



Cosmopolitan Beasts: Pee-Wee's Applied Pedagogy

While it is clear that we are not sovereign, autonomous subjects inscribed in an idealized anthropomorphic order, neither are we liberated from inscription altogether... We are not singularly constructed by outside forces—by state, by science, by capital, by history, by architecture. We are, in fact, structured by all of them, negotiating as agents in an overdetermined field.

—Albert Pope

I know you are, but what am I?

—Pee-Wee Herman

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Architecture's contribution to the production of contemporary collective space depends on its ability to facilitate social and cultural interactions in novel and unexpected ways. Rather than mourn a lost conception of public realm, contemporary architects and educators are working with a renewed sense of agency for themselves and their audiences, manipulating identity politics and mass spectacle as a means of encouraging new forms of engagement and participation.¹ Architecture schools can facilitate this practice by modeling their environments on the kinds of collective space they would like to see in the world. Imagine *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, where Pee-Wee Herman empowered his audiences through a combined display of absurdist performance art and didactic interaction. Although Pee-Wee Herman did not teach his audience how to read or write, he did teach them how to scream very loudly, talk to chairs, and read minds. Pee-Wee projected a rigorously defined self-image that never changed—his outfit, his voice, his demeanor, and his favorite phrases were a relentless constant—yet his interactions with his environment were fluid, spontaneous, and provocative, encouraging children and adults on the other side of the screen to scream, dance, or predict the future along with him. Two recent undergraduate studios taught at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Architecture display a pedagogical sensibility similar to the one we find in *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* and illustrate how such tactics can be engaged in the studio at various levels and scales, through investigation of diverse techniques and programs.

Pee-Wee's pedagogical sensibility advances an argument made by Albert Pope regarding the reintroduction of a formal architecture that preserves political agency through a revised conception of subjectivity. In his essay titled "The Unconstructed Subject of the Contemporary City," Pope introduces an alternative to both the classically inscribed subject of neotraditionalism (with its binding anthropomorphic form) and the unconstructed subject of neomodernism (set adrift by the dematerialization of form). According to Pope, the multiple subject position is "neither entirely constructed nor entirely abandoned." Pope quotes Paul Smith's definition:

The subject is no longer described ... as the equivalent of the "individual" but rather can be conceived as a set of variable qualities that are taken up as a way of negotiating interpretations and thus of understanding and coping with social relations.²

Pee-Wee's interactions with the other characters on the show, with his audience, and, most importantly, with the constructed environment of his playhouse—talking objects, artificial landscapes, and futuristic gizmos—are a literal illustration of this concept and a demonstration of how the formal dimension of architecture plays a role in harnessing that subjective potential.³ Nevertheless, Pee-Wee brings along a style and sensibility that are missing from Pope's argument, ones that embrace the intuitive, unreasonable, and playful as necessary components of a productive social contract. While Pope finds potential embedded in pockets of modernism's history,⁴ Pee-Wee's contribution of unserious, campy irreverence resurrects the cosmopolitan as an alternative to modernism's soberly constructed and rationalized subjects.

THE COSMOPOLITAN CONNECTION

To be cosmopolitan is to be just worldly enough to know that sometimes naiveté is a necessary artifice. If the metropolitan hangs its hat on the generic constructs of global modernism, then the cosmopolitan makes a global rule of local idiosyncrasies. The cosmopolitan produces an equally projective alternative to modernism's metanarratives—the minor-narrative, if you will. The cosmopolitan accepts the cracks in modernism's facade, embracing the uncertainties that we know to be inevitable components of urban collective life. Meanwhile, it maintains the fragile veneer of a formal aesthetic, projecting an image of what we might strive for, even when we know that failure or detour is a possible outcome.⁵

In its philosophical usage, the word "cosmopolitan" is associated with a moralizing movement of ethics, community, and politics on a global scale, a kind of "planetary humanism."⁶ On the other hand, specimens of twentieth-century literature made use of a different interpretation of the word:

The syncretic but less-than-national tradition of cosmopolitanism, which is often associated with aestheticism, dandyism, and flanerie at the fin de siècle, helped to establish a new analysis of perception, and alternative tones of political consciousness among early modernist writers ... whose values include pleasure, consumption, syncretism and



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Figure 1: Pee-Wee's Playhouse.

