, vernacular architecture (interpreted as influenced by the east and west), the landscape, folk customs, etc. In short, architecture was the context in which modern technology and folklore, east and west, intertwined.<sup>10</sup>

Ravnikar, conceived of architecture as the foundation for culture and space as an artistic category, interpreted spatial compositions and structures as originating their modern form entwined with local craftsmanship, materials and forms. The exhibition presented several renovation projects and broader urban concepts that indicated social inclusion, while at the same time revealing the architects' sensitivity and attention for specific local conditions.

Yugoslavia was at the time a non-aligned country, whose conditions of political engagement relied on societal ownership of land and a self-managed economy after much property had been nationalized. This kind of information was, of course, not presented in the exhibition, which is why Ravnikar's commentary, not printed in the catalogue, is significant. He presented the cultural heritage developed under the influence of the West and East as those which architects had adapted, transformed and supplemented in accordance with the new conditions and as the basis of work for the future. He linked the achievements in the field of production of space to the efforts made to improve people's conditions, which expressed the progress made owing to the revolution in society, the economy and cultural life, emphasizing his regret that he had not been able to present the results of the economy at the venue as a basis for the general development of socialism.<sup>11</sup>

The endeavors of Slovenian architects within the UIA were bound with organizing their autonomous activities in Yugoslavia and the establishment of the Association of Architects of Slovenia. In the first post-war years, architecture was understood as a basic construction activity. Ravnikar, however, argued that architecture was not just about building functional volumes, but the artistic engagement with space, which was intrinsically linked to culture and social reality.<sup>12</sup> Without such an accompanying text on architecture, society, economy, and technology, the exhibition had a much differ-



nt impact on the audience. Architectural form was, ironically, excluded from its relationship to the context it co-shaped and became attached to other themes that prevailed in the congress, such as Mediterranean space, urban morphology, horizontal density, the adaptation of architecture to different climate conditions and addressing the need for identity and social inclusion. This was interesting for many other architects who were involved in the architectural design of European cities, including several CIAM members. Among them Alberto Libera, who was at that time working on the reconstructions of the Tuscolano area in Rome.<sup>13</sup>

Another notable architect and the official reporter at the 1951 UIA congress, was Michel Ecochard. Ever since the 1930s architects in Morocco were confronted with the problem of the mass migration of people from rural areas to industrialized cities, which led to the construction of improvised settlements (Bidonvilles). Ecochard, who headed the Service de l'Urbanisme (Urban Planning Service) at the time, worked to restructure the areas and housing estates buildings by using new technologies. The development strategies were incomplete at the time and did not address the pressing social issues adequately. For the French authorities, the Moroccan population after the war became, above all, a new, cheap labor force with which to modernize the country, precisely because of internal migration and simultaneously because of the unstable economic situation in Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Ecochard nonetheless adapted the design of buildings to the specific ways of life of local cultures, thus contributing to the development of different architectural typologies for different populations; yet, these same typologies were, again ironically, based on existing definitions of cultural and racial differences and consequently the production of space embodied them. The latter led to the spatial organization of housing and urban plans in the 1950s, which divided the Moroccan population according to religion (Jews and Muslims) and Europeans as a single category according to different classes. Factory workers were, for example, separated from the 'upper-class' population.<sup>15</sup>

The varying roles of architects in the post-war context, where the urgency for reconstruction and technological advancement dictated a rampant pace of building, enabled diverse forms of engagement with social issues through architectural design. International networks were nothing new, but the onset of the Cold War provided a completely new context for architectural projects and gave way for new discursive framings of architecture. For architects in socialist countries creativity meant striving for social goals with architectural form. They were the ones who wanted a democratic international association for cultural workers, since the reality in their countries allowed them to act within the tight constraints of the five-year-plan.



The UIA could have provided them greater recognition, as architects aspired for the advancement of architecture culture. For Western architects, the position of cultural workers as such was incomprehensible and they were not interested in raising the issue with politicians about their role. Their autonomy meant, above all, the autonomy to act as professionals in collaboration with other professionals, within the parameters of the capitalist (welfare) state. Formal issues and technology offered for them more than enough room for professional debates within UIA.

UIA was not the context to develop criticism of either system or ideology that depended on large scale investments and provided the architects with the opportunity to build. When focusing their arguments predominately on formal issues, the architects, ironically, reiterated old patterns of social divisions in space. The conditions under which societies modernized were different. Since the social conditions that considerably determined the architectural outcome were not presented at the congress, the situation in Morocco illustrated well, how socialist projects amongst many other could become just another set of formal ideas.

As the question of ideology remained unresolved, the presentation of socialist projects in Morocco and later in Western Europe carried an ironic undertone. The situation reveals how post-war discourse evolved through numerous professional meetings and exhibitions, creating a framework that rendered socialist architectural achievements intriguing within a capitalist context. This, in turn, established a parallel interpretation of architecture's symbolic meaning within professional circles, one that was completely detached from the conditions in which the buildings were originally conceived.

## **Reconsidering Democracies**

Expert networks were just one of many factors influencing development projects in Europe; investment policies also played a crucial role. Following World War II, U.S. support was instrumental in directing financial investments toward the swift reconstruction and urbanization of the continent. This initiative was primarily aimed at rebuilding war-torn infrastructure and modernizing the European economy, reflecting America's strategic interests in fostering stability and preventing the spread of communism. Through substantial funding and resources, the U.S. sought to transform the continent's urban landscapes, laying the groundwork for a new economic order that emphasized modernization and growth in the post-war era. For architects, designing under such conditions was a first-time, unparalleled challenge. When the US announced the program for aid for the recovery, reconstruction

- 16 The Truman Doctrine was a policy announced by U.S. President Harry S. Truman in 1947, which committed the United States to providing economic and military aid to countries threatened by communism, specifically Greece and Turkey. It aimed to counter Soviet expansion in the Mediterranean and protect democracy, marking a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. "Truman Doctrine," Britannica, accessed October 1, 2024.
- 17 "A Look Back at the Marshall Plan," June 2 1987, HU OSA 300-8-3-16441, Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: Publications Department: Background Reports; *Open Society Archives at Central European University*, Budapest.
- 18 Geoffrey Roberts, "Moscow and the Marshall Plan: Politics, Ideology and the Onset of the Cold War, 1947," in *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 34, no. 8, 1994, 1376.
- 19 Tanja Zimmermann, "Novi kontinent – Jugoslavija: politična geografija 'tretje poti'," *Zbornik za umetnostno zgodovino*, vol. 46, 2010, 170.
- 20 Zimmermann, "Novi kontinent – Jugoslavija."

and stabilization of the European economy known as the Marshall Plan, it initially did not exclude the USSR or other socialist countries. However, it soon became clear that, in line with the Truman Doctrine,<sup>16</sup> the US did not intend to support communism.<sup>17</sup>

In June 1947 negotiations between England, France and the USSR on the US proposal in Paris ended abruptly with harsh criticism of Molotov. Afterwards Moscow telegraphed its East European embassies with instructions that the people's democracies should ensure their own participation in the forthcoming Marshall Plan discussions, which they did and, in the end, rejected their involvement.<sup>18</sup> Yugoslavia never took part in these proceedings despite Stalin's insistence.<sup>19</sup>

Ironically, within this context, the question of democracy emerged from the Soviet side. Molotov denounced the US aid system as undemocratic and as directed against popular democracies and prevented sovereign states from deciding on their own development prospects. US investment was directed towards the development of European regions (not countries) according to the needs of the US side:

"The implementation of the Marshall Plan will mean placing European countries under the economic and political control of the United States and direct interference in the internal affairs of those countries ... this plan is an attempt to split Europe into two camps ... to complete the formation of a bloc of several European countries hostile to the interests of the democratic countries of Eastern Europe and most particularly to the interests of the Soviet Union."<sup>20</sup>

Yugoslavia did not join the Marshall Plan, nor did it participate in the Molotov Plan, which was organized by the Soviet Union in response to the American initiative later that year.

As with the UIA, Slovene architects did not identify entirely with one side or the other. However, given Yugoslavia's non-aligned stance, its cooperation with the US intensified after 1948. What did it mean for Yugoslavia that it refused to be a part of either plan, and how can the traces of Cold War be discerned in spatial planning? Weren't both sides arguing for peace and democracy? Where was the battle ground? Democracies of the east, or the people's democracies, as they called themselves, meaning people's regimes in which means of production were publicly owned, were politically organized in the context of the Communist Party. The economy revolved around the question of their five-year plans. In democracies of the west means of production were mostly privately owned and peoples' will manifested through elections by having the possibility to vote for different parties organized around free market economy. There was no societal planning in the US. Spatial planning was conditioned by free market economy.

- 22 The Ford Foundation is a nonprofit organization established in 1936 by Edsel Ford and Henry Ford, based in New York City. It was one of the largest philanthropic organizations investing in research on spatial planning, particularly during the 1960s and provided significant funding for urban planning, housing, and community development projects. The foundation aimed to address issues related to urbanization, making it a key player in the field of spatial planning and urban studies during that time. Its contributions co-shaped policies and practices related to urban development in the United States and globally.
- 21 Nika Grabar, "Planning and Ideology: American-Yugoslav Project," *Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports*, July 20 2024.
- 23 Tracy Neumann, "Overpromising Technocracy's Potential: The American-Yugoslav Project, Urban Planning, and Cold War Cultural Diplomacy," *Journal of Planning History*, 22(1), 2023, 3–25. For further reading about international entanglements related to the AYP see also Vladimir Kulić, "Ford's Network: The American-Yugoslav Project and the Circulation of Urban Planning Expertise in the Cold War," *Planning Perspectives* 37 (5) (2022): 1001–27.

The battle ground was really about the imaginary space on future development determined in the Cold War context and was co-shaped by architects when reinventing the production of space on large scale with planning methodologies for urbanization. The position of the Iron Curtain was, through these processes, determined by the decision of European countries to cooperate economically either with the US or USSR. The engagement of Slovene architects in this situation is particularly telling since Yugoslavia, again, maintained its between-the-blocs position. Their activities reveal the differences when trying to overcome them in the process of appropriating western planning techniques and striving to maintain the preconditions for a societal plan at the same time as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

## Adaptations

Of particular importance concerning the activities of Slovene architects was the East European exchange program, a fellowship program administered by the Ford Foundation initiated in 1951. The fellowship allowed Vladimir Braco Mušič of the UPI (Urban Planning Institute) to travel to the USA in 1964 to establish connections with American academics; in particular John W. Dykman, who later collaborated on the American-Yugoslav Project (AYP). By 1966, the Ford Foundation supported a bilateral project between the US and Yugoslav governments, the AYP. The project was launched as a regional planning initiative, a Cold War ‘democracy-building’ enterprise that aimed at transferring American planning methodologies to Eastern Europe. It provided a 2-year grant to Cornell University faculty to work with the Ljubljana UPI on the question of regional planning. The protagonists of the project were Vladimir Braco Mušič (UPI) on the Yugoslav side, Dykman (Berkley) on the US side in the first year and Jack Fisher later (Cornell and Wayne State University).<sup>21</sup>

The Ford Foundation<sup>22</sup> saw the project as an opportunity to expand their influence in socialist countries—the so-called Iron Curtain—something they long desired. The AYP was intended to be a short-term investment in a politically neutral technology transfer that would showcase the superiority of Western science and provide a model for exporting American urban planning knowledge around the world. However, it became the Ford Foundation’s largest project in Eastern Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall and showed that planning was indeed a very political process.<sup>23</sup>

How ideology and spatial planning intertwined in the Cold War arena was perhaps best illustrated with a comment by Louis Winnick, the economist, who played a major role in Ford Foundation’s investments:

- 24 Louis Winnick, "The American-Yugoslav project," *Louis Winnick's travel notes, itineraries and correspondence*, Conferences, 1957–1969, Folder 4, Box 2, FA 601, United States International Affairs Program, Ford Foundation records, 7.

