



The
Architecture
of the
Imagination

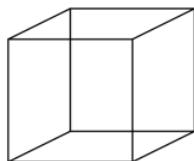
by
M. Shea



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There is in all of us, a desire for something we cannot have. Perhaps it is even a desire for something which does not really even exist—we are aware of its inexistence, its inadequacy in the face of the stresses of reality. Perhaps it was a shadow, a shade, a phantom: something or someone we perceived once, one time, as if we experienced as a flickering shadow on the backdrop of our senses. It awakened a desire in us, a cupidity, which we might even despise in ourselves: a weakness, a rift, a chasm, between ourself and the firmness of reality.

There are examples of this rift: *La Bocca della Verità*, or



The Mouth of Truth, which is perhaps an ancient manhole, portraying a pagan god, likely Oceanus, or the god of the river Tiber. I have visited it, and like Audrey Hepburn—I placed my hand in the Mouth of Truth.

It is rumoured that if you tell a lie before you place your hand in the Mouth, that your hand will be taken. Have you told the truth, you wonder? What is a lie, exactly? Where is the line? In which way does a lie resemble a fantasy? And why might this stone river-man animate to bite off your hand, the fingers of a liar? On which side do you lie? Are you on the side of truth, or will the line divide you in half. There is a line between the truth and fiction, and here, at *La Bocca Della Verità*, as well as occasionally elsewhere, we become concerned with it; the lie catching up with one, and dividing one into parts.

But the stone man has never bitten off anyone's hand, has he? And if he has not, if the stone has never bitten off anyone's hand, why might we still fear it, fear the rift between truth and a lie? Why: it is the fantasy which fascinates us, pleases us: a delectable fear, the highly-unlikely (but perhaps possible) possibility that the stone will decide we are lying, and separate us into bits for our own separation from the truth.

It is the physical representation of this particular pleasure/fear in the stone that is delectable, but also the fear-not-fear, the horror-movie-type fear of being safe while feeling scared: having a place, a physical manifestation of this fear which haunts us all—being caught separated from the truth. But why focus on that particular fear, the fear of be-

ing caught in a lie? In the face of the stone, large, ancient, and thick: marble worn with the passage of water and weather over generations, and his blankly staring eyes, we for a moment, hesitate, without a smile, as we place our hand in the Mouth, before universally smiling, even laughing, as we pull ourselves out—intact.

This stone here is a gatekeeper between truth and fantasy, a stone man on the verge of the real, and the un-real: and the brink is his mouth. The brink lies in reality, in the fringe, where what is seen and felt (the hand), disappears in to the unseen (the mouth), and the potentially un-felt, or the darkness beyond. It is the potentiality that fascinates, what lies beyond waiting in the darkness.

We like to play with the rift between fantasy and reality. The stage is an excellent place for this kind of play. At the *Teatro Olimpico*, built by Andrea Palladio, in the Italian Renaissance, we find a remarkable *trompe l'oeuil*, illusion-ready *scaenae frons*/theatre backdrop, designed by Bertotti Scarmozzi in 1585. It contains a remarkable wooden false-perspective street, which recedes in the fantasy of our eye, but not in reality: the carvings are built to mimic our understanding of reality, to play with it, to evoke a tension within us.

It is a forced perspective, which works only with the audience in line out front of it. It must be placed precisely in the correct location, for our mind at once to make sense of it. Why, it is five blocks of streets, we think—though, at the same time, we know of course, that it cannot possibly be five blocks, because five blocks would not fit inside a

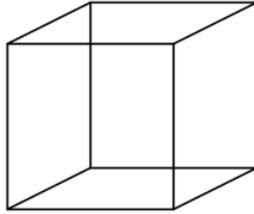


theatre backdrop. It fascinates us because of the continual fight we must put up, between our mind's *eye* and our mind's *truth*. We see-saw continuously, here, in the theatre, between an immediate grasp and a correctional grasp: between five blocks of city street and ten steps of carved wood theatre. Between the city-*polis* (our reality), where we live, and the theatre, the carved forced-perspective, where in reality we cannot go, unless we too shrink in a proscribed manner, like puppets: which we cannot.