Figure 2: Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012); Hushpuppy and the auroch (top); a construction of the "Bathtub" (bottom).

perversity. The decadent tradition ... amplifies the place of transience and artificiality within models of national culture and transnational mobility.⁷

As an alternative medium for political inquiry, literary cosmopolitanism rejected modernism's heroics in favor of the unserious—Oscar Wilde's notion of the "perfectly phrased but not exactly useful"—and, in this way, demonstrated that a "commitment to collective agency may be a style rather than an index of transnational politics."⁸ To be clear, there is an interest in the social, political, and environmental implications of architecture that motivates this inquiry but also a belief that we could be more productive (and have more fun) by engaging those implications from an oblique perspective that celebrates the unnecessary in both life and architecture.

Furthermore, the cosmopolitan reduces the assertion of modernism's failure to a Pee-Wee Herman-esque logic: *I know you are, but what am I?* To call out another's fault is, in fact, to draw attention to your own; therefore, the only logical option is to offer an alternative answer, even if it might appear to be a trick question. To answer is to willingly engage in a game, where the rules of engagement require that the moment you attempt to pin down or define external phenomena, you become implicated in those phenomena yourself. It is this active role in the forecast, description, and reception of architectural production that makes Pee-Wee's demonstration of the cosmopolitan useful to architecture today. If we are enthusiastic for architecture and its history and strive for a disciplined practice of architecture but also want an "other" architecture that is potentially unrecognizable, then that architecture might answer the question "*but what am I?*" with the levity, joy, and provocation with which Pee-Wee poses the question.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF BEASTS

The recent film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) is a contemporary allegory that shares this sensibility while shedding a broader cultural light onto themes of subjectivity and collective agency in relation to urban and architectural form. The movie's heroine, Hushpuppy, is a six-year-old girl who lives along the Gulf Coast with her terminally ill father (Wink) in a flooded bayou community nicknamed "the Bathtub." The name derives from its location on the outside of levees that protect a neighboring city from intermittent floods and the impending sea level rise that will result from melting polar ice caps. Hushpuppy, Wink, and their small band of neighbors refuse to come inside the levee boundary for safety and ignore calls for evacuation of the area, preferring instead to risk comfort and well-being to maintain their lifestyle of exuberant celebration, filled with music, parades, laughter, drink, close friends, and, most of all, freedom.

The "Beasts" refer to several different facets of the movie. Most literally the Beasts are the mythical *auroch* creatures (a cross between giant wildebeests and warthogs) that Hushpuppy imagines will be released from the polar ice caps upon melting and migrate south to eat small children like herself. But the Beasts are also Hushpuppy and the other "untamable" inhabitants of the Bathtub who favor their freedom and lifestyle over someone else's definition of comfort and safety. Finally, the Beasts are the ad

hoc structures built by the community as their homes and shelter from the impending floods—floating homes, on stilts, in trees, without windows, in the shells of old vehicles—constructions that take on the profiles of creatures in the landscape, clad in fur, spines, and scales, and challenge architecture’s conventional relationship to ground (Figure 2). For our purposes here, as well as the filmmakers’, these various meanings help to motivate and direct future action, because the Beast simultaneously embodies the content of our imaginations, the agents we must be in manifesting this content as the material of new worlds, and, lastly, as the actual product of our exploits, the bricolage efforts we make to put new constructions into the world that reflect our aspirations and our failures.

