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# Special Edition: Here's the Story...

ASHLEY SCHAFER AND AMANDA REESER LAWRENCE

After editing, producing, and at times forcibly coercing every issue of *PRAXIS* into existence over the last fourteen years, we thought it was time to try a different approach. We invited Ana Miljački as a guest co-editor to help us break our own mold, partly because of her interest in architectural narratives—a topic which had been floating around our editorial meetings for a few years—and partly to lure her intelligence back into the *PRAXIS* fold after a two-issue hiatus from her role as project editor. Ana brought a mandate—that the issue be an “unmediated” one. That is, she insisted that the articles stand as autonomous tales: without introductions, without captions, without intensive image editing. The emphasis on storytelling as a particular form of narrative created a radically different kind of *PRAXIS*—one without buildings, but which, we would argue emphatically, does not lack architecture.

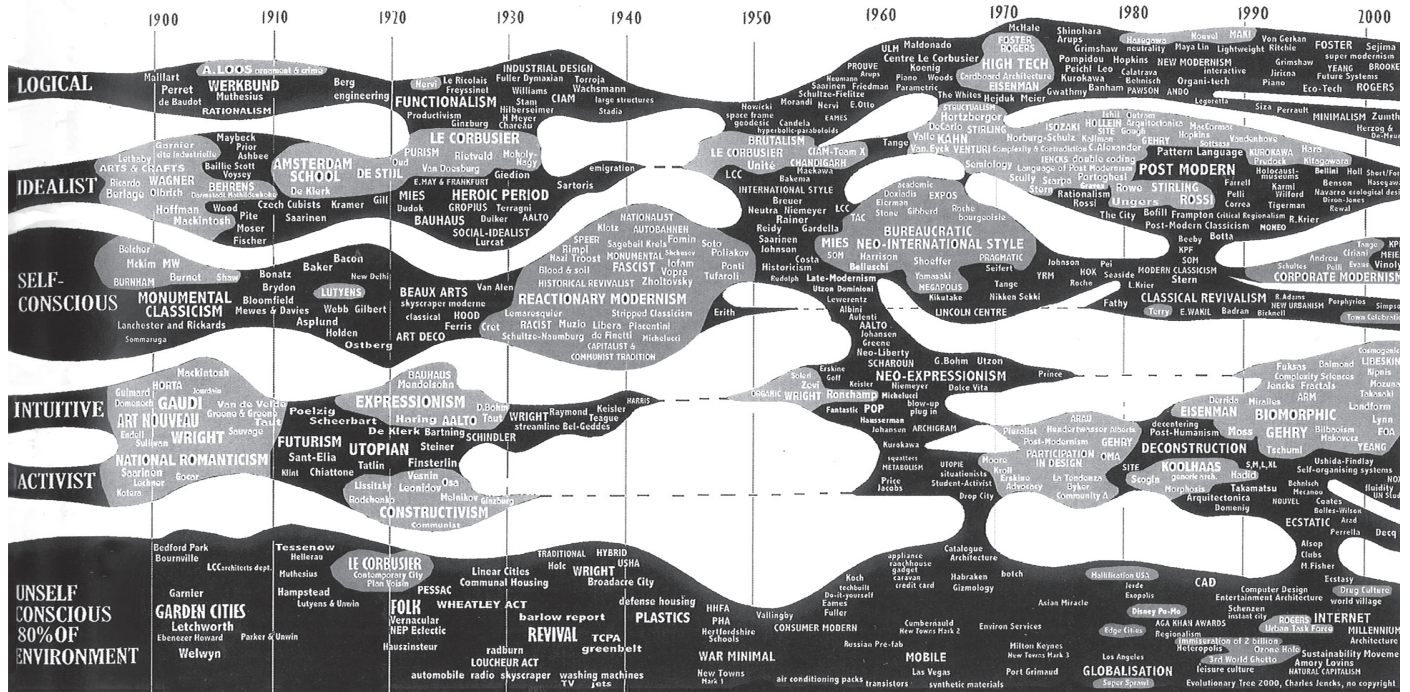
This “special” issue, then, contains a collection of “True Stories” told by architects. Missing are the conventional architectural representations, or tropes, that usually fill the pages of *PRAXIS*: plans, sections, renderings, detail drawings, photographs. Nor will the reader find our familiar format, with images and analytical text curated to educe particular aspects of a project or the design process. Instead, we relinquished control to our contributors, allowing them to author their own stories in their own voice. These stories, we discovered after the fact, can be roughly categorized into four identifiable types: the novel, the comic, the storybook, and the film. While by no means a definitive or exhaustive taxonomy, these four categorizations resonated with the contemporary, experimental work that we identified and selected for the issue, as well as with familiar extra-disciplinary genres. Each story within the journal is treated as its own booklet loosely bound into one volume, conceptualized and graphically designed in the context of its type.