But it delights us, this tension, the transparent-attempted-control of our mind by the designer; by the physical manifestation of the boundary between what is, and what is-not, between our presentation in front of the *scaenae frons*, and our return to our lives in front of five city blocks. Between what looks real, and what is real. We are at play with the artificial horizon line, with the convergence lines, with the raked or inclined stage, we are at play with a designer-magician, with a physical manifestation of illusory space: a half-reality, a teetering on the brink of fantasy.

We delight in the impossible object. It is the delivery of the unreal, the refutation of the Rule, the magical distortion of reality. It is the unreal, for a minuscule moment, in front of us.

Not only will we find it carved, we find it also delivered in paint & photographs—the forced perspective is not only a Renaissance fashion, it continues to fascinate today, as we see here in these photographs/paint installations by Fanette Guilloud, in her “Geometrie de l’Impossible,” in which the undecidable figure is portrayed with spray-cans



and a photograph. In red, white and gold, our eye follows it up, down, and impossibly around: the impossible object, the unsettling moment when what appears real is revealed to be not-real: to be impossible. And then our eye travels back around to double-check, to triple-check. It is an optical-illusion first played with by a Swiss crystallographer, Louis Albert Necker, in 1832, with an ambiguous line drawing called the Necker Cube, which consists of a cube drawn so it cannot be understood whether or not it is back or front: as the eye travels the mind first insists it is one way or another: the imperative of three-dimensional truth is insisted upon, and the reality of two-dimensional play unsettles us again and again. This “Geometrie de L’Impossible” takes this a step further, by bringing back three-dimensionality to the game. The two-dimensional rhomboid hangs in paint in apparent three-dimensional space: it is a test of decipherment. This is not a game of photo-manipulation: this is a real photograph. Our eye is caught on the red, and travels around to the left, to the white, which brings us confusedly back to the red. With a side-check to the roughly painted white bricks, and the broken brown-ish windows, our eye again fixates on the red. We have deciphered the riddle in our mind, but our eye continues to fixate on it: it is the delight of the *reversal* which continues to fascinate.

But we do not believe it is real; we know it is a trick of the photograph; a forced-perspective. It is a game being played, playfully, upon us: held out in front. If we actually did believe it, it would do more than delight us. It would confound us. Here we see what we know is a game: the colours are made to delight, the shape, the placement: de-

liberate. We are in collusion, we stand in the mind of the photographer, we play the same game, within society.

Should it not be a game, it would not delight. It would confound, confuse, stymie, obsess. But it is a game, a game played with red and white paint, a game intended to delight. Many people play this game: and they play it, delightedly, with architecture. Architecture, here, becomes the field of play. Here is a photograph by Georges Rousse, again, of a painted-architecture game, this time in a green-ish-turquoise, in a grey concrete space: a beautiful game played with something, possibly ugly. A painted play forcing us to be witness to a momentary puzzlement between what is, and what-is-not. It is a three-dimensional object, painted to look like an old two-dimensional game, and re-awakens the old delectation, this tension, between reality and conceived-possibility, between perception of the real, and perceived conception of the unreal. The art the design-photographer-magician, the illusionist. One in control of space. One able to evoke the delightful teeter-totter between one idea and another, in short succession. An illusionist.

Another example of anamorphic illusion is Felice Varini; we see here, his yellow shape, in our forced-perspective view, we are held in helpless thrall: first we think, no, and then we think: yes. What we are saying yes to, is obvious. It is right in front of us. It is what we are saying no to, which is more obscured: the realm of darkness in the Mouth.

These games of forced perspective are present in other forms; in the art of Nikolaj Arndt, for example, who works





with sidewalks. The grey of the sidewalk, the backdrop of spaces which are un-used, are an excellent space for these games of illusion: the spaces which are the most mundane, clearly not filled with love, with play. Empty concrete spaces.

The sidewalk parts, and there, suddenly, is a safe-precipice, and we are story-book heroes, safely with our shoes on the ground, but for a moment, in a photograph, or to an observer, standing in the right perspective: heroically we make our way across a rickety ladder precipice, dressed in our t-shirt and running shoes, and safe the entire time.