- 25 Secretary to Keast, June 13 1968, Reel 2871, Grants U-Z 06800493, FA 7321, Ford Foundation records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

“All things considered, American-Yugoslav collaboration presented Ford with an exceptional opportunity ‘to open doors and minds’ within Marxist Europe, a basic Foundation goal since the inception of its East European programs. Looking back, one could also adduce a certain irony in the notion that a Communist domain, where systemized planning approached a secular religion, was willing to concede a deficit in a critical dimension—spatial arrangements at the regional level. The irony heightened by the fact that Yugoslavia sought assistance not from the socialist or labor party regimes of West Europe, Scandinavia or Great Britain, or even from dirigiste France, but from what was, arguably, the Western world’s most free-wheeling and least planned society.”<sup>24</sup>

A deep irony was thus present already amid Cold War. The spatial planners in Yugoslavia sought collaboration with Western experts due to their advanced methodologies. However, the situation reveals a more complex dynamic. While Yugoslav planners were adapting and refining their approaches to develop socialist spaces, the knowledge exchange simultaneously provided Western investors with a deeper understanding of how socialist societies were organized. Ironically, this allowed Western investors to adjust their methodologies in ways that appealed to countries beyond the Iron Curtain. The discursive framework of the AYP thus transformed the meaning of development projects, making them attractive to both Western investors and Eastern European planners. This created an imagined professional reality, where, despite unresolved ideological differences, socialist contexts increasingly adopted Western-style development models. Today, after the collapse of socialism, this irony persists, illustrating that the forces shaping architecture were driven not only by professional meetings and debates but also by investments deeply intertwined with political agendas.

How did the project evolve and what were the problems? The original project was organized in the summer of 1966 to develop a regional planning research and training center in Ljubljana and bring American know-how in regional planning to Yugoslavia. In the years 1966–67 the goal of the project was to ‘contribute to the development of spatial planning in Yugoslavia by confronting the problems of the Yugoslav experts to the experience of the concepts of the American academy in the field.’<sup>25</sup> In more practical terms, the idea was to develop thoroughly professional plans with the emphasis on the quantification of economic and social factors for the Ljubljana region as a case study. At the time Ford aimed at establishing an interdisciplinary training and research program for young professional planners extending to Eastern Europe. The UPI of Ljubljana served as the administering agency, but it was also the Association of Yugoslav Planning Institutes, known as

26 Winnick, "The American-Yugoslav Project," 19.

27 Winnick, "The American-Yugoslav Project," 19.

Zajednica, that provided Federal sponsorship and organized a Yugoslav “national” advisory committee for the project.

One of the scopes of the project was establishing an International Centre for Regional Planning Studies chartered as a Yugoslav legal entity. Its charter would provide for a board of directors composed of representatives of Yugoslav planning institutions as well as non-Yugoslav professionals, regional planners and researchers to enable research activities on regional planning problems: training of professional planners, regional scientists, economists, geographers, demographers, sociologists, architects, and administrative experts. This autonomous think-tank was to provide a scientific base for regional development. It was about laying the foundations for a regional planning institution that would cooperate internationally, connecting urban planners in the region with the American experts in the field.

Problems arose almost immediately, and they showed the basic differences in the approach to planning of socialist and capitalist contexts, whose futures would supposedly materialize differently in space. At the beginning the specialist were facing a seemingly unresolvable situation. Urban land was, according to the American planners, to derive its site value from the incremental gains of its location and was envisioned to be allocated to the most productive users according to the principle of ‘highest and best use.’ This was dismissed as completely irrelevant in Yugoslavia, where urban land was publicly owned and administratively distributed. In such circumstances the attribution of any value and price to land was an alien idea and caused a significant problem when starting the AYP since both parties were unable to communicate the basic starting point for planning.<sup>26</sup>

This was not the only predicament. To the US contingent un-priced land provided no clues to the rational spatial arrangement of economic activities. Likewise, housing, which in a market system is an economic good rationed by price and rent, was treated by socialist planners as a public good provided at a nominal charge, slated in the future to be a free commodity. Rent-income ratios of 25% typical for the US context seemed like exploitation to the Yugoslavs by landlords and renters. Conversely, to the Americans, Yugoslavia’s closely packed three-generation households and the 10-year queue for a dwelling was evidence of underinvestment in housing, which, in a capital-short state, could be remedied by higher consumer outlays.<sup>27</sup>

The described difficulties were connected to the question of property and profit, and it was therefore necessary to establish a new common ground through methodologies in which it would be possible to overlap the interest of both the Western investors as well as socialist governments expanding the logic of the Marshall Plan, which was in the long run an economic success for the Americans. Yugoslavia needed the economy to recover, it needed

28 In 1964 Lowry had advanced a computer model for the spatial organization of human activities within a metropolitan area for the RAND (research and development) corporation. Ira S. Lowry, "A Model of Metropolis," RAND, July 20, 2024.

29 For a more detailed explanation of the process see Nika Grabar and Jelica Jovanović, "Prostorne politike i proračuni Hladnog rata: Amerčko-jugoslovenski projekat," *Uspomi in padovi, domašaji i promašaji i nono što smo zaboravili*, eds. Jelena Vesić, Ana Sladojević, Ana Miljanić (Beograd: Centar CZKD, 2021), 44–65. Or Nika Grabar, "Rethinking the American-Jugoslav Project," filmed by CZKD October 14 2020.

investments but could not engage a free market economy with socialism. How could it modernize and instill a societal plan at the same time?

Research in regional planning procedure in the AYP relied on the analysis of the region through several parameters. One set of parameters (drawn as top-down in a diagram) was described as: economy, population, physical conditions and other factors. These factors were then reconsidered via alternative sets of data and evaluated via another set (drawn as bottom-up in the diagram). These parameters included: housing, work, transportation, agriculture, services and infrastructure. It is possible to interpret the two sets of parameters corresponding one to the US and the other to the Yugoslav analysis of the situation. In short, the Yugoslav planners recognized the immediate social challenges in developing space vis-à-vis the economy, which both sides accepted as a precondition for planning. The process was to be constantly considered, reconsidered and studied further via problems, objectives, indicators and measures (horizontal parameters). These were the key elements for the planning process and generating data based on applicable development factors reconsidered for the region of Ljubljana. In this phase they used the Lowry model adopted for the AYP developed by Ira S. Lowry, which quantified economic and social factors.<sup>28</sup>

Looking closely at the Lowry model, the computational link between the two views, it too quantified the analyses of the regions through its own set of parameters. These included additional aspects of development: travel time; population, employment, land use, attractiveness factors for population and population serving employment; work, shopping, special shopping, social recreation. Though the planners tested out different spatial patterns (corridors, linear, polycentric) when studying supposedly all possible factors that influenced urban growth, the Lowry model seemed to them as most efficient. In this process computing helped sorting out different sets of information. The inputs included details about the future transportation networks, location of future non-population serving employment (industry), and projected population estimates for the region. Outputs included distribution of population, population serving employment (services) and the amount of land consumed by various urban activities.<sup>29</sup>

The results of the Lowry analysis were presented as regional maps in which the program defined urban, suburban and rural areas in several stages. In the case of AYP regional development meant imagining urbanization for a wider Ljubljana metropolitan region. The boundaries of the computerized schemes did not in any case correspond to the boundaries of zones, municipalities, republic or the state in which people could potentially politically organize and state their opinion about different types of development transforming their immediate surroundings. Instead, this planning strategy envis-

- 30 *Selected Experiences in Regional development*, Documentatoin & Information Service on Regional Development, Social Development Division (New York: United Nations, 1970).
- 31 John Mathiason, *Invisible Governance, International Secretariats in Global Politics* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2007).
- 32 "Center for Metropolitan Planning and Research records," *Special Collections*, The Johns Hopkins University, July 10 2024.

ioned a region in which intense urbanization was managed by experts whose decisions relied on pre-determined factors. Regional planning as such had nothing to do with people's democracy nor with the notion of western democracy. It did, however, appear scientific, progressive, and appealing.

## Aftermath

The AYP officially ended in 1970, when Ford withdrew its funding. But the ideas lived on. The AYP was the basis for the establishment of the Regional Planning Centre in Belgrade and Ljubljana under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council, conceived in the light of the 1086 C (XXXIX) resolution for developing research and training program in regional development. It envisioned assisting countries that were facing migration from rural areas to cities and to modernize their economies through industrialization and agricultural improvement programs.<sup>30</sup> The Yugoslav experience is one of many in this field, the aim of which was to develop compatible regional planning methods for around the world to unravel under UN sponsorship. The regional planning network created an infrastructure for planning, which included establishing UN Secretariats that from the 1970s onwards became a major player in international relations. They have had a significant influence on national policies but have been almost invisible since they have not been part of national governments. Their role in the contemporary regional planning as well as their influence on global governance is yet to be examined.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, the AYP was significant in co-shaping the Johns Hopkins University programs at the Centre for Metropolitan Planning and Research by initiating a lasting engagement with Eastern Europe. When Fisher moved to Hopkins in 1972, he brought the AYP with him. (The Centre also engaged in planning the Belgrade Transportation Project during this period.) This not only enhanced Hopkins' academic and research portfolio but also solidified its reputation as a leader in urban studies with a unique international perspective on planning methods in a communist context. The collaboration led to a sustained relationship with Eastern Europe, embedding this international dimension into the university's strategic initiatives and academic activities.<sup>32</sup>

The work of architects within the UIA and AYP was symptomatic of its time and was defined by contradictions developed in a tense political climate. The nature of war is not to resolve contradictions, but rather for one side to impose its will upon the other. Thus, the professional activity of architects within the UIA left aside the question of ideology and architecture, allowing the discourse to focus pronominally on formal issues without serio-



usly considering the economic effects on society. The situation around the AYP, however, was not so clear-cut. Parallel to trying to develop different models and strategies to even start working on the AYP there was also a constant negotiation about how and why decisions were being made and who was allowed to make them. We can see this in the procedure of planning already in the first stage of the project, in 1967–68, when both sides proposed two different stages of the ideal planning procedure.

For the American planners this included a macro, sector and project stage of planning process after which came directly planning of physical space. For the Yugoslav planners, however, after the spatial planning phase the stage was set for establishing a societal plan and a feedback loop to rethink the macro plan. This was in fact the background idea for complex diagrams developed in the final stage of AYP. The Lowry program later rationalized how these evaluations unfolded, but the Yugoslav side meticulously insisted on the feedback loop when it came to final decisions. They were to be made by people not systems or machines. Despite all the scientific parameters and ideologies, the architects insisted on maintaining conditions for the possibility of a societal plan to be reconsidered against macro-economic factors. This theoretically allowed for local institutions to influence development. Although this decision-making and coordination process was supposed to provide an inclusive starting point for societal planning, the practice was not as consistent.

The evolving dynamics of spatial planning during the post-war era consistently produced ironic outcomes, rooted in the conflicting ideological positions of those involved. These ironies underscored the dual nature of architecture, which both anticipated and helped shape the transitions of the 1990s. As socialist and capitalist architectural practices intersected, the symbolic meanings of buildings were often reframed, detached from their original context, and reinterpreted in ways that conflicted with their ideological foundations. Particularly, the collaboration between Yugoslav planners and Western experts highlighted this irony, as Western investors adapted socialist methodologies to suit their own agendas. This knowledge exchange, while rooted in ideological opposition, resulted in an unexpected alignment of practices across the Iron Curtain, with Western models influencing socialist contexts. The irony persists today, as the forces shaping architecture were not only professional but also deeply political, revealing how investment and ideological compromise played a central role in transforming both architectural meaning and urban development during the Cold War era. Moreover, the reality of international symposia, exhibitions, and investments was integral to establishing an imagined expert reality—one that continues to influence architectural and planning practices to this day.



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# **Architectural Irony and the Sarajevo City Hall**

## **A Symbol of Cultural Paradox**

**Lejla Odobašić Novo**

- 1 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003)
- 2 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24.
- 3 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)
- 4 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004)
- 5 James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993)

## Framing Architectural Irony: Vijećnica as a Site of Contestation

Sarajevo City Hall, known as Vijećnica (pronounced *Vee-yea-chnee-tsah*), stands as one of the most emblematic and contested structures in Sarajevo's complex urban landscape. Built in 1896 by the Austro-Hungarian regime in a pseudo-Moorish style, Vijećnica was intended to assert imperial authority while appealing to the local population through a superficial gesture of cultural affinity. Over the ensuing decades, the building has been repurposed as a national library during the Yugoslav socialist period and later as a symbol of multiculturalism, when it became a target of deliberate destruction during the Bosnian War. Today, Vijećnica is often celebrated as a historical monument and a symbol of resilience, but such interpretations risk oversimplifying its deeper, more complex significance.