Although theoretically we strove to produce an unmediated issue, the translation of any story into a standardized journal format requires some manipulation. The comics and storybooks—including Wes Jones’s “The Nelsons,” resurrected after a long absence following its life in the pages of *ANY*, and the fantastical worlds created by Jimenez Lai and Katie Shima—combine text and image on the page, and in this sense remain relatively close to a normative architectural journal article, even if the representations themselves defy traditional architectural conventions. The films posed the greatest challenge to print translation; the articles are all printed on high gloss paper, with a black background, but they use different approaches to incorporate this non-architectural medium into print. Just as Bruce Mau’s ciné-roman, *La Jetée* captures a film of still images that becomes the book, the print version of MOS’s “Romance of Systems” attempts to capture the temporality of the slow caress and allow the reader to focus on the narrative drama. The videos that accompanied the MOMA “Foreclosed” exhibition are almost documentary in format, and are therefore represented through select images of the figures interviewed. The stories we categorized as fictions seem farthest from conventional architectural storytelling methodologies, as they conjure images rather than actually employing them. Keith Mitnick appropriates the form of the novel as an architectural trope, while FKAA—in a more blatant act of appropriation, bordering on plagiarism—offers architectural strategies for “argumentation”; the article becomes a fiction about crafting fictions.

Two decades ago, Mark Wigley claimed storytelling as the territory of not just architectural theorists, but all architects and ultimately all architecture. He pointed out that students are taught to tell stories about their buildings, critics tell stories about other architects’ buildings, and buildings themselves are “megaphones” for their stories. Underlying Wigley’s polemic was a desire to legitimize the emergent field of architectural theory as an activity equal to a design practice, and to challenge the burgeoning ossification of the theory–practice (we might say writing–building) divide, calling for a more fluid definition and operation of both. Today as we find a re-emergence of architectural narrative in a vastly altered disciplinary landscape, what can these stories that don’t speak of buildings tell us, and what can we tell about these stories? At a time when the more conceptual pursuits of history and theory are marginalized in favor of the prosaic exigencies of practice (particularly software and sustainability) storytelling occupies an experimental space between writing and building, liberated from the weight of either. Perhaps we have seen Wigley’s provocation taken to its extreme, but logical, conclusion. THE END.

# ONCE UPON A TIME: NOT EVERYTHING ALL AT ONCE<sup>1</sup>

Ana Miljački



Recall for a moment the image of Charles Jencks's 1971 "Evolutionary Tree:" a hybrid of futurological prediction and trend assessment, one of those sexy images that circulates through architectural discourse via books, lectures, blogs, and, currently, (on) Flickr.<sup>2</sup> It is a cognitive map, as Fredric Jameson might have wished for, not just for postmodern life in general, but for navigating the contemporary architectural plurality.

It still "sort of" works, as well as it ever did, its hilarious authority bestowed upon it via its graphic connotations. The x axis presents history, and the y axis a stylistic pulse that Jencks identifies in the projects, all rendered in the ultimate architectural history flowchart. It moves from big words on the left—Logical, Idealist, Self-Conscious, Intuitive, Activist, Unselfconscious—to ever-smaller ones (including some individual architects' names) on the right.

If you look closely at the retouched version (2000) you will find Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* in the category called "unself-conscious," a category that, as Jencks will explain, comprises 80 percent of the environment. You will find Peter Eisenman in a special bubble within the "logical" band, together with Norman Foster and Ernesto Rogers in the seventies (high tech and cardboard architecture made perversely intimate with one another), and then Eisenman again at a strange junction of "intuitive and activist" in the late 1980s. Around the same time and hanging to the side of activism, Rem Koolhaas (qualified by "generic architecture"), Mack Scogin, and Zaha Hadid occupy a common (aptly) irregular blotch.