It is the story-time risk: risking only your conception, in the play-space afforded to you in the brief moment of relief from reality; in reality you would not walk across such a deep cavernous rift on such a fragile device made of rope and boards. But in story-space, in art, in a forced-perspective illusion, you *might almost*.

It is the *might-almost*, that is evoked, in a swamp, installed inside an architecture. With floating plankton, in the swamp, which spills over the floor, and fog in the air, as you walk across rope bridges or wooden walkways, the limits of architecture are stretched near to the breaking point. Why limit ourselves to swamp-less spaces? If a fantasy such as a swamp in an architecture can be realized, what are the other limits which might be tested? Our mind, balanced on the pads of our feet, pauses to contemplate this swamp-iness, and hesitates in the foggy-air which obscures the previously crisp-Zumthorian wall and roof details. The floors too, under the shifting waters of the



swamp, are momentarily gone, in our architecture and in our minds.

The trouble of installing a swamp into an architecture, in terms of financial resources and effort, is considerable, and hardly feasible (currently), in many places. But doing it once! And creating an instance of doing it once, an image which floats, like a rumour, in the architectural air, might be worth-while.

Especially if we are dissatisfied with the current boundaries of architecture. And because we are always questing, always testing, the boundaries are always being pushed. “The Mediated Motion,” is not an act of magic—neither is it the illusory act of a magician. But it too lies on the boundary of the real/not-real. “The Mediated Motion,” is an installed-state, an impermanent obscurity of an architecture. Its proof is in the photographs, the eye-witness accounts, or in an appeal to the authority of its perpetrators: I myself, did not experience it, except in words & photographs. But it veils, for a moment, or reveals another state; a possible state. A swamp inside an architecture. An outside-within. And then it is taken away, dismantled, put aside: the conjurer’s tent is swept away to another town.

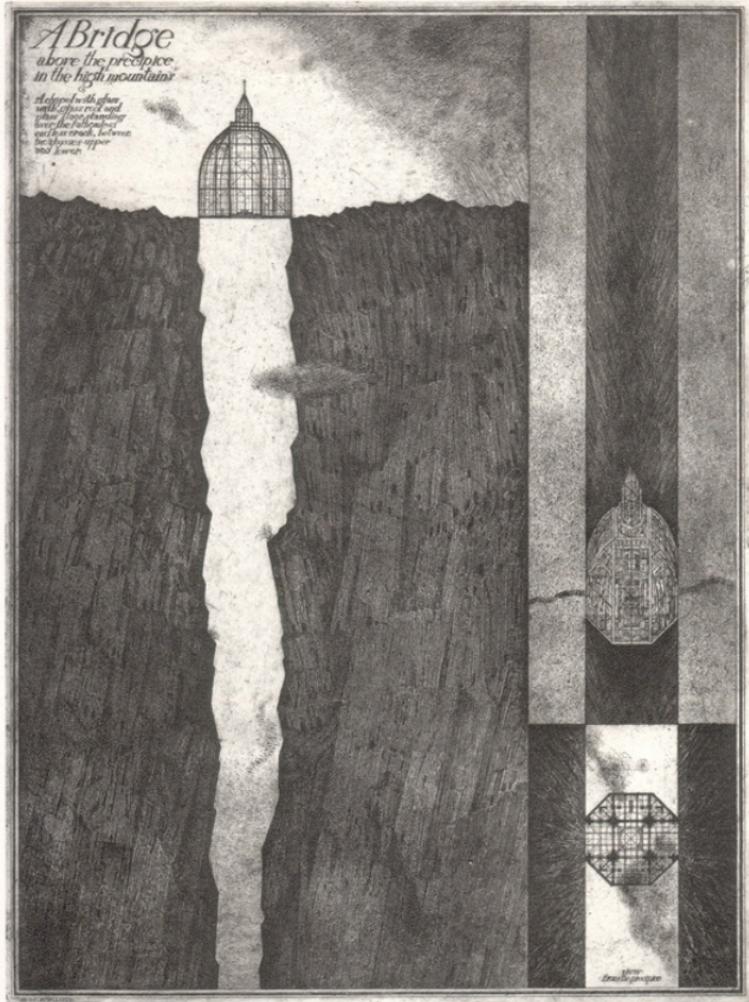
But the swamp-itecture, a momentary-state, performs like the impossible object, a part of reality, and yet obscuring reality, providing a delightful flight, a fantasy-state, that is worth our while to pay for, to work for, to search for. An important state. Reduced to the state of childhood, once more we are free to wonder, to hypothesize, to play on the bridge.