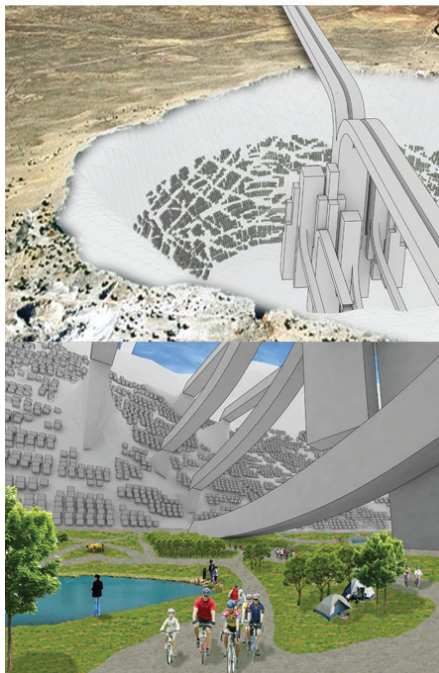
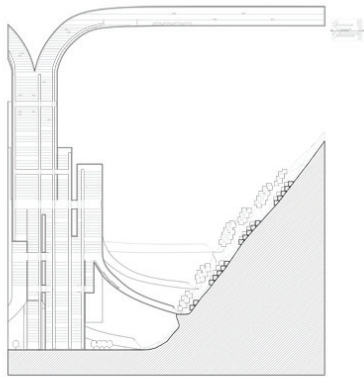
By the end of the movie, Hushpuppy has transformed from a naturalized Beast of the Bathtub to a Cosmopolitan Beast of the world. Over the course of her many journeys—to the city’s evacuation shelter, to a visit with her absentee mother at the “Elysian Field” night club and lounge, to the awareness of her father’s illness and immanent death, to her confrontation with the *aurochs*—Hushpuppy is made aware of her multiple places in the world and of how her experiences in the Bathtub shape a shifting subjective awareness that extends beyond the Bathtub’s borders. The development of Hushpuppy’s subjectivity illustrates Pope’s call for the deliberate cultivation of multiple subject positions, described via Paul Smith as:

a continual and continuing series of overlapping subject positions ... [which] may or may not be present to consciousness at any given moment, but which in any case constitute a person’s history. ... [A] person’s history cannot be abstracted as subjectivity pure and simple, but must be conceived as a collation of multifarious and multiform subject positions.⁹

According to Pope, this complex relationship between individuals, their histories, and their subjectivities may be a basis for new forms of collective space. If a previous notion of “public” was an all-encompassing universal designation that held the singular humanist subject in fixed suspension at the service of an abstract notion of the “greater good,” then our contemporary aspiration for collective space is based on a looser and always-shifting dynamic between individual and group and between local and global. The education of Hushpuppy helps push the movie’s message past both the humanist veneration of place and the neomodern dismissal of subjectivity to a postplace understanding of how the specificities and idiosyncrasies of the local might be dispersed and injected into multiple global and social milieus.

URBAN BRICOLAGE

To produce architectural and urban artifacts that perform as Cosmopolitan Beasts, we must educate architects as Cosmopolitan Beasts who can negotiate not just between the local and global but also, more importantly, between naive intuition and cultivated discipline. This ambition requires a projective pedagogy that is both didactic and performative, where the strict prescription of technique supports and elicits unprecedented and unpredictable propositions from students who might not initially understand the radical implications of their investigation and action.



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Figure 3: "Crater City," Kellyn Carlos (bird's-eye view, ground-level perspective, and section zoom).

The premise of Arch 106: Urban Compositions and Operations was first conceived and coordinated by Assistant Professor Judith De Jong in the spring of 2011 and then adopted and developed by Assistant Professor Clare Lyster in spring 2012. As the second studio in the undergraduate sequence, the course is designed to introduce students to basic themes of urbanism, primarily through studies and manipulations of urban morphology. Despite its relatively straightforward pretext, the subtext of the course is quite radical: to cultivate the rigorous initiation and substantiation of imaginative speculation through negotiation between willful hypothesis and disciplined representation.