Eisenman's work did indeed change over time, and he has been the first one to try to explain its evolving meaning, so the fact that

he occupies different spots in Jencks's flowchart is not totally random, but it is hard to escape the feeling that the closer one looks at the chart, the further any sense of historical certainty recedes. What the "Evolutionary Tree" does accomplish, in direct opposition to its promise of rendering speciation visible, is an ultimate evacuation of meaning from the big words on the left.

Words pile up, patches of black unite them, patches of white separate them, and together they spatialize time. This intriguing drawing has to be seen as a symptom of postmodernism rather than as a tool for surviving it. Its contemporary appeal mirrors a collective nostalgia for a cognitive map, while it in fact actively performs (in its own way) the destabilizing destruction of meta-narratives, not in a spectacular way, just simply by relying on the flowchart's scientificity rather than on any type of verifiable (and often not even conventional) history of twentieth century architectural production. So then why start here?

Because, indeed, the hope that one could map the field for the purposes of navigating it (or teaching it), and also the dizzying swirl of words in Jencks's attempt to do so, equally haunt the bubble of U.S. contemporary academic architectural discourse. It is hardly Jencks's fault, but his image did capture, indeed it predicted, the plurality of concerns that corresponds to our own (it is only fair to credit him with this). Commensurate with the complexity of issues that define our time, most architects today work on a million different platforms simultaneously—and some even articulate this modus operandi as their project. But of course, things would be simpler, at least in architecture schools, if someone would finally enumerate, or



resuscitate, one or two ideas about our disciplinary core (preferably ontological, but a conventional core would do as well, as long as it did not sound too much like NAAB—I am being ironic here).

The loss of certainty is not something to mourn (we are repeatedly told), and yet that momentous time when early postmodern theory was a bloodbath of metanarratives seems sufficiently distant to allow nostalgia for “grand narratives” and even harbor a suspicion about their ultimate disappearance. After all, we realize on a daily basis that gender, race, class, and religion shape the world we live in, even if the discourse about them may seem more tentative and pedestrian than at an earlier point in time.

Once nostalgia is on the table, Jencks’s flowchart gets reanimated, not only as the mirror image of that contemporary want for clarity that was never experienced by those who mourn it (nor perhaps by those who appear to have had it), but, indeed, as an allegory of dismantlement, and by the same token of the persistence of narratives, even if atomized, redistributed, repressed, and retooled.

In a more recent, and by many accounts more deadly, blow to modernism than Jencks’s, Bruno Latour told us that “certainty” was always a contrivance of sorts.<sup>3</sup> After critiquing modernism’s legacy of reductive categorization, rigid binary oppositions, misguided supremacy of the rational, and egotistical supremacy of man (over nature), he concluded that the world was never modern, even as the moderns represented and intervened in it as if it had been. Now as much as one might agree with Latour (and I do) on a number of points of his critique, here and elsewhere, the final twist of his argument knocks the wind out of modernism indeed, but with it, as inevitable collateral damage, also goes the necessary pairing of representing and intervening in the world.<sup>4</sup> This pairing happens to be constitutive of all creative work, as some version of representing secures the authority (and grounds the hope) with which one intervenes in the world. The idea that modernist scientists, politicians, and architects imagined that some of their intellectual (and aesthetic) prejudices had the status of ontological truths is separable from the fact that the world has to be conceptualized and narrated—simply or complexly—in order for actions within it to have meaning. This is to say that the particular content, or values, of the moderns can be critiqued against our own contemporary concerns; but even if we accept that we are now far more conscious of the entanglements and complexity of relationships between humans and non-humans, things and systems, actions and abstractions then our modern predecessors, without some form of imposed hierarchy onto that complexity, a cognitive map of sorts, or at least a story, no form of intentionality registers.

At a time when the archives are vast and ever expanding—and by this I mean both our general access to information and our disciplinary archives (scholarly, blogged, and leaked)—histories are made and remade instantly too, as plausible cuts through those archives. Storytelling then has to be seen as having particularly important navigational and propositional capacities. It might not require a full-fledged position, but it requires a point of view and commitment to produce and, even more, a commitment to produce well. So even when it remains deeply personal, a story comes closer to a position than our contemporary flashes of judgment delivered as “liking,” “pinning,” or “tumbling.”