Not all our architecture of fantasy is worth building; some lies quiescent in our minds: the architecture of Brodsky and Utkin, largely architects of fantasy & imagination, rather than built spaces, for example. In “A Bridge Above a Precipice in the High Mountains,” though more buildable than some of their other pieces, such as “Columbarium Habitabile,” they project in the unbuildable. Their “Bridge” is improbable only in its fragility; the fragility of an ill-prepared structure, ill-situated on a precipice. Made, in fact, of prismic glass, the only bridge over the void—carefully drawn from below, with the transparency of the sky shining through it, and drawn in shining white, above the dark recession of the chiasmic void under it. From the side, it barely sits on each side of the cliffs, which recede straight down from each facade. It is made of fragility, of improbability, of temporality: a creature of death, of near-misses, of breaking. Any moment it will plunge, and shatter, and disappear. It plays with time, in its fragile temporality, and with the certainty of gravity, in its precarious situation; empathetically, it plays with death for us, evading it, but barely.

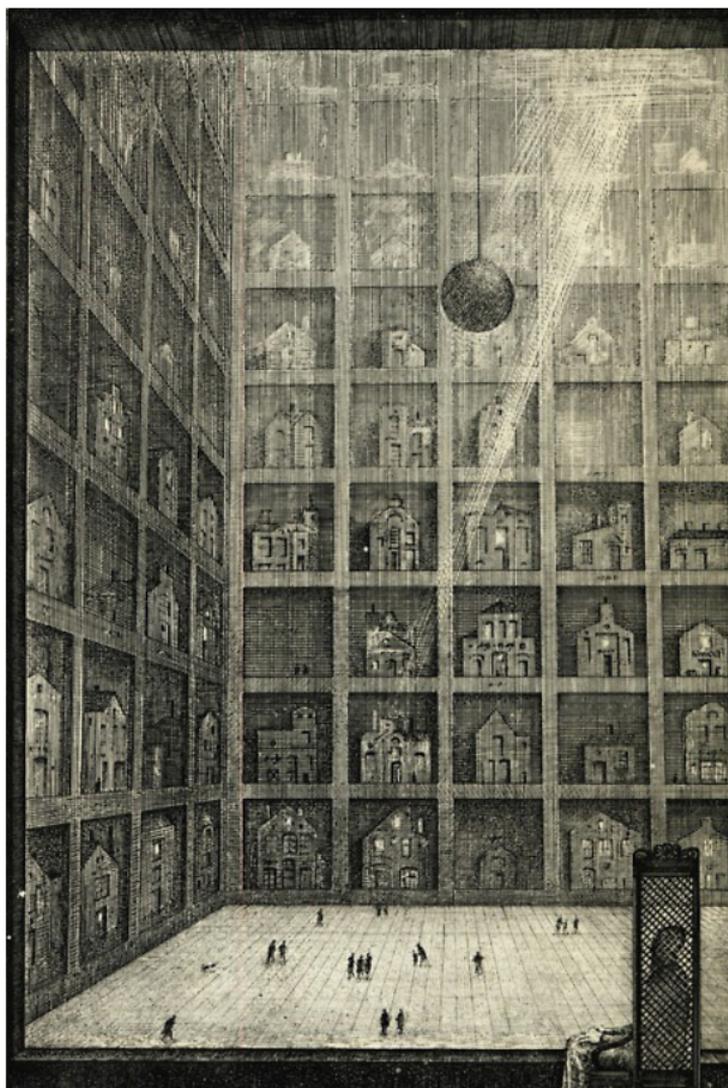
However, “Bridge,” is buildable. With the certainty of engineering, and hidden structural tensile members holding it to the cliff, it could be located, however improbably, there.