For the first four weeks of the studio, students researched and documented the morphologies of five existing cities through mapping, aerial imagery, diagramming, and physical modeling. For the remainder of the semester, individual students proposed and developed the formal and organizational framework of a "Fictional City." Each student began with a hypothesis or narrative that established the premise of a city, which they built iteratively with a formal "kit of parts" (topographic, networked, and typological) extracted from the cities researched at the beginning of the semester. We suggested that students think of themselves as Dr. Frankenstein, grafting elements from disparate sources in order to create a product that is ultimately greater than the sum of its parts—if not a superhuman monster, then a supercity that can do things that other cities cannot.

One of the more monstrous creations of the studio results from the initial query "What would happen if a city was built in a crater?" This student's proposal for a hyperdense city core (a cluster of megatowers whose form derived from an inversion of Chicago's Willis Tower) is suspended at the center of the crater's void. Part *Close Encounters*, part Superstudio, the project inserted a megastructure into the terrain of the crater with as little contact with the ground as possible. Taking a cue from Greg Lynn's *Stranded Sears Tower* (1992), the proposition peels away single towers from the cluster to serve as connective infrastructural tubes. Larger tubes act as major infrastructure, highways and rail systems that connect the city to the outside world, while smaller tubes serve as pedestrian pathways between the commercial core and the residential neighborhoods along the crater's outer wall. In contrast to the highly formal megastructure of the city center, the residential neighborhoods derive their scale, structure, and organization from the informal favela neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro. The project abstracts the favela typology to populate the steep slope of the crater as a car-free residential zone with direct pedestrian access to, and views of, the octopus-like urban agglomeration at the crater's center.

The image of the project is overwhelming and imposing, an intensification of the isolation and alienation suggested by its landscape. On one hand, the project recalls Superstudio's *Continuous Monument* (1969), its insertion of a monolithic abstract form into an otherwise pristine natural landscape. In the midst of a vast hinterland, the city's panoptic form concentrates density, circulation, and spectacle at a single point. However, unlike the Panopticon, where power and surveillance flow in only one direction, the Crater City promotes an open exchange between the monolithic core and the informal

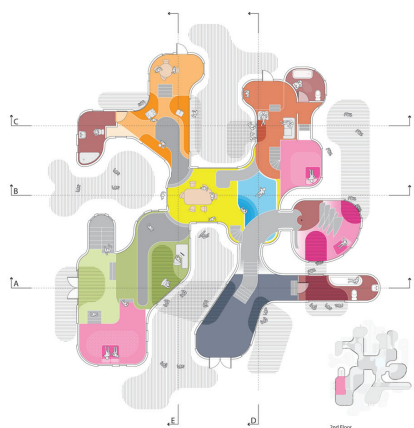
neighborhoods along the crater wall. This project advances both of these precedents by addressing what actually happens at the boundary between the object and the site and by creating architectural conditions of connection, programming, and public space in those mediating moments.

In both its visual connections across the crater and its physical pedestrian connections, the city promotes democratic exchange between radically different urban conditions. It is not just the city's center or edge that articulates two different positions to occupy but also open space at the bottom of the crater, public plazas at the tops of the towers, and infrastructural tubes in between. Through this contrast and juxtaposition, the architectural resolution at these moments describes specific urban opportunities that liberate the subject from its traditional inscription in urban form and provides multiple spaces for the subject to inhabit freely yet always in relation to the great beast that hovers at the center of the crater. In many ways, this affect is a product of the naive, almost reckless abandon with which the project was initiated. The initial concept might make us question its viability as a possible city yet is sufficiently provocative to simultaneously make us wonder "Why not?" Or more to the point, if we return to Pee-Wee Herman's question—*I know you are, but what am I?*—this city seems to confidently assert its identity while still leaving a margin for interpretation that acknowledges and negotiates that troublesome dynamic of transference through its ability to hold multiple urban positions, or postures, simultaneously.