This paper posits that Vijećnica is not merely a stable symbol of unity or resilience; rather, it is a profound example of *architectural irony*—a condition where the intended meaning or function of a building is subverted by its historically politicized trajectory, creating a structure that embodies contradictory messages or multiple, conflicting—paradoxical—narratives. Architectural irony can emerge when a building's design or purpose is at odds with the historical events and sociopolitical contexts that shape its use and perception over time. In the case of Vijećnica, this irony is revealed through its role as a 'living text,' where each attempt by different regimes to impose a singular narrative has been met with subversion, reinterpretation, or transformation, reflecting ongoing struggles over identity, historical narratives, and cultural heritage in Sarajevo.

To explore these complexities, this paper draws on key theories from memory studies and cultural theory. Andreas Huyssen's concept of the "fluidity of memory"<sup>1</sup> and Pierre Nora's idea of *lieux de mémoire*<sup>2</sup> provide a foundation for understanding how monuments like Vijećnica function as dynamic sites where collective memory is continuously produced and contested. Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory<sup>3</sup> highlights how different social groups have inscribed their identities onto the building over time. Additionally, Paul Ricoeur's insights on selective memory and forgetting<sup>4</sup> offer a framework for critiquing the building's reconstruction, while James E. Young's notion of counter-monuments<sup>5</sup> helps us understand the inherent irony in efforts to preserve its original form.

By applying these theoretical perspectives, this paper critiques conventional approaches to heritage preservation and monumentality, demonstrating how Vijećnica's reconstruction reflects broader tensions between memory, forgetting, and the politics of space in post-conflict societies. Through this analysis, it challenges dominant narratives that attempt to fix Vijećnica's

6 The Serbo-Turkish War was a military conflict that took place between 1876 and 1878, in which the Serbian and Montenegrin forces fought against the Ottoman rule supporting a rebellion in Bosnia and Herzegovina which in turn further fueled the political unrest culminating in a war between Russia and Turkey.

7 Nedžad Kurto, *Arhitektura Bosne i Hercegovine: Razvoj Bosanskog Stila* (Sarajevo: Međunarodni Centar za Mir, 1998).

8 Dijana Alić, "Ascribing Significance to Sites of Memory: The Sarajevo's Town Hall," *Urban International Press* (Great Britain, 2004), 70.

meaning, revealing instead the complexities and contradictions that make it an enduring and contested symbol in Sarajevo's cultural landscape.

### **Historical Context and Architectural Design: Emphasizing Paradoxes**

The theoretical frameworks of Andreas Huyssen, Pierre Nora, and Maurice Halbwachs offer profound insights into the complexities of Vijećnica's architecture and its shifting symbolism across different historical periods. In 1878, following the Congress of Berlin and the end of the war between Serbia and Turkey<sup>6</sup>, the Habsburg Monarchy assumed control over Bosnia and Herzegovina, succeeding the Ottoman Empire. This shift in power was not just political; it was reflected in a radical transformation of Sarajevo's urban landscape. The city's spatial planning shifted dramatically from Ottoman models to Western and Viennese precedents<sup>7</sup>, marking the capital as a canvas where two contrasting worlds collided. The Austro-Hungarians imposed new urban forms that signaled their authority, alongside changes in governance, social structures, and demographic patterns. By 1910, the city had swelled from 21,337 to 30,547 inhabitants, with the demographic composition shifting dramatically: the Muslim population fell from 69% to 40%, while the Roman Catholic population surged from 3% to 37%; the Orthodox Christian population remained stable at 18%.

Amidst these changes, the Austro-Hungarian rulers decided to make their mark on the capital's skyline by constructing a grand City Hall. This building, Vijećnica, was meant to assert their dominance while simultaneously paying homage to local traditions. Yet, the gesture of 'homage' revealed a deeper irony. Sarajevo, at that historical moment, stood at the crossroads of two divergent cultural spheres: the traditional, Ottoman-centered East, and the protomodern, European West anchored in Vienna. This intersection was expressed in the architecture of Vijećnica, which the Habsburg government commissioned in a style they called 'pseudo-Moorish.' Hence, architecture became a battleground for competing narratives—one that sought to merge the seemingly incompatible elements of empire and locality.

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw Austro-Hungarian rule desperately trying to balance the empire's traditional values with the distinct identities of its annexed territories<sup>8</sup>. Architecture was employed as a diplomatic tool to forge connections between colonial ambitions and local customs. The pseudo-Moorish style emerged from this cultural maneuver—a blend of Moorish and Egyptian elements, reshaped with a Viennese augmentation, creating a 'new vernacular' that the Austro-Hungarians believed would appeal to the



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9 Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," 7-8.

10 Ibid., p.84

11 Ibid., p.66

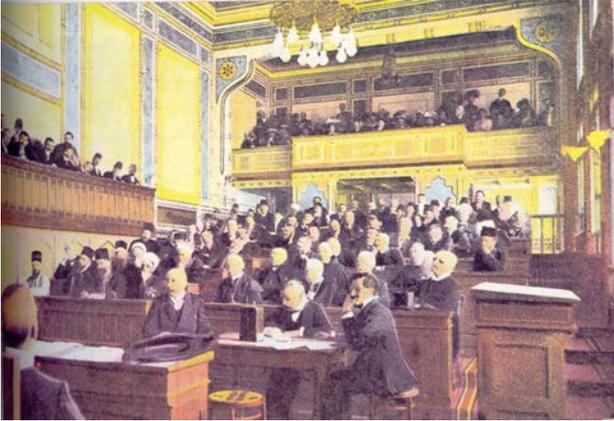
1 Postcard of Sarajevo City Hall from the late 1890's.  
(from the personal collection of Ferhad  
Mulabegovic, used by permission).

Bosnian population. Ironically, they failed to recognize that Bosnia's dominant architectural style was rooted in Ottoman principles, not in the Andalusian or North African motifs that informed their designs. Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*—sites of memory—refers to places where collective memory is inscribed and preserved, often because the original social fabric that sustained these memories has been lost. Vijećnica can be seen as a *lieu de mémoire*<sup>9</sup> in the way it was constructed to serve as a symbolic site that anchored the Habsburgs' narrative of control and cultural hegemony. By using an architectural style that was intended to evoke Islamic traditions, the Austro-Hungarians attempted to create a monument that would integrate the city's Ottoman past with their imperial future. However, rather than creating a seamless narrative, the building became a site of contested memories. Nora's theory helps to elucidate how each period of Vijećnica's history involved an attempt to fix its meaning—to establish it as a site of memory that would serve the needs of those in power. The Austro-Hungarian regime sought to anchor its authority in a space that, while appearing to pay homage to local traditions, was deeply disconnected from them. This disjunction created an inherent irony, as the building was never fully embraced by the local populace it was meant to appease.

The site for Vijećnica further underscored this disconnect. Positioned deliberately at the edge of the city, on the eastern periphery of the Ottoman Baščaršija, the new City Hall was meant to serve as a gateway to Sarajevo. However, its orientation—turned away from the old Ottoman center—was a clear assertion of Austro-Hungarian dominance. Bosnian-Australian architect Dijana Alić argues that the building's towering height and its main entrance, facing the banks of the Miljacka River rather than the city streets, were meant to visually and politically sever it from its surroundings.<sup>10</sup> The pseudo-Moorish style, she suggests, was a strategic attempt to de-escalate tensions between the city's Muslims, Serbs (Orthodox), and Croats (Catholics) by forging a 'Bosnian' style and national identity. However, this identity was heavily skewed toward the Bosnian Muslims, reflecting a calculated Austro-Hungarian effort to counteract growing Croatian and Serbian nationalism by fostering a separate Bosnian character, labeled as 'Bošnjak.'

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The architecture, proffered to assert control through cultural inclusion, ironically reinforced perceptions of alienation. The inclusion of 'Islamic' elements in Vijećnica was crucial from the outset, entrusted first to the renowned Austro-Hungarian architect Karlo Pražik. Yet, his proposal was ultimately rejected by Austrian authorities, leading to his replacement by architect Alexandar Wittek in 1892. When Wittek fell ill, the task was finally handed to Ćiril Iveković, who completed the project in 1896 [1]. These



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- 12 Homi K. Bhabha, in his seminal work "The Location of Culture" (1994), introduced the concept of mimicry as a colonial strategy wherein the colonizer encourages the colonized to imitate the cultural norms and practices of the colonizer, creating a relationship of ambivalence and partial presence. While Bhabha primarily applied this idea to language, identity, and behavior, the concept has been extended to architecture to describe how colonial powers employ local or regional styles to assert dominance while appearing to respect local traditions. Thus, while Bhabha did not specifically coin "architectural mimicry," his theoretical framework provides the foundation for understanding the term in a broader postcolonial context.

- 13 Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2-5.

- 2 View of the Council Chamber Hall, Sarajevo City Hall from the early 1900's. (from the personal collection of Ferhad Mulabegovic, used by permission).

architects, each bringing a different vision, mirrors the fragmented and often contradictory nature of the Habsburgs' attempt to forge a unified identity through architectural expression. In their effort to bridge cultures, the Austro-Hungarians only highlighted the divides, as Vijećnica became less a symbol of unity and more a testament to imperial aspirations that struggled to understand the cultural complexities of Sarajevo.

Vijećnica is arguably one of the most impressive and opulent structures ever commissioned by the Habsburg administration in Sarajevo—a lavish monument to imperial ambition. Conceived as an architectural statement, the building's plan is an equilateral triangle, each of its three corners accented by a commanding tower, symbolizing the reach of imperial power. Its most striking feature, the south-facing façade overlooking the Miljacka River, is an intricate display of ornamentation, with a central bay richly adorned to draw the eye and assert its presence upon the skyline.

The architectural drama continues within: the heart of the building is a vast hexagonal atrium, crowned by a gleaming dome of glass and steel from which all spaces radiate, as if to emphasize the centrality of power emanating from this seat of authority. A grand marble staircase ascends from the atrium, leading visitors upward through the hierarchical tiers of governance, to the most imposing rooms—the original City Council (*Gradsko Vijeće*) meeting room and its secondary counterpart, both located on the first floor [ 2 ].

The construction of Vijećnica as a monumental City Hall was an exercise in architectural mimicry<sup>12</sup>, intended to assert imperial power and control through cultural symbolism. Yet, its function continued to evolve and reflect the fluidity of the political and societal shifts. Drawing on Huyssen's notion of “fluidity of memory”<sup>13</sup>—in which he argues that memory is not static but fluid, constantly evolving in response to present needs and desires—we can see an example of this through a building whose identity has been repeatedly redefined by the regimes that controlled it.

The effort at cultural cohesion backfired spectacularly. In 1914, just after a visit to Sarajevo's City Hall, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated—a spark that ignited World War I and unleashed forces that politics of architecture could not contain. The building, originally intended to consolidate power, became a silent yet salient witness to the empire's collapse. Between 1914 and 1941, Vijećnica saw a range of occupants—including prison—as it was adapted to various functional needs. Each tenant altered its interior, reflecting the shifting purposes and fragmented identities imposed upon it.

After World War II, Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged as one of the six republics of Yugoslavia (along with Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro



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14 Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.

3 View of Sarajevo City Hall from the 1980's.

4 Council Chamber Hall turned into the library study room from the 1980's. (from the personal collection of Ferhad Mulabegovic, used by permission).

and Macedonia), a state determined to forge a new socialist identity, one that necessitated the erasure of its colonial past. Vijećnica, as a symbol of former Austro-Hungarian authority, stood as a reminder of that past and thus required reimagining. To align with the ideological shift of the new regime, the building was repurposed from a seat of administrative power to the National and University Library—a beacon of socialist enlightenment and progress [3][4]. Here, Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* is again applicable, as the socialist government sought to create a new site of memory that would align with its ideological goals.

During the Yugoslav era (1945–1992), Sarajevo was radically transformed, expanding far beyond its previous geographical limits. The cityscape itself became a canvas for new socialist ideals, replacing imperial grandeur with architectural expressions of equality and collectivism. This was a time when architecture was not merely about aesthetics but ideology—a declaration of the regime's vision to elevate the proletarian working class. New buildings were constructed as symbols of uniformity and equality, spaces designed to embody the collective spirit and to serve as tangible rewards for the contributions of the people.

