

Architectural Projection in the Past Tense

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We may not know, simply by looking at an architectural drawing, if the space it depicts has ever been built. However, architectural drawings have past, present, and future tenses. As David Leatherbarrow states in *Showing What Otherwise Hides Itself*, “a project often includes drawings in each of these tenses, and is both “recollective and prospective,” with the designer seeing “not just what is apparent ‘now’ but what was seen in the past and will be seen in the future” (Leatherbarrow, 1998, p. 52). The point of view of the designer is situated in the present, conventionally, but that need not be the case. All design studio projects are fictions, after all.

Site analysis is one form of the past tense where the designer’s point of view is situated both literally and fictionally in the present, at a threshold between what has been and what will be. Robert Beauregard argues in *From Place to Site* that “the process of surveying a site is one where “the untamed, overlapping, and contradictory histories, remembrances, and engagements that cling to a place must be removed and subsequently replaced (or not) with simplified, coherent, and transparent representations” and “made compatible with the relations of production, state imperatives, and the order that both imply” (Beauregard, 2005, pp. 40-41). This temporal situation projects an implicit discontinuity between the past and the future. The project is the resolution of the political, social, economic, and environmental forces in the past and present, and is cast forward as a site of new activity that will be re-occupied, presumably continuously, as soon as construction is completed.

Another form of past tense is the case study. This form of past tense, because it does not anticipate a discontinuity, may be well suited for revealing the multiplicity of voices, forces, and stories that inform the architecture of a place, over time. The role of the draftsman shifts from that of an inventor to that of a historian. While this form of the past tense may seem limited to addressing the space between the past and the present, it can also encompass the future, if the draftsman is fictionally re-positioned in time. Lebbeus Woods’s drawings of “freespaces” in Sarajevo and Havana, of “architecture drawn as though it were already built – architecture built as though it had never been drawn” (Woods, 1997, p. 17), are in this latter form of past tense. They use this tense as a way of envisioning architecture that is provisional, collectively produced, and taking shape continuously – at least as much from occupation as for occupation.

Barrio Libre de Sa Penya, a 2015 thesis project by Anna Zaniboni, at IE University, is explicit in its adoption of the past tense and the genre of case studies.¹ For their thesis projects, students were asked to study the island of Ibiza, and to find a question related to the theme of tourism. Zaniboni focused on

¹ “Proyecto fin de Grado,” with professors Lina Toro, Pablo Oriol, and Fernando Rodríguez at IE University, Spain.

the neighborhood of Sa Penya, in the city of Eivissa. The neighborhood is home to a primarily gypsy community, and a place tourists are warned to stay away from. Zaniboni first traces how the economic isolation of the gypsy community led to the district becoming the base of drug production and distribution in the city. Rather than assuming she can provide an ameliorative intervention, Zaniboni frames her project as a historical study of the transformation of the district's urban fabric from 2016, until its proclamation of independence from the municipality, in 2050. The drawings and models in the thesis booklet, as well as the mock-documentary film (narrated by a cultural anthropologist) that accompanies it, document and analyze typologies of informal constructions built on the roofs of the fabric existing in 2016. These constructions do not replace, but develop from and support the existing economies and activities of the neighborhood. Through a series of detailed case studies, she traces how they this expansion also diversifies the community's economic resources. Rather than try to ameliorate the community's isolation by opening it up, displacing or assimilating it, her thesis projects the existing economic and social isolation of the neighborhood toward self-reliance and eventual self-governance.

The use of the past tense frees Zaniboni from the traditional point of view of the architect, having to prescribe a solution to a self-defined design problem, and instead enables her to imagine an architecture that is co-determined with a community's self-identity and social organization. Both Woods's freespaces and Zaniboni's *Barrio Libre de Sa Penya* are opportunistic, making use of the potential for alternative, heterarchical social organization created as a byproduct of the hierarchical systems they are subject to. They are pockets of resistance, collectively constructed through bricolage, bit by bit, over time, without a masterplan or conventional mechanisms of architectural production. The use of the past tense is what enables the graphic, formal articulation of these spaces and how they might come to be.