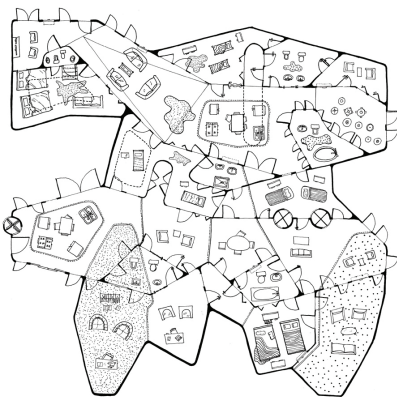
DRAWING THE LINE

While a multiplicity of subject positions helps to avoid the pitfall of fixed identities, there still comes a time in all young architects' careers when they must decide which side of a line they will stand on. In the best case, this is a line that they have drawn themselves. The drawing of lines is a fundamental act of architecture at the core of *Cartoonish Worlds*, a fourth-year undergraduate-option studio taught by Jimenez Lai in the spring of 2012. The control of freehand lines—their continuity, thickness, character, and grooming—and the profiles they compose are the expertise students develop in this combined studio and seminar. While these concerns are not new to architectural production, the final product of this studio is a set of disciplinary curiosities: houses that are cartoonish in character yet opaque and complex in content and meaning, simultaneously comfortable and beguiling. They tell old stories in new ways, constructing subjectivities, cultivating sensibilities, and suggesting new ways of living through their investigations of the house typology.

The studio disregards many common concerns of contemporary architecture—deliberately ignoring the urban, the environmental, the political, even the digital—in order to turn its focus inward toward a limited palette of interests and concerns, namely, the composition of a house as a hyper-subjective interior environment. Such acts of omission are characteristic of the cosmopolitan as a way to reorient perception through the tunnel vision of obsession. Students achieve this single-mindedness through two initial exercises: the first an intensive precedent study based on the repetitive copying (redrawing by hand) of iconic house projects from a predetermined



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Figure 4: Cartoonish Worlds, "House of the Indecisive," Brad Kang.

Figure 5: Cartoonish Worlds, "House of the Exhibitionist," Felipe Oropeza.

set and the second the formulation of a libretto, a prose narrative that is traditionally the basis of an opera or dramatic musical but that, in this instance, is the basis for the house's introspective and autonomous interior. The first grants access to architecture's established yet shifting vocabulary of formal invention; the second prioritizes subjective desire as the motivating force of architectural production. Finally, the two parallel investigations converge through the cartooning seminar, where students develop a graphic language for the architectural representation of their invented libretto.

Motivated by a particular character type (the indecisive, the sadistic, the exhibitionist, the dreamer) or by a plot-driven scenario (a family secret, a sudden breakup, a sentence to purgatory), the libretto contributes an idiosyncratic personality to each house. The resulting interior worlds are built from an architectural language that reflects, exaggerates, and sometimes challenges the subjective affect associated with these characters and scenarios. Using the case study plans as a starting point, students' willful misreadings impose new organizations and sensibilities onto existing projects. For instance, the "House of the Indecisive" (Figure 4) multiplied and overlapped the plan of UNStudio's Mobius House and then inserted an unnecessary array of doors in order to exaggerate the sense of choice and disorientation for the indecisive inhabitant. The "House of the Exhibitionist" (Figure 5) reconfigured the figural forms of John Hejduk's Wall House to create a sprawling figural plan whose irregularly curvilinear profile wraps around exterior courtyards where a public audience may view the activities of those inside the house. The success of these projects is that they take literally and seriously the specificities of their libretto to the point of absurdity. And, yet, they are pulled back from the edge of nonsense by the disciplined commitment to architectural precedent and drawing technique.

Students inflect the lines of their drawings with the sensibility and character of their houses' inhabitants. A cartoon storyboard often accompanied the project to represent the kind of scenarios that might occur within this architectural construction. Through this emphasis on representation—the act of drawing a "well-groomed" line, the studied engagement with deliberate composition—students internalized the character and sensibility of their libretto as a facet of their own subjective expression. Students began with the precedents, the drawing techniques, and the concept of the libretto as a collective set of tools that was external to their own experiences and proceeded to develop a sense of agency and ownership over the graphic and architectural language that their individual project required. Students' work is bound to other work within the studio and to an established legacy of architectural production so that it could never be read as purely idiosyncratic. As *Cosmopolitan Beasts*, both the students and their projects demonstrate how a new understanding of subjectivity might negotiate between a commitment to collective existence and the aspirations, neuroses, and oddities of the individual.