In this context, Vijećnica underwent its own metamorphosis: from a colonial symbol of bureaucracy to a contemporary library and research institute open to all. Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory emphasizes that memory is a social construct, shaped by the group that holds it. Collective memory is not about the past itself, but rather how the past is remembered by different social groups<sup>14</sup>, and as such this period illustrates how different social groups inscribed their own memories upon the building. For the socialist regime, Vijećnica was reimagined not as a relic of colonial rule but as a beacon of enlightenment and cultural synthesis, reflecting the ideals of a socialist state that sought to transcend ethnic and religious divides. This reframing was an effort to construct a new collective memory that aligned with the socialist vision of a unified, modern Yugoslavia. However, as Halbwachs suggests, collective memory is always contested, and not all social groups in Sarajevo may have accepted this new identity for Vijećnica. For some, it remained a symbol of past imperial domination, while for others, it became a cherished part of the city's intellectual and cultural life; a living testament to the city's capacity for cultural adaptation and resilience and an embodiment of Bosnian multiculturalism.

### Vijećnica's Destruction

In 1992, when Vijećnica was shelled by Serb nationalist forces during the Bosnian War, the ironies of its history seemed to reform as flames. Here was



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a building that had transformed from a symbol of imperial authority only to be targeted for embodying the very spirit of diversity it had come to represent. The burning pages of 1.5 million books fluttered like 'black snow' over the city, a grim testament to the attempt to erase Sarajevo's pluralistic memory. How bitterly ironic that a structure that once aimed to bridge cultures was destroyed in an act of cultural cleansing, its ashes a stark commentary on the fragility of shared histories in times of division.

During the Yugoslav period (1945–1991), Vijećnica, the Bosnian National and University Library held over 1.5 million books—a treasure-trove of knowledge that housed the National Archives of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the entire collection of the University of Sarajevo, more than 150,000 manuscripts and rare books, and copies of every book, journal, and newspaper ever published in the country.

On the night of August 25, 1992 the Serb nationalist army unleashed a brutal assault, shelling the library in relentless waves; within moments, the library was engulfed in flames. The siege lasted for three days, consuming the very soul of Bosnia's cultural memory. By the end, the vast majority of the library's collection had been reduced to smoldering fragments, a nation's heritage turned to dust via a calculated act of cultural erasure. This strategic obliteration underscores Halbwachs' notion that collective memory is fragile and can be manipulated or erased by those in power.

The man who signed the order to annihilate Vijećnica was Nikola Koljević, a figure whose life embodies a profound and tragic irony. Once a distinguished literary professor at the University of Sarajevo, Koljević was a revered Shakespearean scholar, poet, and a critic who thrived in the city's rich, cosmopolitan milieu. Koljević was deeply embedded in the intellectual fabric of Sarajevo, a city that mirrored the very ideals his scholarship once upheld.

In a cruel twist of fate, the seeds of personal tragedy began to unravel this connection. The death of his son in a skiing accident in the late 1970s plunged Koljević into a deep depression, driving him toward Orthodox mysticism and a fervent embrace of Serbian nationalism. This once-celebrated man of letters, who had spent his life immersed in the works of Shakespeare—himself a master of irony—transformed into a staunch supporter of Radovan Karadžić, the nationalist Serb leader. By 1992, Koljević had relocated to Pale, the stronghold of the Bosnian Serb leadership, from where he played a pivotal role in orchestrating the siege of Sarajevo.

Koljević, a former scholar who had once walked the halls of Vijećnica, a man who had undoubtedly turned the pages of rare books and manuscripts, became the architect of their destruction. For Koljević, Vijećnica had come to symbolize everything he now despised about Sarajevo—its Ottoman



Photo by Roger Richards/DVReporter.com

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- 15 Rebecca Knuth, *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries: Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006), 6.
- 16 András J. Riedlmayer, "Killing Memory: The Targeting of Bosnia's Cultural Heritage," testimony presented at a hearing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, April 1995 (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1995), 51.

legacy, its multicultural identity, and the scholarly life that continued to flourish within its walls. His directive to Ratko Mladić to shell and eradicate Vijećnica was not just a military order; it was an act of personal and ideological erasure, an attempt to obliterate the very symbol of a city that had once nurtured his intellectual pursuits. In this act, the scholar-turned-nationalist made a mockery of the values he once embodied,

The burning of books is an act that transcends mere destruction; it is an assault on the very essence of culture and memory. As Rebecca Knuth observes, "books and libraries constitute the living tissue of culture; the destruction of books (with burning frequently serving as the method) undermines the ideals of truth, beauty, and progress – and, by extension, civilization itself."<sup>15</sup> The irony is stark: Vijećnica, once the repository of Bosnia's diverse cultural and intellectual heritage, became a target of deliberate obliteration, not because of what it housed, but because of what it represented—an edificial testament to Bosnia's pluralistic spirit.

This cultural onslaught provoked international outrage; the Harvard librarian Andrés Riedlmayer condemned the maelstrom as an act of "cultural destruction." He argued that this was not just another casualty of war but a calculated effort by nationalist extremists to extinguish both human lives and the memory of Bosnia's historically pluralistic and tolerant society<sup>16</sup>. Tying it back to Andreas Huyssen's concept of the "fluidity of memory", its destruction represents a violent attempt to halt this fluidity, to fix memory in a state of erasure, effectively denying the pluralism that the building had come to symbolize [ 6 ].

The attack on Vijećnica represents a complex and layered instance of cultural and collective memory erasure. Through the lens of Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, and Huyssen's fluidity of memory, the attack on Vijećnica can be understood as an attempt to erase a contested and dynamic site of memory, underscoring the profound irony of a building that once united diverse narratives becoming a casualty of division and intolerance.

## Reconstructing Memory: Post-War Restoration

The post-war reconstruction of Vijećnica is laden with layers of irony, reflecting the tension between remembering and forgetting, preservation and transformation. After the Bosnian War, the building's restoration became a symbol of national resilience and a statement of cultural revival. However, the decision to restore Vijećnica in its original Austro-Hungarian style, rather than embracing its more recent role as a national library and cultural center, reveals a deeper, more complex narrative about memory and identity in post-



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conflict Sarajevo. This decision can be critically examined through Paul Ricoeur's ideas on selective memory and forgetting, as well as James E. Young's concept of counter-monuments.

The unwavering commitment to rebuilding Vijećnica, along with its once-vast library collection, drew significant support from an array of international organizations, including the World Bank, UNESCO, the Harvard University Libraries, and the Government of Austria. The urgency of the cause was undeniable, and yet the reconstruction efforts seemed to attract as much attention for the building's haunt remains as for its potential revival.

The ruins of Vijećnica became the backdrop for a high-profile concert—an event meant to draw media attention to the restoration campaign. The Sarajevo Symphonic Orchestra, under the baton of Zubin Mehta, performed Mozart's Requiem within the crumbling walls of the City Hall. The choice of music—a requiem, traditionally a mass for the dead—could not have been more paradoxical, as it echoed through a structure being resurrected to symbolize national renewal. This performance, meant to herald a new beginning, resonated with the mournful notes of loss and remembrance, underscoring the complex layers of meaning entwined in Vijećnica's revival. Here, amidst the ashes of war and the hopeful strains of music, the building itself seemed to exist in two worlds: one of death and destruction, the other of rebirth and reclamation, trapped within the ironies of its own history.

In the aftermath of the conflict, war survivors in Sarajevo yearned for a return to 'normalcy,' imagining their city as a thriving, global metropolis that would focus on current challenges rather than linger on the wounds of its past. Yet, even in its ruined state, Vijećnica loomed large—not as a mere relic of history, but as a powerful symbol of what had been lost and what could still be reclaimed. Ironically, while the building was shattered and scarred, its very ruin became a testament to its historical significance, evoking a deeper sense of cultural value precisely because of its vulnerability.

Soon after the war ended in 1995, the first tentative steps were taken toward restoring Vijećnica, but the discussions surrounding its future use were fraught with ambiguity. Should it be restored to its original function as a City Hall? Or should part of it serve as the National and University Library, as it had done for decades? Some even proposed leaving it in its ruined state, as a stark, visceral monument to the destruction wrought by war. In 1996 it was decided to relocate the library collection to a 'temporary' home at the University of Sarajevo, in a building that had once served as military barracks named after Josip Broz Tito.

However, the reconstruction of these facilities lagged and was not completed until 1999, three years after the decision was made, at which point the library moved into what was supposed to be its interim residence. This



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17 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 55–57, 412–413.



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18 *Ibid.*, p. 412–416.

8 View of the Council Chamber in 2007.

9 View of the grand staircase in 2007.

'temporary' arrangement has since become a permanent fixture of the university campus, much like Vijećnica itself—a structure caught between its past identities and uncertain future, embodying the very contradictions of a city striving to move forward while continually being pulled back into its own complex history.

The decision to reconstruct Vijećnica in its original Austro-Hungarian form and function adds yet another layer of irony to its already complex narrative. In the aftermath of war, its restoration as a City Hall seemed to resurrect not its most recent role as a cultural beacon, but its original function as a symbol of imperial power. According to Ricoeur, memory is inherently selective, shaped by both conscious and unconscious processes that decide which events are remembered and which are forgotten.<sup>17</sup> By reconstructing Vijećnica as it appeared during the Austro-Hungarian period, the restoration efforts underscore a desire to remember the building's colonial past while simultaneously forgetting its later transformations. This act of selective memory represents an attempt to fix the building's identity at a particular moment in time, thereby neglecting the fluid and evolving nature of its historical and cultural significance.

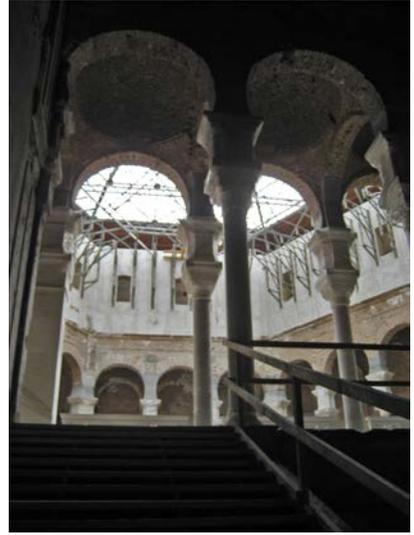
Ricoeur also highlights the role of forgetting in the construction of memory, suggesting that forgetting is not merely the loss of memory but can also be an active process of erasure or suppression<sup>18</sup>. In the case of Vijećnica, its reconstruction can be seen as an intentional act of forgetting—specifically, a forgetting of the building's more recent past. The restoration, therefore, can be critiqued as a conscious effort to stabilize the building's meaning and reduce its dynamic complexity, aligning with a singular narrative that may not fully capture the building's multifaceted history.

In the years following the war, as Sarajevo embarked on a journey of reconstruction and renewal, many of the city's damaged landmarks began to rise from the ashes, but Vijećnica remained conspicuously untouched. While funds from the EU and Austrian governments trickled in, they were sufficient only for a partial restoration—focused on stabilizing the central hall and securing the building's structural integrity. The full resurrection of Vijećnica seemed a distant dream, stymied by soaring costs, tangled legal ownership, and deep uncertainty over its future purpose. The very forces that had rebuilt Sarajevo's war-torn landscape showed little urgency in restoring one of its most emblematic structures.

Unlike the imperial Austro-Hungarian rulers who originally erected Vijećnica or the socialist Yugoslav authorities who repurposed it, the post-conflict Bosnian leadership seemed indifferent to the building's palimpsestic significance. The pseudo-Moorish style, once deployed to symbolize a distinct Bosnian identity, now appeared politically irrelevant, failing to align



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- 10 View of the burnt-out roof with missing stained glass in 2007. Photos by the author.
- 11 View of the burnt-out roof from the grand staircase in 2007. Photos by the author.
- 12 Structurally stabilized Sarajevo City Hall, photo of the front façade.
- 13 Detail of one of the towers, 2007. Photos by the author.

with any contemporary ethnic or electoral interests. In a grim twist of fate, the building that had once been a focal point of Sarajevo's architectural and cultural identity now found itself adrift—without clear allegiance or champion in the fractured political landscape. Thus, its reconstruction languished, not because of lack of historical importance, but because it no longer served a convenient political purpose.