In *Strait: A Geographic Fiction*, by NEMESTUDIO (Neyran Turan and Mete Sönmez), the past tense is used in a different way altogether. The installation and accompanying silent film were exhibited at the Salt Beyoğlu Gallery in Istanbul, in 2015. The film is a mock-documentary, using past tense to depict an instance in 2025 when Oilella, "the biggest fictional oil tanker in the world" (NEMESTUDIO, 2016), gets stuck while traveling through the Bosphorus. This incident not only blocks the passageway forever but also causes the Bosphorus to be transformed into a new land of urban development. In the story, while some structures on the Bosphorus turn into touristic destinations depicting an archaeology of an oil-shipping landscape, new developments take advantage of this rapidly urbanizing land. For new construction, building codes are based on the specifications of Oilella, and monuments are built to commemorate previous oil spills on the spots where they happened. The installation at the Salt Beyoğlu Gallery is presented as one of those monuments, built to commemorate the original shorelines that disappear after the infill. The installation is the case study in this instance, an inhabitable monument to the "lost" shoreline of the Bosphorus, reconstituted with architectural moldings. It is both a commemoration and a translation, from landscape edge to architectural edge.

In the installation at Salt Beyoğlu, one had to walk through this reconstituted strait before viewing the film, at the end of the passageway. Many visitors to the exhibition thought the events depicted in the film had already, in fact, taken place (Turan, 2018). Indeed, the project intentionally mixes up temporal cues. The experience of the installation is in the present. Past tense is used for a story taking place far in

the future; the images used in the collages in the film are not contemporary photographs or futuristic renderings but historical photographs from mid-20th century Istanbul; and the film itself is a silent, documentary film, with text screens interspersed between images. Unlike Woods's or Zaniboni's projects, *Strait* does not depict the emergence of an alternative social order and its architecture. Its vision is opportunistic, collectively produced with bricolage, but the past tense is used instead to reveal the opportunism of land speculation, development and architectural production that have shaped modern and contemporary Istanbul. At the same time, it projects a window of time in which the obscured history of disasters (maritime and urbanistic) may yet re-emerge among the new developments. The project has a literary precedent in Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book*, in the chapter titled "The Day the Bosphorus Dries Up":

I am talking about the new districts that will be built, under the noses of the municipal cops rushing about with citation books in their hands, on the mire of the lacuna once called "The Bosphorus": about shantytowns, stalls, bars, cabarets, pleasure palaces, amusement parks with merry-go-rounds, casinos, about mosques, dervish tekkes and nests of Marxist factions, about fly-by-night plastics workshops and sweatshops that manufacture nylon stockings. Observed in the midst of the apocalyptic chaos will be carcasses of ships that remain from the Municipal Goodworks Lines listing on their sides, and fields of jellyfish and soda –pop cans. [...] Amidst mussel-encrusted Byzantine treasures, forks and knives made of silver and tin, thousand-year-old barrels of wine, soda-pop bottles, carcasses of pointy-prowed galleys I can imagine a civilization whose energy needs for their antiquated stoves and lights will be derived from a dilapidated Romanian tanker propelled into a mire-pit. (Pamuk, 1994, p. 15).

Pamuk's text imagines a continuity between past and present in this newly revealed landscape, similar to that envisioned in NEMESTUDIO's project, but the life that emerges from the waters is decidedly less sublimated. Pamuk studied architecture at Istanbul Technical University, as did Turan and Sönmez of NEMESTUDIO. His decision to become a novelist instead of an architect was precisely to resist sublimating the psychogeography of his beloved city (Pamuk, 1999, pp.271-278). Especially in this light, *Strait: A Geographical Fiction* reveals not only the imperatives of capital and land speculation in urbanism but also architecture's complicity with them, as built into its own conventions of production.

Fort Zones: A Speculative History

Architectural Design III (ARCH 301/Fall 2017), the third-year architectural design studio at Iowa State University, also started its experiment in architectural projection in the past tense with literary references.² In a three-week, "Prologue Project", students were asked to make collages analyzing how the space of the woods acted as a "shadow of civilization" (Harrison, 1992) in folk tales they chose. This analysis informed the design of a threshold for Munn Woods, a deep, wooded ravine that is anomalous in the relatively flat landscape of Ames, Iowa, where the university is located. The threshold was to articulate the transition from the mundane world to the sylvan space of magical transformation and enchantment, as defined by their analysis of the folk tale. They then modified a chair (or object with a

² While the studio is for third-year students, it is only the students' third semester in architecture.

similar relationship to the body), to create a place for themselves in that landscape now framed otherwise. This three-week sequence was, in part, to frame the woods as having cultural, psychological value in addition to an ecological one, and to ensure the students became familiar with it through physical engagement, before seeing it as an architectural site, and looking at it through maps and GIS data.