Looking at Brodsky & Utkin’s “Columbarium Habitabile,” or a constructed location for temporarily abandoned houses, the flight of architectural fancy takes the next level, and plays with scale. However, given the size of mine pits, quarries, skyscrapers. . . this too could be built.



The scale of it opens our mind to uncertainty, but when we learn the purpose of it, we are certain it never could be built: a home for abandoned houses, before they are re-possessed? Certainly not. This is whimsicality itself; the scale and difficulty of the project begin to dissuade us, but it is the *irrationality* of it which finally defeats us, and at the same time delights us. Here, in this drawing, is a place which will never exist because its purpose will never inspire humanity to build it. The design-flaw is its withdrawal from Reason.

And while we empathize with the Abandonment, we appreciate the desire to gather all these Lonelineses together, and re-apply them, to Adopt them out to new families. . . we understand, with some small sense of sadness, that obviously—empathizing with the House, with Architecture itself, is beyond the line. And our division from the space is understood by Brodsky & Utkin; the rendered drawings are inevitably from a Bird's Eye, or All-Seeing View; the all-understanding, sympathetic, human-being, seeing the pathetic, fragile, somewhat sad yet appealing in an inevitably removed way Architecture. We see the persons in the renderings as specks, as near-alien creatures; the architecture almost scale-less in incomprehension, lack of relationship with us—its link with ourselves is delicate, brittle, a spider's filament of wonder. We are drawn in: not all the way, because the drawings don't allow that, but drawn in nonetheless; we are drawn in, in understanding, if not in body, our skepticism at war with our questing regard. The division, between the eye and the intellect, here, is understood, by Brodsky & Utkin, explored. The range of



their architecture lies always within that narrow spectrum of jarring fantasy attraction & intellectual disapprobation. In Brodsky & Utkin, the architecture is not built in the world, its site is our soul; its interest is in the tension within ourselves. The living space that is created is only within our imagination—and for a moment, we do desire to live there, in fantasy.

Of course, we do not just do this in the landscape of our hearts. We also live in real-world dreams. In the most improbable of spaces, we claim a small nook to place ourselves—in the air.

The Japanese mountain-bred architect-academic Terunobu Fujimori specializes in the building of these dream-houses. Here is *Too-High Tea House*, on two stilts, with a thin red ladder, and a small wobbly-looking hut levitating high in the air, a strange hand-pounded tin roof of questionably-efficacious shape. . . yet it is the shape, the inefficacy, the futile location, the unproductive size, the accidental & inadvertent-looking daintiness of it, which thrills. It uplifts us. It strives, where we do not.

Where the world draws its line: engineered, practical, rectilinear, repetitive, industrial, unit-ized, everyday—Terunobu Fujimori draws his own mocking line, his line of decision, of rebuff, of tenebrous infidelity. He sets off into fantasy, on his stilts in the air. He draws and builds another place, a place for the imagination.

His is not the only building that builds in flighty realms. Tham & Videgård Arkitekter, have built a mirrored cubic



Tree Hotel, that hangs, improbably, among the trees in Sweden.

It is not just the location of this *Tree Hotel* which is odd; houses rarely hang in trees. It is the mirrored *façade*, the cubic shape, the guide-lines, fragile-ly seen: covered in clouds it hangs there, also rather small, rather strangely placed, off the ground, in the air. In the scope of the not-generally, in the zone of the extraordinarily rarely, in the territory of the useless, the not-used, not-frequented, the un-looked at: at the boundary, in other words.

For that is what the imagination is for.

It is for play, at the boundary.