The focus on Vijećnica as a symbol of Sarajevo's resilience and multicultural heritage began to fade. Political parties shifted their attention—and the much-needed funding—toward projects that promised more immediate, tangible benefits and clearer financial returns. Political priorities crystallized around initiatives that directly catered to specific ethnonational groups, and as international enthusiasm for funding a multicultural approach dwindled, so too did the momentum for Vijećnica's full restoration.

In 1997, UNESCO designated Vijećnica as a monument under the 'Monuments Protection Act,' an accolade that seemed to promise renewed attention and resources. Yet rather than channelling substantial funding toward its reconstruction, UNESCO allocated \$600,000 from the German government for peripheral expenses—such as equipment, staff training, and the restoration of the library collection. The structural stabilization efforts resumed only modestly between 2002 and 2003 [ 8–13 ], and it wasn't until September 18, 2003, that the Sarajevo Canton administration made a decisive move to restore Vijećnica to its original role as City Hall, with limited space allocated to the National Library.

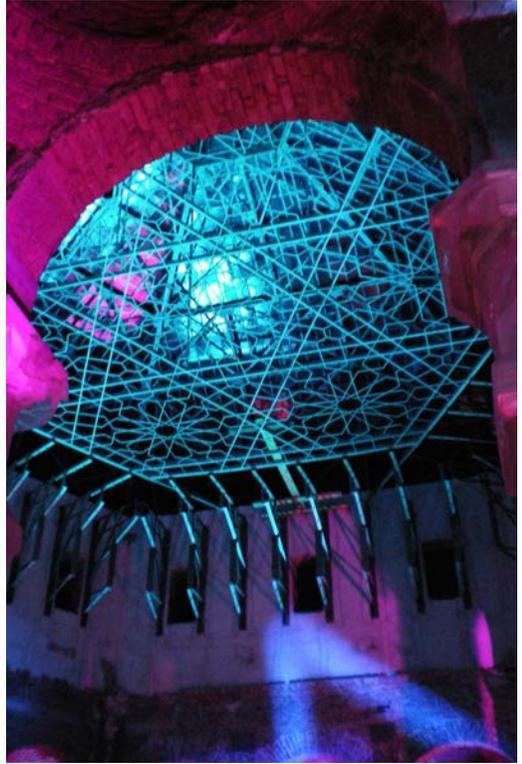
The irony deepens when considering the final phase of renovation, which began in late 2008 and concluded in 2014. The effort was less about reclaiming Vijećnica's dynamic role as a cultural nexus and more about reinstating its original Austro-Hungarian function. The structure was ultimately rebuilt to fit a narrowly defined purpose, reflecting a stark paradox: in the pursuit of preserving the past, the opportunity to embrace its richer, more inclusive legacy was allowed to slip away.

### **Solidifying the Monument: Remembering and Forgetting**

Between the late 1990s and its reopening in 2014, Vijećnica found itself in a peculiar limbo—structurally sound yet not fully reconstructed. In this 'in-between' phase, the building unexpectedly emerged as a vibrant cultural hub, its partially restored halls becoming a dynamic canvas for Sarajevo's creative and communal expression. Ironically, it was in this state of incompleteness that Vijećnica truly came alive, its flexible interiors adapting to host an array of cultural events that breathed new life into its walls and reaffirmed its place in the city's cultural landscape.



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14 Sarajevo Film Festival (SFF) event organized in Vijećnica. View of the atrium with grand staircase visible, 2007.

15 SFF detail of the roof construction. Photos by the author.

16 Photo of a concert in the main atrium of Vijećnica, 2007. Photos by the author.

During these years, Vijećnica transformed into a pivotal venue for festivals, cultural organizations, and museums, accommodating everything from art exhibitions and concerts to avant-garde installations. Its galleries displayed works by renowned artists like Kounellis in 2004, Zec in 2007, Kovačević in 2008, Muritić in 2008, and Dimitrijević in 2010. The building's grand spaces also became the central stage for major events such as the Sarajevo Film Festival (SFF), MESS, Sarajevo Winter, and Bašćaršija Nights, along with countless concerts and performances [ 14 ] [ 15 ] [ 16 ]. In this unexpected role, Vijećnica defied its own unfinished state, symbolizing the convergence of diverse narratives and communal gatherings that define Sarajevo's multicultural spirit—perhaps more so than at any other point in its history.

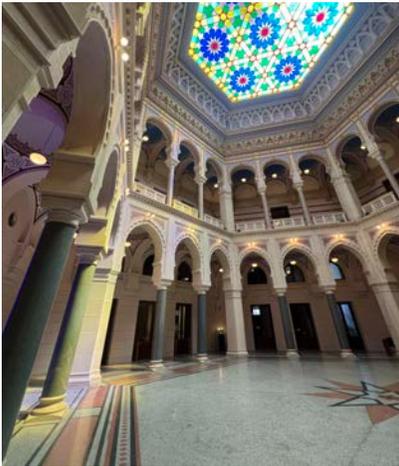
Vijećnica's final chapter of reconstruction is steeped in irony, and for many Bosnians, its verdict felt like a profound misstep. To countless Sarajevans, Vijećnica's identity is inseparable from its role as a library, a cherished cultural landmark that stands as a testament to the city's resilience and intellectual spirit. The decision to return it to its initial administrative purpose sparked controversy and disappointment, as it seemed to negate the very essence of what the building had come to represent.

James E. Young's concept of counter-monuments illuminates the ironies inherent in the restoration of Vijećnica. Counter-monuments are typically designed to challenge traditional forms of commemoration, rejecting fixed or singular interpretations of history in favour of a more dynamic and open-ended engagement with the past. Although Vijećnica was not originally conceived as a counter-monument, its post-war status ironically aligns with Young's framework. Despite efforts to fix its significance through the restoration of its original style, Vijećnica a dynamic site of memory, continually reinterpreted by the diverse communities and narratives it represents.

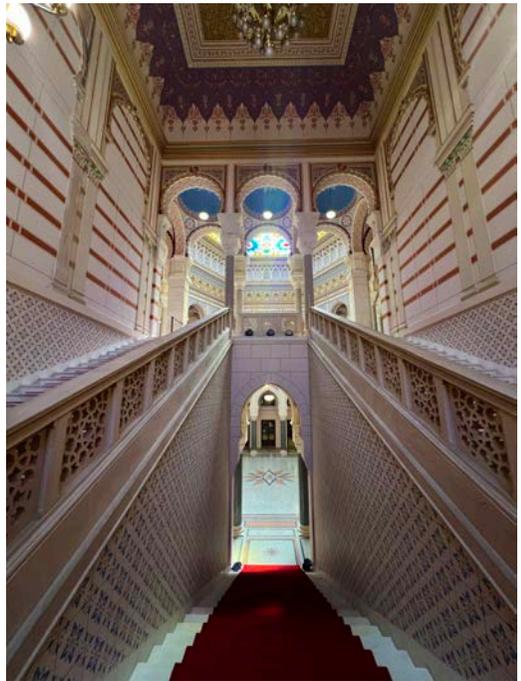
The building's very existence resists any attempt to pin down a single, unambiguous meaning. Even as its restored façade attempts to evoke the grandeur and authority of Austro-Hungarian rule, the building is inescapably marked by its history of destruction, survival, and reinvention. It continues to operate as a contested space where conflicting memories and interpretations converge, embodying a kind of counter-monumentality that defies the restoration's attempt to "freeze" it in time. Young's concept also helps to critique the limitations of conventional restoration practices, which often aim to return buildings to a perceived original state, ignoring the evolving and multiple meanings that such structures accrue over time. By seeking to restore Vijećnica in its original style, the reconstruction efforts ironically ignore the building's role as a "counter-monument," a site where competing historical narratives and identities intersect. Instead of allowing Vijećnica to remain an active, dynamic site of memory—constantly in dialogue with its past—the



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19 Huysen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, 249–250.

17 Sarajevo City Hall front facade, 2024. Photo by the author.

18 Sarajevo City Hall main atrium, 2024. Photo by the author.

19 Sarajevo City Hall interior, Grand Stairs and the Atrium, 2024. Photos by the author.

restoration attempts to contain its meaning within a specific historical frame, inadvertently underscoring the very fluidity of memory that it seeks to deny.

Further compounding this irony is UNESCO's designation of Vijećnica under the 'Monuments Protection Act,' a move intended to preserve its historical importance but one that inadvertently froze the building in time, stripping it of its ability to continue its adaptive, reflective journey. In declaring Vijećnica a monument, the decision confined it to a singular narrative, undermining its capacity to embody Bosnia's complex and inclusive identity. As Andreas Huyssen, a contemporary cultural historian, notes, remembrance — whether individual or collective — is inherently unstable, always subject to reinterpretation. In modern societies, where museums, memorials, and monuments often shift in meaning or lose their original significance, such an act of preservation ironically risks ossifying what should be dynamic.<sup>19</sup>

Vijećnica — a structure that had once adapted and evolved to accommodate the city's shifting identities — was trapped in the amber of its own history, its potential to serve as a living testament to Sarajevo's multifaceted narrative diminished. The irony, then, lies in the effort to honor the past while inadvertently limiting the very evolution that gave Vijećnica its unique significance. The restoration of Vijećnica, viewed through the lenses of Ricoeur's selective memory and Young's counter-monuments, reveals a fundamental tension between efforts to fix its significance and the building's resistance to such stabilization. The decision to reconstruct the building in its original style is thus an act of both remembering and forgetting, an attempt to honour a particular past while suppressing others.

### **Counter-Monumentality and Vijećnica: An Alternative Approach**

In considering the reconstruction of Vijećnica, the potential for a counter-monumental approach introduces an alternative vision, one that could embrace the building's complex and ironic history rather than attempting to restore it to a fixed past. Going back to the concept of counter-monumentality, as articulated by scholars like James E. Young, a counter-monument resists the inclination to freeze history into an immutable form, instead it creates a space where the ongoing interpretation and evolution of memory can flourish. For Vijećnica, this approach could have offered a more profound engagement with the building's history, inviting a dialogue between its various roles through history.

The irony inherent in Vijećnica's reconstruction lies in the decision to restore it to its Austro-Hungarian form, thereby privileging a singular, imperial narrative while neglecting its more recent and perhaps more culturally significant history. By opting for this fixed restoration, the complexity of the



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20 Monument Against Fascism in 1986 when first erected depicting its full height. During its existence it slowly 'disappeared' into the ground.

21 A boy adding his inscription into the monument.

22 View of the disappeared monument. Photo courtesy of Esther Shalev-Gerz.

20 The following is part of the artist's statement that Esther Shalev-Gerz has shared with the author to further reinforce the intentions behind the monument: "We invite the citizens of Harburg, and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12-metre-high lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared completely and the site of the Harburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the long run, it is only we ourselves who can stand up against injustice."

building's layered meanings was overshadowed. A counter-monumental approach, however, could have embraced these multiple layers and allowed for a dynamic interaction with the past.

Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz's *Monument Against Fascism* in Hamburg provides a powerful example of how a counter-monument can subvert the traditional role of a memorial. Erected in 1986 in the Harburg district, this lead column (1x1x12m) was designed to disappear over time as an intentional commentary on the transient nature of memory and the role of monuments in shaping collective consciousness. The monument invited the public to inscribe their names and thoughts on its surface as an act of engagement with the very concept of memorialization. As the inscriptions accumulated, the column was progressively lowered into the ground until it vanished entirely in 1993, leaving only a plaque in its place<sup>20</sup>. The deliberate vanishing of the monument was

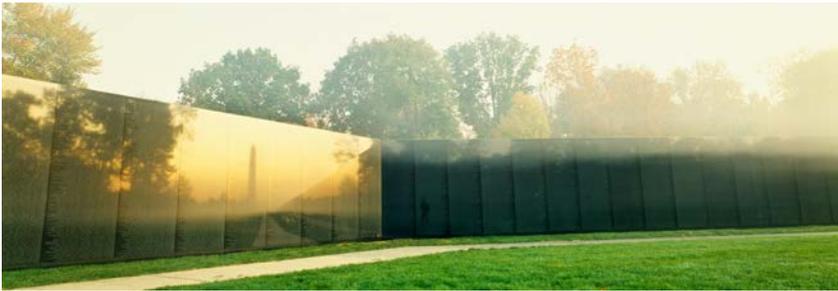
meant to reject the idea that a static monument could ever adequately capture or preserve the essence of memory, especially in the context of something as profound and complex as the memory of fascism and its consequences. Instead, the monument embodied the notion that memory requires active participation and constant renewal by those who live with its legacies.