In this way, the project introduced them to the site of another story. In the Summer of 2015, a group of Ames kids, kicked out of the house by their parents and told to get off their smartphones and do something other than play video games, got together and constructed a fort out of found material, in Munn Woods. They used their fort as a space “to read books, discuss social issues, or just enjoy the outdoors”. They also devised a collective decision-making system for the governance of the fort. Eventually, the city found out about the fort, and moved to evict them (*Fort Kids face eviction from Munn Woods*, Ames Tribune, 2015). The kids resisted. This caused some debate in the community. Some felt the city was right, as the kids had not considered that the site was a nature conservancy and did not think about the environmental impact of the structure, but others felt the kids should be allowed to bend the rules, especially given the amount of effort and ingenuity they had put into their construction. As the debate and eviction process was underway, the stream flooded and damaged the fort (*Flooded out, Fort Kids leave Munn Woods*, Ames Tribune, 2015). The kids and sympathizers took it apart and cleaned up the site. Nevertheless, the “Fort Kids”, as they became known, then went to a Parks & Recreation hearing, to argue for “Fort Zones” to be established in the city, where kids would be allowed to build such structures (*Parks and Rec to explore kids’ proposal for ‘fort zones’*, Ames Tribune, 2015).

The primary project of the semester followed up on this proposal for Fort Zones. The class hosted representatives of the city government and, separately, some of the Fort Kids in the studio for interviews. Working in groups, students analyzed and evaluated a series of parks and flood easements across Ames that had potential to become Fort Zones. They were asked to propose procedures and guidelines for the establishment of Fort Zones in each site area. While all of these studies were done in the conventional mode of architectural proposals, the final phase of the semester, the Speculative History, was in the past tense. Individually, students were asked to write a series of speculative case studies of the history and architecture of Fort Zones in Ames over 25 years, looking back from 2040 to 2015. They were to illustrate these case studies with drawings and models, presented in the form of a mock-documentary film.

The most challenging aspect of the project proved to be the displacement of the professional agency as architectural designers that they had just started to cultivate and become comfortable with. Instead of designing a playground, which would be neutralizing – or sublimating – the story of the Fort Kids - they had to imagine structures that would be collectively produced, over time and through trial and error, through occupation by kids, rather than merely for their occupation. Some did this through an imagined collaboration with the city, where certain structures would be built that allowed for modification by occupants, while others imagined that city-sanctioned Fort Zones were impossible, and any such construction had to accept being rogue, made on the run, and hidden.

Through their own trials and errors in struggling with this displacement of agency, students found that they had to discard some of the professional tools and methodologies they had worked so hard to

develop, and find ways of drawing and modeling that allowed them to inhabit a space of construction, without knowing, or being sure of, the outcome. One student, Grant Morthland, took a six-foot long sheet of paper, and developed his speculative history as he drew it, with ink, from the left to right, filling up the sheet over the course of two weeks. His history involved failures, structures destroyed by floods and rebuilt to accommodate them. Some, such as Tomi Laja, argued that 25 years was not enough, nor should a Fort Zone program be limited to kids. She positioned her viewpoint in a post-apocalyptic, post-Anthropocene future, imagining humanity struggling toward an architecture at peace with Gaia, and possibly failing. Other histories, such as Alyanna Subayno's, were written as journal entries rather than historical case studies. The entries were from a journal kept by a group of kids who run away from home, and occupy rafts and cabins they lash together as they travel through the subliminal stream-scape of Iowa. Others still, such as Emma Henry's, may not constitute a whole Fort Zone, but project an architectural proto-thesis about the relationship between nature and architecture. Henry's project traced how a scaffolding is constructed to support a particular sapling which, as it grows, supports a platform that allows the kids to leave the ground and inhabit its canopy. As the tree ages, and its roots are endangered by the stream below, the platform grows legs back to the ground and starts supporting the tree instead, until the tree is held aloft, almost horizontal, by the expanding architectural structure.

The project described above is the author's first experiment with the use of architectural projection in the past tense as part of a pedagogical brief. As part of a brief for a beginning design studio, the past tense has some practical challenges. One is: how to write a history that is specific enough to be generative of drawings? Another has to do with the usefulness of bricolage in imagining a collective construction. A limited or specific palette of materials could be prescribed, though the useful limitation of bricolage may also apply to the components of texts and histories as much as to those of buildings. Nonetheless, the use of the past tense proved invaluable in opening a space for students to question assumptions about the agency assumed in conventional architectural representation and production; about whom that agency represents, and begin to invent ways production that open the imagination to the agency of others.

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