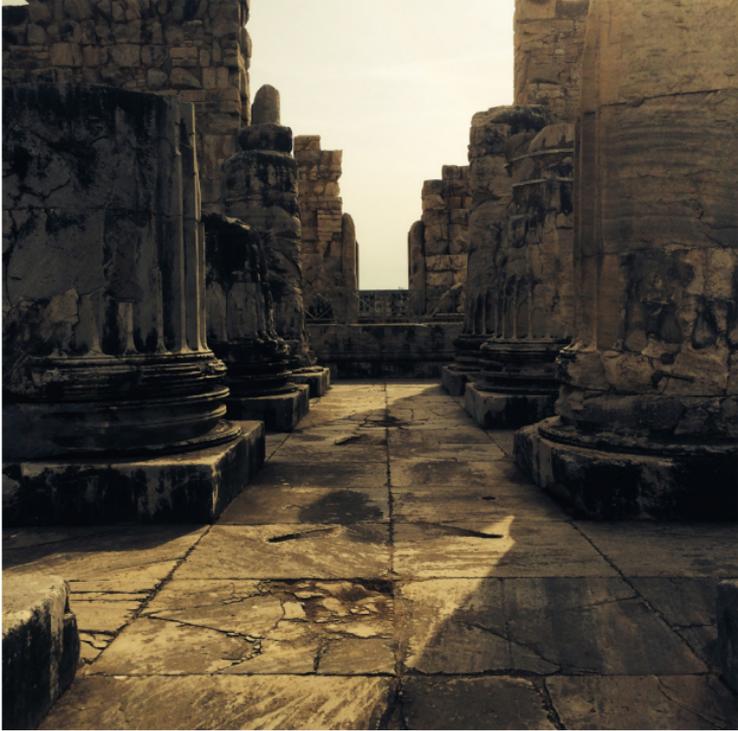
The part of architecture which is Of Interest. At least, to me. The place where puzzlement rules, where one thing may be another, where improbability is briefly rebuffed. And in my own Mist-House, I have tried to test the boundaries of Air, in architecture. On my own stilt-legs I have bravely hoisted a shack.

But is this new, we wonder? This stilt-shack fascination, this quest on two-legs into the airy world of fantasy? Will it fade, and be forgotten? Or is it perhaps not important? Not remarkable, not worth mentioning: is it merely the kind of fantasy that stays forever hidden, behind key and door, in the smaller, darker, deeper rooms of the mind.

I recently went on a trip, to a faraway place, a place I am not certain ever existed. It is called Didim.







Certainly, an odd name, and certainly, it is located very far from where you or I stand, reading this.

It is a place, with giant columns the size of huge trees, and it always was located at a Distance from what was known. It was a temple where one called upon an Oracle. One walked upon a road to visit a place where the Uncertain future, for a moment, could be Glimpsed.

Through the Trees of the Porch, one Approached, and at the door, if one listened, and paid enough, perhaps a voice might be heard, a voice which pronounced The Future.

Now architecture, you see, has always been the site of magical categories of effect. Prediction, impossible objects, illusions, undecidable figures, escapist acts, or levitation, in which the present was transformed briefly, or transmuted imperfectly and momentarily, into something else. And we were transported into a space of the imagination, a space which defied the Rules, where just for a moment, our mind was free from the general restrictions, regulations, stipulations, the confinements, and allowed, on wobbly-legs to define a New Space.

Into the new space, we may not always go.

There are always restrictions on it. It exists only in pictures, perhaps, or far-away. It exists only in our drawings. It is fragile with desire, too fragile for the heavy-ness of our footprints, which might break its glass-over-the-precipice. In order to build it in reality, we must have a real reason,

COMPLETELY BEGUILD, SEASON DEVOTED HIMSELF TO HER, HE WENT TO HER AND ASKED HER FOR HER HAND, AND SOFTLY SHE PUT HER LITTLE PAW IN HIS, AND HE ASKED HER WHAT SHE WOULD HAVE. UPON SEVERAL MOMENTS OF CONSIDERATION, SHE REPLIED THAT SHE WOULD LIKE A HOUSE THAT NEVER SLEPT. SHE ALREADY HAD A VERY NICE HOUSE, BUT STILL, ANOTHER MIGHT DO HER VERY WELL. SHE GAVE HIM A SMALL POT OF HERBS MIXED IN EARTH, FROM WHICH HE MIGHT GAIN AN UNDERSTANDING, AND A BUNDLE OF FLOWERS AS A SORT OF AN HINT. HE ADDED THESE TO HIS OTHER TOOLS, AND PATTED HIS BAG SOFTLY.

...

'AND WHERE SHOULD I BUILD?' HE THOUGHT, AND WENT TO ASK HER.