This act of disappearance is central to the monument's counter-monumental nature, reflecting the idea that memorials should not serve as permanent reminders but as prompts for ongoing reflection and engagement. In this way, the *Monument Against Fascism* subverts the traditional expectation that monuments are eternal markers of historical events [ 20 ] [ 21 ] [ 22 ]. By gradually disappearing, it calls attention to the impermanence of memory itself, and to the dangers of relying too heavily on physical structures to carry the weight of historical trauma. The Gerz's work directly challenges the conventional purpose of monuments, which often attempt to fix a singular narrative in place for future generations. By contrast, this disappearing column acknowledged that memory and history are dynamic, fluid, and often uncomfortable processes, ones that cannot be contained within a single symbolic structure. The interactive and evolving nature of this monument invited the public to take responsibility for remembering by inscribing their own thoughts onto the monument, rather than relying on a monument to do the work for them.

For Vijećnica, a similar approach could have been employed in one segment of its reconstruction to underscore the ironic tension between its historical roles. By incorporating elements of gradual decay or impermanence into the restoration, the reconstructed building could have served as a reminder of the fragility of both memory and architecture. It could have also been used to record new memories of the citizens today. Thus, a design element



23



24

23 Vietnam Memorial by Maya Lin, view from the top, the memorial looks like a 'cut' into the landscape. Photo by Terry Adams, National Park Service

24 Detail of the reflective surface of the Vietnam Memorial on which the names of the fallen soldiers are written. Photo by Mark Segal

that reflected the passage of time, similar to the *Monument Against Fascism*, would have allowed Vijećnica to stand as a living symbol of Sarajevo's evolving identity, rather than an attempt to freeze it in a specific moment of imperial history. This counter-monumental approach would engage the public in an ongoing dialogue with the building's past, highlighting the continual process of negotiating memory in a city marked by both cultural richness and historical trauma.

Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington, D.C., is another poignant example of how a monument can move beyond mere commemoration to foster personal engagement and reflection. The memorial's defining feature—its reflective black granite wall—enables visitors to see their own image superimposed upon the engraved names of the fallen soldiers, thereby creating a direct and intimate connection between the individual and the collective memory of those memorialized. This interaction transforms the experience of the monument into something active and personal; each visitor is confronted not only with the past but with their own role in the ongoing process of remembrance. By incorporating their own presence into the memorial's surface, visitors are compelled to confront the notion that history is not a static narrative confined to the past, but one that continues to shape and be shaped by those who engage with it. Lin's minimalist design, with its absence of overt symbolism, leaves space for multiple interpretations, allowing the memorial to resonate across generations and with individuals of diverse backgrounds.

For Vijećnica, a similar approach could have provided a means of engaging Sarajevo's citizens in the building's layered history. By incorporating reflective surfaces or other interactive elements into the reconstruction, Vijećnica could have invited visitors to see themselves as part of the ongoing narrative of the city's complex past. Such a design would have fostered an active relationship between the building and those who encounter it, emphasizing that its meaning is not fixed but continually evolving. The act of seeing one's reflection in the structure, as with Lin's memorial, would have symbolized the continuity between past and present, reminding visitors that they are part of a living city that continues to grapple with its history.

Furthermore, this reflective or interactive design within the building, could have been used to highlight the multiple roles Vijećnica has played throughout its history. The juxtaposition of these various layers of history, reflected in both the architecture and the visitors themselves, would have created a dynamic dialogue between the building's past and present functions allowing the building to acknowledge the contradictions and complexities that define its identity. Much like Lin's memorial, which accommodates the individual's experience while also standing as a collective monument,



a similar strategy at Vijećnica could have reinforced the idea that memory is not monolithic but is shaped by the interaction of multiple narratives and perspectives.

The irony in Vijećnica's restoration lies in the decision to freeze its identity at a singular historical moment, overlooking its complex evolution as a symbol of both colonial power and cultural resilience. While the restoration was meant to honor its past, it paradoxically silences the dynamic and multifaceted narratives that have shaped the building's significance, such as its role as the National Library and its destruction during the Bosnian War. A counter-monumental approach would have allowed Vijećnica to reflect the fluidity of memory and embrace its layered history, engaging the past and present in ongoing dialogue. Instead, the restoration limits its potential as a site of inclusive reflection, missing the opportunity to embody the complexities of Sarajevo's collective memory and its struggle to reconcile with its past.

### **Conclusion: Synthesizing the Paradox**

This paper has examined the inherent ironies embedded in the shifting roles and meanings of Vijećnica, from its inception as a symbol of Austro-Hungarian colonial authority to its transformation into a cultural nucleus and its contested resurrection in the post-conflict period. By positioning Sarajevo City Hall as a compelling case study of architectural irony, the paper has contextualized it within a broader global framework of buildings that have undergone similar transformative journeys. In doing so, it has illuminated the complex interplay between architecture, memory, and identity in post-conflict societies.

Central to the argument is the idea that Vijećnica functions not merely as a static symbol, but as a dynamic 'site of memory' — what Pierre Nora calls a *lieu de mémoire*. Throughout its history, different regimes and social groups have sought to inscribe their own narratives and memories onto the building. The Austro-Hungarian regime, for example, attempted to use the pseudo-Moorish style to project a narrative of cultural integration, while simultaneously reinforcing their political dominance. Later, under Yugoslav socialist rule, the building was transformed into a national library, reflecting a deliberate attempt to overwrite its colonial identity with a new narrative of socialist progress and cultural synthesis. In each case, Vijećnica became a contested site of memory, embodying the selective processes by which societies choose to remember, reinterpret, or forget their pasts.

Paul Ricoeur's insights on selective memory and forgetting are particularly relevant in critiquing the decision to restore Vijećnica to its original



form. This restoration reflects an effort to fix the building's meaning to a specific historical period, privileging a narrative of imperial heritage while marginalizing other layers of its complex history. By focusing on this singular narrative, the restoration risks freezing Vijećnica's dynamic and evolving nature, reducing its role as a site where multiple memories and meanings intersect. As Ricoeur suggests, such acts of selective memory involve not only remembering but also deliberate forgetting—a suppression of the building's more recent roles as a symbol of multicultural resilience and intellectual life.

Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory further elucidates how different social groups have inscribed their identities onto Vijećnica over time. For the socialist government, the building was reimagined as a beacon of enlightenment and cultural synthesis, embodying the ideals of a unified Yugoslavia that transcended ethnic and religious divides. However, the building's destruction during the Bosnian War and its subsequent reconstruction highlight the fragility of collective memory and its susceptibility to manipulation by those in power. Halbwachs' perspective underscores the contested nature of Vijećnica's identity, which has been constantly reshaped by shifting political and social contexts.

James E. Young's concept of counter-monuments offers another critical lens through which to understand the ironies of Vijećnica's post-war restoration. Counter-monuments challenge traditional forms of commemoration by rejecting fixed or singular interpretations of history. Although Vijećnica was not originally conceived as a counter-monument, its status in the aftermath of the war aligns with Young's framework. Despite efforts to restore it to its original form, the building continues to function as a dynamic site of memory, where conflicting interpretations and narratives coexist and evolve. The decision to restore Vijećnica to its Austro-Hungarian appearance may seek to stabilize its meaning, but the building itself resists such finality, remaining an open text subject to ongoing reinterpretation and debate.

By applying these theoretical perspectives, the paper critiques conventional approaches to heritage preservation and monumentality, demonstrating how Vijećnica's reconstruction reflects broader tensions between memory, forgetting, and the politics of space in post-conflict societies. Through this analysis, it challenges dominant narratives that attempt to fix Vijećnica's meaning, revealing instead the complexities and contradictions that make it an enduring and contested symbol in Sarajevo's cultural landscape.

Tracing the complex history of Sarajevo City Hall reveals the many ways in which architectural irony and memory are inscribed within its evolving roles and meanings. The irony does not reside solely in its stylistic dissonances or political role reversals but in the very act of its post-conflict



restoration—a restoration that sought to resurrect an imperial past while overshadowing its more recent incarnations as a symbol of cultural resilience and diversity. This choice underscores the uneasy balance between the desire to honor heritage and the necessity to acknowledge the multi-layered identities of post-conflict spaces.

Ultimately, Vijećnica serves as a reminder of the paradoxes that architectural history often carries. It is a building that resists any single, definitive narrative; its every stone carries a tale of irony and memory. As we reflect on its past and contemplate its future, we are confronted with profound questions: How can we honor a complex history while adapting to contemporary needs? How do we balance the impulse to remember with the necessity to move forward? In Vijećnica, these questions remain unresolved, etched into its very foundation, making it a living testament to the complexities of memory, identity, and cultural endurance in post-conflict societies.



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**Lejla Odobašić Novo** is a Bosnian-Canadian architect and researcher with bachelor's and master's degrees in architecture from the University of Waterloo, and a Ph.D. from International Burch University. She investigates how the built environment can engage with contested histories and play a critical role in both perpetuating and transforming spaces marked by conflict. Lejla teaches at International Burch University and directs the Architecture Program at Kuma International in Sarajevo. She is also on the steering committees of the Architectural Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina and DoCoMoMo BH, and is a licensed architect with the Ontario Association of Architects.

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**George Papamattheakis** is a researcher, writer, and editor based in Athens, Greece. He holds masters in environmental studies (Yale M.E.D.



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# Abstracts

## Catching Flak On the Irony of Fortresses

Anna Neimark, Michael Osman

**Keywords:** Fortress, Paul de Man, Parabasis, Vauban, Military

During this time of heightened emotions brought about by wars, military terms might be the last possible object to bring to an issue on irony. There is nothing ironic about war, as it is experienced. Yet we do find it disturbingly present in the modern language of our discipline, so we are willing to catch some flak.

Flak itself is an abbreviation of a compounded German word, dating back to World War II. The acronym stands for the *Flieger-abwehr-kanonen*, or the flying defense cannons, that produced clouds of shrapnel in the skies. Canons, too, are a medium of irony. In the German language, little distinction is made between the weapons of war and the annals of disciplinary knowledge: both *kanonen* are spelled with a single *n*. Doubles are seemingly everywhere in warfare. Take the mortar's trajectory, for example, as projectiles are intimately tied to theories of projection. Bringing cannons into the canon, Robin Evans described the conundrum faced by early military engineers. The form of a defensive fort, he showed, made a direct relation of the arc of an offensive shot and the projection plane of drawing. In the field, a vector of offence produces a corresponding geometry of defense. On paper, representing that geometric confluence requires a set of reciprocal orthographic conventions. Is it ironic that the artist Albrecht Dürer speculated on the truncated cone of the fort's form with the visual aid of the projectile's path? The convex surface was simultaneously formed by the attack of cannonballs and informed by the impression of battered arches. Evans dwelled on a possible moment of indecision: Dürer needed the wall to map the path and he needed the path to map the wall, and we may never know which one came first. His projections of a fortress are therefore self-referential, depicting a structure caught in a cloud of linework flak. One hundred and fifty years later, in an astonishing drawing, the military engineer Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban figuratively represented the explosion of lines – this can be read as much an aesthetic attack as a descriptive image. What explodes in the drawing is a curtainwall.

This essay will address the double life of military language in architecture: curtainwall façades, urban boulevards, interior enfilades, banquet halls, parade grounds, and printed magazines are just some of the modern terms that trace their origin to the military fort. The aim is to understand how architectural theory can revisit this glossary of terms to employ the slippage of meaning for multiple purposes. We believe it can offer a place of comic relief, while at the same time, it may also offer a way to sharpen the stakes.

## Who Laughs Last?

The Architecture of Entertainment as a Paradigm of

# Serious Irony from Cedric Price to the Present Day

Cesira Sissi Roselli

**Keywords:** Politics, Pretence, Cedric Price, Fun, Clubbing

On 18 September 2024, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni receives a phone call from the President of the African Union Commission.

On 1 November 2024, news is leaked that the phone call was a telephone deception by the Russian comedian duo Vovan & Lexus Actually, no discrepancies emerge during the conversation from the government's public positions on the issues tendentiously raised by the Russian interlocutors.