The ambition of this issue of PRAXIS is far narrower than the general predicament I suggest above. Instead of revisiting postmodernism and thinking about how to reconstitute if not meta-then medium-level legitimating narratives that operate on par

with practice (such as activism, optimization, new beginnings) we decided to collect stories that propose alternative endings. We collected architectural stories that more or less comfortably meld fictional, projective, and critical elements, with the hope that their synthetic storytelling is key for propelling us beyond the impasses of excessive information, fast recycling, and propositional emptiness. In each of these pieces different lines of criticality and projection coexist. Importantly, storytelling here allows, and demands, style: it is harder to farm out to a renderer, it offers resistance, although at times it might obscure things too (even dangerously). But that is the point of storytelling. Not everything, not all at once. Even if one cared about many things simultaneously, and it is hard not to do that today, composing a story imposes order and judgment on all the pieces that went into it in the first place.

The PRAXIS 14 stories are truly that ... true stories. Parts of them are based on real facts and projects, and their effects may be very real as well, though they hardly hold the status of facts. Although some contain research, the findings are not presented didactically.

The most important takeaway from True Stories is that telling a story requires commitment. And stories that were meant to be told, that were constructed to be told, like the ones collected in this issue of PRAXIS, for a moment highlight a position. And finally, the ambiguity of the stories we collected (both gloomy and easy, free and unfree, pleasurable and damning) speaks not only to the impossibility to neatly resolving critique and projection, but also of a particularly contemporary comfort with their dialectical contradiction and coexistence. However retooled, post-produced, and mashed-up contemporary architectural narratives might be, it is in them that fragments of utopia still live, as points of view and as style. So perhaps “liking” and “pinning,” despite my earlier pessimism regarding these contemporary judgement flashes, may be the first step towards assembling around and consolidating new arguments. If a story can have a fan, it can also have a following and provoke further stories into existence.

#### NOTES

1. This title is in direct conversation with mos architects’ Everything All at Once, as a position that they have presented in various forums, and most recently as the title of their book. See, Michael Meredith and Hilary Sample, *Everything All at Once: The Software, Videos, and Architecture of MOS* (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2013). For the record, I more than appreciate their qualification of their project in this way, and find it aptly contemporary to the point of arguing for it alongside mos in my “Promiscuity as A Project? – ‘mos Definitely,’” *Thresholds* 37: SEX, Spring 2010. Underpinned by some of the same issues as Everything All at Once, its opposite, “Not Everything All At Once” highlights the need to plot a specific path through contemporary complexity, even if momentarily, and for the sake of putting forward a clear, even if affected position.
2. Original map appeared in Charles Jencks, *Architecture 2000: Predictions and Methods* (New York: Praeger, 1971) and the most recent reworked version in Charles Jencks, “The Century is Over, Evolutionary Tree of Twentieth-Century Architecture,” *Architecture Review* (July 2000): 77. See also the Flickr presentation of the 2000 remake at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/archidose/3088862107/> (Last accessed, Sept 22, 2013). The map has been recently discussed by Mark Wigley, in “Whatever Happened to Total Design,” *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 5, (Summer 1998) and in Reinhold Martin, *Utopia’s Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
3. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
4. This view is an impatient simplification of Latour’s entire body of work, in which he is consistently interested in a collective construction or reconstruction of values (around various and overlapping matters of concern) and simultaneous preservation of complexities of interconnectedness between all things. At the risk of repeating some of the mistakes of the moderns, I then invoke representing an intervening in order to highlight the need for even the most fleeting representational reduction of the real complexities that surround every action, precisely in order to act.



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Fake Industries Architectural Agonism is an entity of variable boundaries and dubious taste that explores the potential of replicas for the advancement in the field. The ensemble, orchestrated by CRISTINA GOBERNA and URTZI GRAU, relentlessly questions the value of originality while investigating productive disagreement as an engine to open up discussions through architecture. Recent projects include the new National Velodrome in Medellín, Colombia, the renovation of the Mining Village of Aldea Moret, Spain, and the OEHouse in Alforja, Spain.

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Jencks image, p. 5 from "The Century is Over, Evolutionary Tree of Twentieth-Century Architecture," Architecture Review (July 2000): 77.

Milgram drawing by Richard Duff/AUDC "The Absolute Skyscraper" illustrations by Vasco Mourão, based on a script and original sketches by Carlos Teixeira. Originally published in O Condomínio Absoluto / The Ultimate Skyscraper, C/Arte, 2009.



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