'ON AN ISLAND,' SHE TOLD HIM. 'FAR AWAY.'

'BUT WHERE SHALL IT BE BUILT, PRECISELY?' HE THOUGHT, AND WENT TO ASK HER.

'IN AMONG THE GRASS IN A GREAT FIELD,' SHE REPLIED.



an undeniable Impetus. Something which will lift more than our pen, our hand, our mind.

We must have something which will lift our hearts from their heaviness, lift our eyes from their straight-gaze patterns, some curiosity must catch at us, and lead us, more than briefly, in a round-about.

We must be caught in some dream for a time, some little love which encourages, which beckons us on, off the path, into a little fairy-world.

Some among us will build these dreams in the hard-ground of reality: some Terunobu Fujimoris, or some Olafur Eliasson & Günther Vogts perhaps, or some Tham & Videgårds, perhaps. Highly admirable and determined persons, strong in their beliefs, and cunningly or charmingly resolute. Others among us, will merely tell stories about our desires to build these dreams: some Winter & Sheas, perhaps, or some Wes Andersons.

Yes, it is Wes Anderson, who I think of, when I think of the struggles of the imagination, in its efforts to self-manifest. A man who builds imaginary worlds of talking foxes and badgers, in tiny-houses underground, and in perfect tan-coloured suits, with little fur mouths, and laundered white shirts. He builds friendships, fox-houses, and other cheerfully improbable things, and for him, we suspend our disbelief.

And when Winter & Shea submit our improbable drawings of improbable spaces, I do not wonder at the meaning of



them. Some people ask whether Goats can really have anything to do with architecture, and whether little Mist-Houses built for Jackalopes are really of consequence, or whether a mere drawing of a stone building in a field can have any effect.

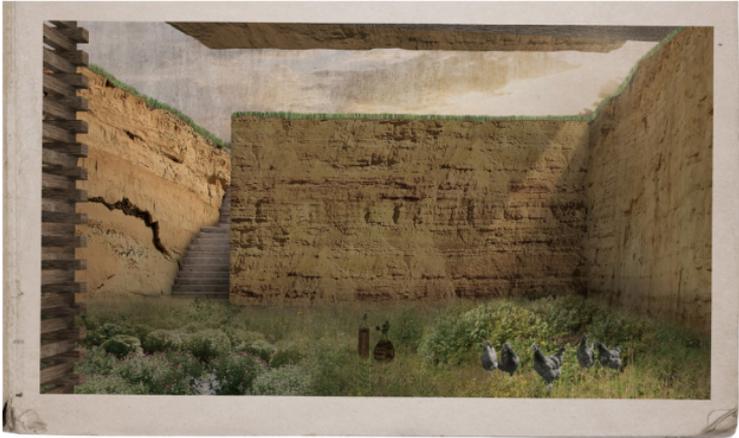
I myself do not wonder.

The magic of a paper project, in my mind, is a powerful magic indeed. Some persons will declare it is not architecture at all. They will see a talking animal, or an Improbable Site, and the thin-ness of a page, and think: there is no architecture here.

But I myself, when I look—why my mind inflates it all, animates it all, and suddenly the Field is full of butterflies, the Mist-House, with its shifting-façade and doorless entry; with its carbon-pole and its column of purple Egyptian porphyry stolen in antiquity from the pantheon and inscribed with the Family History of the Jackalopes—why, it has meaning. It lifts my heart and opens its door and renovates a small room inside for Wonder.

And the Earth-wall rooms and Empty Fields are not improbable or Differentially Located in a place outside reality: why, they are right here, in front of me, and my mind is able enough to step out onto the thin-ness of the page, without disturbing the peace of this Silent Space, and I clamber inside, and inhabit it, for awhile, and am At Peace.





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An examination of the architecture of the imagination, with a focus on the concept of the impossible object, or *trompe l'oeuil*, or of the *baetylus*, for example, or a sacred object, in an effort to test the limits of the visual—the intellectual. This is an effort to understand the quest for escapist architecture, our desire to transform the real, to predict the future, to penetrate the undeniable—in order to create a space for the imagination. This is an exploration of limits and boundaries, an effort to play with and possess, if only for a moment, the impossible.