The elementary nature of a prank call takes on the dimensions of an international diplomatic case. The episode becomes emblematic because it demonstrates (beyond the systemic fragility of the filters of the Office of the Diplomatic Advisor to the Italian Prime Minister) how one resorts to the modalities of irony to approach extremely serious issues, such as the war in Ukraine and illegal immigration from North Africa.

Starting from this episode, the paper aims to investigate the status of irony: after a period of apparent crisis, where political correctness seems to have flattened the debate, can irony still be a useful reading tool to interpret the present?

This change of direction is repeated cyclically in history. To examine how this is reflected in the field of design, some of Cedric Price's works are taken as case studies in relation to some exhibitions and projects by radical and more recent authors.

Considering Price as one of those authors capable of balancing the rigour of technological tension and the opening determined by abstraction, today the need to resume Price's studies is linked to the desire to reconsider this interrupted history where innovation was used to converse with the construction of imageries, in a prolific exchange between technical sciences and theoretical visions. Experiences like those accrued by Price return to be key issues in the present, where the detachment of the various levels of the design process has sanctioned an autonomy of the disciplines, causing their progressive and mutual depletion.

The title of the proposal "Who laughs last?" is a quotation from the cover of the magazine *Ottagono* No. 98 of 1991. The title of the magazine's editorial "Architecture and entertainment" by Marco De Michelis is the text that traces the guideline proposed in the paper. Starting with Cedric Price's Fun Palace experiment, similar projects are analysed including: the Entertainment Centre for Leicester Square (Michael Webb, 1962); the Entertainment Tower for Montreal (Peter Cook, 1963); the Theatre Trodheim (Archigram, Ron Herron, 1968-70); Pietro Derossi's installations for the XIV Milan Triennale (1968); The Bang Bang Club (Ugo La Pietra, Milan, 1967); The Altro mondo club (Pietro Derossi, 1968); The Montercarlo Project (Archigram, 1970); Space Electronic (Florence Mondial Festival, Gruppo 9999 and Superstudio, 1971); the project for Ministry of Sound (OMA, London 2015).

The paper investigates projects where an ironical approach is recognizable. Ironical approach refers to the attitude towards reality characterized by an analytic awareness and an irreverent consciousness and typical of a methodology born in times of change and crisis.

The aim is to define which compositional traits characterised these projects in architectural and political terms. For example, the use of colour made by the post-modernist movement and the micro or macro scale which took over both architecture and design objects. Or the amused and uncompassionate split of the Vitruvian triad, the use of dislocation, the provocation of a designer designing a non-plan and the reversal of the architect's role in a process of auto-irony.

Mainly the paper tries to find the answer to this question: is it already possible being ironic today?

Is irony in architecture maybe a luxury that we can't give ourselves no more, or is it a way to see the reality, to interpret the world in a non-schematic and free-from-preconceptions point of view?

Irony doesn't solve a problem; it is an aptitude. Vladimir Jankélévitch connects the idea of irony to the idea of "occasion": irony helps to pinpoint where can be an unexpected occasion. And architecture always needs new occasions.

## Transfer of Power

### A Calendar of Classical Contradictions from Trump to Biden

Kyle Dugdale

**Keywords:** Classicism; Washington, DC; Trump; Biden; Tennis

The months surrounding the 2020–2021 transition of presidential power in Washington, DC witnessed a fury of classical drama in and around Washington, DC. In December 2020, outgoing president Donald Trump signed an executive order recommending that newly commissioned federal buildings—courts of justice, government offices, even structures built for the nation's least exciting federal agencies—demonstrate a visible commitment to the vocabularies of classical architecture. America's architects erupted in protest. But on January 6, 2021, it was a different crowd that marched upon the US Capitol—its Corinthian columns forming an orderly backdrop to the growing violence of the mob.

Two weeks later, the same building was decked out in full glory for the inauguration of President Joseph Biden. Witnesses to the celebratory speeches might have detected a more vocal commitment than usual to the notion that DC's classical architecture served as an enduring symbol of democracy. Indeed, the same day saw the release of a new architectural logo for the White House itself—designed to be “forward-looking while having its roots in something very traditional,” and intended to symbolize the new president's “desire to bring the country together.” The new graphic identity came complete with classical letterforms to communicate “a governing tone.”

Before another month had passed, Biden had revoked Trump's executive order. White House press photographs dutifully documented the performance of his presidential duties at a desk placed carefully against the backdrop of the State Dining Room's Corinthian pilaster order.

## Re-enter Pliocene

### Irony and Sincerity in Speculative Architectural Fiction

George Papamattheakis

**Keywords:** Speculative Architecture, Territory, Future thinking, Superstudio, Planet City

In 1972 the Italian journal *IN* featured a project by Superstudio, titled “Salvages of Italian Historic Centers.” With six proposals for six different cities, the architects were responding to their contemporaneous Italian discourse on preservation, seeking to unearth its radical potential. The sixth proposal referred to the group’s hometown, Florence, and suggested that a deliberate flooding of the Arno valley would provide a more suitable environment for the conservation of significant buildings, saving the historic city from both degradation and speculation at once. In the points explaining their rationale, Superstudio presented an argument that has received little attention: they cite a “return to the Pliocene geological condition” as a valuable operation in itself. Nested within their ironic approach, this statement essentially questions what the object of preservation really is, and what era it is more fruitful to “return to.”<sup>1</sup>

Superstudio’s position was meant to be provocative more than it was constructive, yet seen in hindsight, its irony is fairly productive. Historians of science Deborah Coen and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson recently noted a Holocene nostalgia permeating the sciences and Anthropocene discourse, and warned against a naturalization of certain restoration thresholds.<sup>2</sup> “Salvages” comes at an important moment in this history (later in the same year UNESCO publishes the landmark Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage) and asks an epistemological question that is even more relevant today with regards to the much-rehearsed goal to restore the atmosphere to its pre-industrial condition.

Set within this background, my essay considers landscape-scale speculative architectural fictions of the past 50 years. First, I read closely the “Salvages” project by Superstudio and place it in its epistemological context as it relates to architectural conservation and ecological restoration. I then turn to two recent examples of speculative architectural practices: Those by Design Earth and Liam Young. I read their key projects, most notably *Geostories* (2016) and “The Great Endeavor” (2023) respectively. In a trajectory that apparently overlaps with rising climate change awareness, I observe a shift in the approach of the authors from ironic detachment to earnest investment. This tendency could be paralleled with a more general cultural shift away from postmodern cynicism and towards a “new sincerity” that combines irony and earnestness, which some commentators have noticed after the 2000s.<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that the architectural speculations I look at are simultaneously “reflective” and “performative” and are driven by an eagerness to be propositional in very palpable ways—for example by collaborating with scientists to get realistic measurements for their speculations.

My goal is to examine the function of irony in the speculative architectural project, and suggest that more than inventing new worlds, their combined strength lies with their ability to question epistemological premises that are otherwise difficult to address.

<sup>1</sup> Superstudio, “Salvages of Italian Historic Centers: Omens for Good Fortune for your Cities,” *Log* 22 (2011). First published in Italian in 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Coen, and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson. “Between History and Earth System Science.” *Isis* 113, no. 2 (2022): 407-16.

<sup>3</sup> Jimenez Lai, “Between Irony and Sincerity,” *Log* 46 (2019).

## **AI: Peter Pan’s Runaway Shadow, Digital Twins and an Intelligently Artificial Architecture of Irony**

# Rhetoric and Form

Ralitza Petit

**Keywords:** Generative AI (Artificial Intelligence), Digital Twins, IoT (Internet-of-Things), Subject and Object, Rhetoric and Form, Episteme and Techne

Artificial Intelligence is hot; and *some* architects are getting cold feet.

This relative unease might be dismissible at a first glance, as if it were attributable to some mere humorous inaptitude of fear in the face of novelty, but the not-so-humorous irony of architecture's AI predicament might be a problem of both rhetoric and form. In fact, AI might have brought to light the unintended and unexpected inversion in the order of precedence between the episteme and techne of the very discipline of architecture. The ultra rapid infiltration and matter-generation of AI tools in human life, culture, society, environment — "everything and everywhere" — has produced a new situation in which architecture's notoriety of being slow to change, i.e. slow to show theory through buildings, is inverted: buildings are smart, and smarter, and conceptualization of this "smartness" or intelligence has come to a baffled state of uncertainty or ambiguity, perhaps even denial.

One way of addressing the complicated, ironic, condition of architecture in the age of AI would be by backtracking through the bits of history of how we got here — or how and when *form* and *rhetoric* might have switched places — innovations such as digital twins and the IoT (Internet of Things) are highly implicated in this version of history backtracking. Reverse history, take one: The human **subject** in the *World of Warcraft*. year 2004.

Online gaming can be dated back to the 1970s, and an alternate version of a human subject can be attributed to a digital representation, but not replication — a subject created specifically in online games — the human is loosely "mirrored" and the digital version of the human player is defined solely within its digital realm; anonymity and disassociation appear possible and the relationship between physical and digital is clearly definable. The transformation of the the digital subject — an avatar/skin/nick/char... and the ensuing interdependency of real and digital constitute the subject's timeline into the irony of AI in architecture.

Reverse history, take two: The environment, particularly the inanimate **object** of interest, in the latter's first appliance as connected to the internet is a Coca-Cola vending machine at Carnegie-Mellon University, year 1982.

By 2008-2009, "more things than people" are connected through IoT. The internet connected vending machine gives entry into the *IoT* — which evolve and amass into entire "smart" buildings smoothing the gradual loss of an environment as subservient to the human subject — who controls space (and utility). The subject-object or subjectenvironment connection deeply embedded in the center of past architectural treatises becomes ambiguous: IoT allows "things" — such as objects, appliances, furniture, entire buildings and urban spaces to be interconnected in a similar way and with similar weight as people being interconnected — i.e. the internet is an equalizing *inter-net* where things and humans have equally defined access to the "main", a reality *outside*. *In the post-smart-vending year 2019, a popular sitcom capitalized on the comedic aspects of a now commonplace situation — conversing with a refrigerator. The episode of the sitcom "Modern Family" showed one of its main characters Cameron literally singing a duet with his smart fridge (named Brigitte) — a situation followed by an infuriated partner, Mitchell, finally*

resorting to unplugging of the intelligent appliance in a jealous fit of competition with the aforementioned device.

Reverse history, take three: The first **digital twin**, purportedly a replica of a NASA spaceship, year 2010.

The process of creating digital copies of the environment, i.e. to objects, extends into defining digital copies of humans. Many copies. Both subjects and objects are twinned, duplicated and interlinked through multitudes of sensors and algorithms. Unlike the IoT which equalizes subjects and objects through attributing "smartness" by a process of access and connection, digital twinning equalizes by attributing intelligence by a process of referencing, controlling, adjusting, correcting and monitoring any potential difference. Continuously. The Edge - Amsterdam is touted as the world's smartest and most intelligent building with more than 28K sensors — controlling capacity of rooms, tables, parking spots, bathrooms usage and cleaning staff, occupants' location and personal habits down to individual humidity preferences, solar energy usage and so on. Perfect twinning of all imaginable criteria is the ambition. The emergent actual disparity between twins and duplication processes, especially the disparity between intent and result as in irony, occurs when the individuals supposed to be observed and tracked in order to enhance the occupied building by literally becoming a part of a symbiotic organism refuse to adhere or participate. Hence, smart buildings can open to constructively actuated juxtaposition of relationships of the scattered subject to the architectural environment, the ironic relationships of simulated discreetness or incompleteness of a subject to a similarly unevenly defined environment.

On the back of the pre-histories of digital twins interconnected with their originals through the IoT, ambiguity has befallen architecture's form since the very recent 2022 when ChatGPT and other visual **generative AI** tools have been introduced — seemingly at everyone's disposal. Moreover, it appears that the very instantaneity of transition from conceptualized e-motive architectural search for form to a near-total abandonment of formal ideation, giving in to the seduction of singing with a fridge, might have also suspended architecture's rhetoric. Such an ironic suspension of architecture is precipitated and actuated by the disheveling of its subject's integrity in a more profound way than ever before — rather than a Frankensteinian recomposing the entity or the idea of the subject from parts, that subject — in parts and as a whole — is simultaneously multiplied and scattered.