CONCLUSION

The vital statistics of these two studios couldn't be more different, teaching radically different skill sets to different skill levels. Nevertheless, they

approach their divergent agendas with a similar mind-set—that through the negotiation of prescriptive, narrowly focused technique and a strong conceptual conceit, students are liberated to explore and follow their own subjective impulses to unexpected conclusions. Like Pee-Wee does for his audience, these studios provide students with a clear performative identity to embody. However, the performance is embedded with loopholes and gaps that require interpretation and invention by the students themselves. In this way students immediately step into a role of fully realized architectural agency and are forced to reconcile the gaps with acts of intuitive invention that redefine their own relationship to the world.

In other words, the most fundamental skill taught by both these studios is how to be an architect as Cosmopolitan Beast, an agent of negotiation between subjectivities and between worlds. But, as we learned earlier, the Beast is both producer and product, and these two studios also demonstrate a curious formal similarity in the work they produce—their inventions begin to resemble, or at least suggest, the profile of creatures, Beasts in their own right. These figural forms may be interpreted as fanciful whimsy, but they also return us to Pope's interest in a new anthropomorphic representation that asserts architecture's agency in an otherwise dematerialized world. Rather than associate architectural form with the human body, the suggestion and interpretation of another kind of creature, with a character and profile all its own, help us to slip away from the singularity of our own preconceived identities and into the slipstream of subjectivities that construct and reconstruct new collective environments. Like Pee-Wee in his playhouse, we are defined simultaneously by the image that we project and by the way that image reacts and interacts with the material of the world around it. Each new interaction and relationship is an opportunity to adjust or reshape our own subjectivities. In that way, we are not subject to a single reading of ourselves but rather to the ebb and flow of positions and relations whose interactions define new realities.

The nature of this formal proposition is a political one because it demands the negotiation of a position within architecture's broader cultural milieu. The Beast's position in the context of practice is fluid—not fluid to the point of indeterminacy but fluid in that it can shape-shift to absorb external objects or adversarial positions that might otherwise be construed as obstacles. Here we return to Pee-Wee's eternal question, which turns such confrontation into a game. We learn from Pee-Wee that the key to a successful negotiation is a playfully intuitive and spontaneous attitude that transforms conflict into an opportunity for novel engagement. This position may be described as "loose fit," where disciplinary interests serve as points of reference to define the fuzzy profile of a territory but without setting hard-and-fast boundaries. Regardless of scale, program, or client, each new design project can then become an opportunity to manipulate that fuzzy boundary line according to circumstantial contingencies. From the terms set here, such manipulation would not be understood as an abdication of a disciplinary position but instead is a moment where a new reality emerges from the intersection of two positions that were previously at odds. ♦

ENDNOTES

1. Roger Sherman, "Strange Attractors, or the Catalytic Agency of Form," in *Fast-Forward Urbanism: Rethinking Architecture's Engagement with the City*, eds. Dana Cuff and Roger Sherman (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011).
2. Albert Pope, "The Unconstructed Subject of the Contemporary City," *Slow Space* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1998), 167.
3. Pope criticizes Rem Koolhaas for his dismissal of architectural form: "Where there is nothing, everything is possible. Where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible." He argues that the dematerialization of urban and architectural form is an explicit abdication of architecture's capacity to "operate in the field of multidetermination . . . and make progressive contributions to heterogeneous identities."
4. Pope describes Le Corbusier's *Modulor* as a modernist inscription of subject as decentered, nonhierarchical, and modernist and references La Tourette as an architectural machine that constructs multiple subject positions.
5. Definition of "cosmopolitan" adapted from discussion of its role in modernist literature, in Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
6. Stan Allen discusses a similar notion of the cosmopolitan in an interview from Log online, October 2011.
7. Walkowitz, 20.
8. Ibid.
9. Pope, 167.