Further, the object itself, the architectural environment, which has most recently been through the consequences of rhetorical purification (modernism), recomposition (postmodernism), dematerialization (parametricism) appears to be in a relationship with a "naturally artificial" subject through an AI induced digital *smoothing*: if irony is an *act* rather than a *significance*, then architecture which is "activated" through (like-minded) AI tools could become a prime playground for irony.

The actualization of architecture, however, still falls on the shoulders of the human.

## Feral Surfaces

### A More-Than-Human Perspective on New York's Wild Side

Ariane Lourie Harrison

**Keywords:** Atlas for the End of the World, Map of Life, Urban Land Expansion

It could be ironic that formerly apocalyptic visions—flooding and fire—describe a new normal for many American cities. Just as New York City floods, so too do its burnt orange skies broadcast the simultaneously near and far presence of the March 2023 Canadian wildfires. The end of the world has been a reality for non-humans for some time now. The *Atlas for the End of the World* maps the apocalyptic collapse of species in the wake of human urbanization and industrialization of agriculture.<sup>1</sup> So does the *Map of Life*, documenting the impact of urban land expansion projected to 2050.<sup>2</sup> These data visualizations point to the need to literally design and build wilderness into cities.

And architects have dreamed this for centuries: Piranesi's overgrown ruins of Paestum from the 1770s depict the margins of a city inhabited by animals and outcasts; that in the demise of human buildings, emerges living space for species seen as foreign to the city. Today, there is increasing appreciation for the role of cities in sustaining other species.<sup>3</sup> This article argues that rather than the demolition of the city, it is the reorganization of building materials and rethinking of building surfaces that can dramatically expand non-human's potential habitats. A more literal reading of the image of a pig flying between the chimneys of Battersea Power Station during the filming of Pink Floyd's music video in December 1976 could suggest we no longer view the juxtaposition of animal and city as an impossibility.

<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Weller, "Précis" in Richard J. Weller, Claire Hoch, and Chieh Huang, *Atlas for the End of the World* (2017), <http://atlas-for-the-end-of-the-world.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://mol.org/species/projection/urban>

<sup>3</sup> <https://environment.yale.edu/news/article/cities-can-be-part-solution-sustaining-species>

## Humorous Irony in Guild House and BEST Products Stores

### How an Architecture of Communication Can Fail to Communicate

Katerina Zacharopoulou

**Keywords:** Humour, Irony, Incongruity, Politics, Postmodern

The proposed paper explores how postmodern architectural irony is performed in built projects, by looking at two exemplary projects described by their architects in a very similar way, but resulting in contrasting communicative effects. These projects are Guild House as described in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (Robert Venturi, 1966) and *Learning from Las Vegas* (Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, 1972), and BEST Products Stores, as described in *De-Architecture* (James Wines, 1987).

Both projects are situated by their architects-authors within a critique of modern architecture's inability to communicate, and constitute a response by employing irony as a design tool for communication. Through the *Complexity and Contradiction* chapter "The Inside and the Outside", the *Learning from Las Vegas* concept of the "decorated shed", and *De-Architecture's* technique of "inversion", irony emerges as a tangible strategy of architectural practice based on a contradiction between expectations and experience

which provokes amusement. Specifically, the authors see this type of humorous irony occurring when the façade or shell of a building creates expectations about its interior, function, or structure, which are opposite to reality.

While Venturi, Scott Brown and Wines use humour terminology (wit, jester, joke, laughter, etc.) to describe irony as a tool of communication, irony's potential to be amusing is usually either taken for granted or not analysed in depth. In line with Linda Hutcheon's argument that irony's discourse has been mostly in relation to "intellectual detachment", this paper puts forward irony's humorous side to emphasise its affective, communicative, bodily aspect.

The humour theory of "benign violation", which defines humour as the perception of a non-threatening incongruity, is first used to explain how humour intersects with irony in practice for each project. Then, utilising Linda Hutcheon's concepts of the "transideological politics of irony" (the simultaneous affirmation and rejection of the system irony criticises) and "discursive communities" (the pre-existing groups sharing the context necessary to understand irony), the paper explores the contrasting communicative effects of the two projects.

This comparative analysis of irony eventually reflects two different conceptions of communication, revealed in the type of expectations that are contradicted in each case, namely how commonplace they are. In Guild House, the conventions that irony subverts are related to the modern architectural language of unity between form and programme, expressed, for example, through continuity of material and independent volumes. BEST Products Stores, on the other hand, subvert universal conventions about a building's steadiness and completeness. Here irony is destructive to architecture's expected appearance of integrity and stability in a more radical way, and becomes not only more widely understandable, but also offensive to an architect's role and authority.

## Cold War Architectures Global Discourses, Slovenian Practices, and Ideological Fractures

Nika Grabar

**Keywords:** Architecture, Ideology, Planning, Cold War, Irony

Architecture functions simultaneously in at least two separate ways – as a physical and symbolic object, while its perception can change over time. When the situation arises in which the same architectural form begins to be perceived in symbolic terms as a vehicle for values that are antithetical to those that the same building represented at the time of its construction, irony cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand as a bad joke, since its effects cut into all the pores of everyday life. The fact that the same architectural form can influence different modes of perception over time raises the question of its content and purpose in a wider context of space, which is directly linked to visions of progress and thus to constant technological and social transformations. In the contemporary world, a sense of irony could be linked to the many renovations and new buildings that, with their glittering facades, no longer convince anyone of a just and bright future.

The perception of contemporary spatial effects is today largely conditioned by building technologies and digital presentations. Both are accelerated or decelerated by the media landscape. The field of architectural discourse has therefore inevitably expanded into these areas in recent decades. What is often overlooked is that the development of digital technologies related to architectural design has two parallel trajectories, both of which were shaped after the Second World War. One is related to planning buildings and presentation techniques. The other concerns less visible but no less important

processes – spatial planning methodologies. The role of architects in the development of both trajectories was not negligible and as such it is interesting for analysis.

The pioneering spirit of the architects of the post-war period, navigating between the interests of the Cold War, inevitably collided with the barriers of different discourses that were outlining different futures. In the context of architectural collaborations between the Eastern and Western blocs, it was impossible to find a common denominator regarding ideological tendencies, which is why they were often avoided at professional meetings. A telling example were the initial congresses and meetings of the UIA, where, when writing the founding charter, Eastern Bloc architects, unlike their Western counterparts, advocated a democratic organisation of the association. But the apolitical stance won the day. The avoidance of political topics was supposed to allow for truly professional discussions. In such environments, architectural discourse became increasingly formalistic.

At the same time, when it came to establishing conditions for financing individual projects, for example the Marshall Plan or the Molotov Plan, discourses related to architecture were increasingly distanced from formal issues into the domain of the societal planning in the East, and the free market in the West. The involvement of architects in this context was significant, which can be discerned also from the developments of the American-Yugoslav Project [AYP] in the 1960s, supported by the governments of both countries and the Ford Foundation. Using the Ljubljana region as a model case study, the experts were concerned with planning modernised settlement patterns as well as with the long-term aim of establishing a training centre for Eastern Bloc planners in Yugoslavia. In fact, the project was an excellent field for the exchange of knowledge in both directions and had positive effects on both sides. It could also be said to have influenced many of the successful architectural projects of that period in Yugoslavia. Planners from different disciplines worked together with the help of computer technology to develop models and complex procedures for the design of efficient space in accordance with the societal plan, which worked only so long as the socialist state apparatus existed to guard, even if only theoretically, the outcome. The protocols of state administration, although separate from the development models, were therefore intrinsically linked to them. The engine of development was, however, like in capitalism, based on managing societal differences, but not increasing them, rather equalising them, while the pursuit of a certain lifestyle was built into the very fabric of the planning system.

Yugoslavia played a bridge-building role by helping to develop planning methods interesting for countries of both blocs, which paved the way for Western investment. At the same time, an analysis of AYP documents shows that the development of working methods and many development projects were financially supported to *win* the Cold War. The post-WWII spatial planning protocols, including the associated computer technologies in the context of architecture, thus became a part of international operations that were as important as the arms or space race. Backed by international financial mechanisms, they significantly influenced political decision-making, technological development, and alliances on both sides of the Iron Curtain. By the 1980s, the work of architects, which had on the one hand produced many architectural achievements in physical space, distanced the discourse from political issues and thus formalised it. The fall of the socialist state placed political differences on the common denominator of the free market, which changed the symbolic framework of planning and rendered the perception of many iconic architectural achievements as failed. Ironically, the very planning methods that allowed for the development of the most engaged architectural practices in the post-war period

contributed to this. The article focuses on the interpretation of the events surrounding the founding of the UIA and its exhibitions on the one hand, and on the American-Yugoslav project on the other, to shed light on the described dilemmas through the specific role of Yugoslav architects in the international post-WWII environments.

## Architectural Irony and the Sarajevo City Hall A Symbol of Cultural Paradox

Lejla Odobašić Novo

**Keywords:** Architectural Irony, Sarajevo City Hall, Cultural Identity, Historical Architecture, Post-Conflict Reconstruction

This paper examines the notion of architectural irony through the example of the Sarajevo City Hall (*Vijećnica*), a building that embodies a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and political narratives. It was built as a City Hall by the Austro-Hungarian regime in 1896 after they took power over Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Ottoman Empire. The building was designed in a pseudo-Moorish style as a means of asserting administrative power in the previously Ottoman part of the old town while attempting to appeal to the local population who were majority Muslim at the time. However, the new administration failed to differentiate the Ottoman architectural style that was prominent in Bosnia from the Moorish which had roots in Andalusia and was foreign to the local population albeit having an Islamic influence. The building's grand scale, orientation which was disassociated from the urban fabric of the old town and architectural articulation ended up generating quite the opposite consequence and rendered *Vijećnica* a symbol of colonialism. With the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and between the two World Wars, the building was used as a temporary prison until it was converted into the National Library during the socialist Yugoslav regime after World War II. As a prime representation of both its colonial past and Ottoman roots, *Vijećnica* had no place in the construction of the new socialist, secular and modern Bosnia and Yugoslavia. The relevance of the building's colonial background was thus transformed if not diminished by the change in the building's use from a place of administration to one of learning, from a colonial center to a modern progressive research institution and the National Library. The newly crafted identity as a library subsequently provided a gateway for *Vijećnica* into the daily lives of Sarajevans and their collective memory and it also acted as a testament to multicultural Bosnia. It is in this building that the memory of cultural interactions, influences and multiple narratives were not only brought together but transfigured and changed according to the specific sensibilities of the local people and culture. Precisely due to this reason, it also became one of the major targets during the Bosnian War (1991-1995) when it was burnt to the ground along with the majority of its 1.5 million books. *Vijećnica's* journey to reconstruction after the conflict further compounds its irony as the reconstruction process failed to acknowledge, let alone further facilitate, the evolving nature of this building but rather it superimposed the rigidity of the original form and function of the City Hall exactly as it stood during the Austro-Hungarian rule. This paper examines the inherent irony in the edifice's fluctuating roles—from a symbol of colonialism to that of a cultural nucleus and questions its resuscitation in the post-conflict period. By employing literary analysis techniques and gathering perspectives from historians, architects, and locals, the paper interprets *Vijećnica* as a multilayered 'text' that reveals ironic commentary on politics, war, peace, and cultural memory. This analysis not only highlights the Sarajevo City Hall as a case study of architectural irony but also situates it within the global context of buildings that have undergone

similar transformative journeys, offering insights into the broader themes of architectural symbolism in post-conflict societies.

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Irony is not just one topic amongst many in architecture. It is a subject which readily aligns architecture with theory, and thus intellectually channels access to our discipline in a particular light. Neither an attribute of architectural form that one can catch by looking at it in a state of distraction, nor a set structure of discourse, nor accessible to casual apperception, irony requires a “learned” understanding and interpretation of the relation and discrepancies between thingness and ideality. Whereas 20th century postmodernism was largely defined through its many levels of irony, neither theory nor irony were necessarily much *en vogue* in architecture in the nineties and the aughts. Yet today’s tumultuous times should be fertile ground for irony’s return – triggered by current notions of *post-humanism*, the *Anthropocene*, and the shifts in socio- and geo-politics.

Emmanuel Petit

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