

How to Use This Book: Guidance in a Permissive Society

While guidebooks empower readers to take action, their impulse to instruct also strips away the ability to interrogate the book’s underlying arguments. Does this turn towards participation risk disarming the power of both author and reader?

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Guidebooks are everywhere. From the *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*¹ to *Made in Tokyo*,² guidebooks are multiplying so quickly that they seem to have overthrown the manifesto as a principal text for architectural agency. Far removed from the commanding stance of Futurist authors, guidebooks employ a gentler art of persuasion. Guidebooks outline ‘best practices,’ open access to hidden corners of the city, and share skills with receptive readers. As vehicles for influence, they empower readers to participate in the realization of their authors’ architectural ideas. And yet, while guidebooks empower readers to take action, their impulse to instruct also strips away the ability to interrogate the book’s underlying arguments. Does this turn towards participation risk disarming the power of both author and reader? Does it incapacitate revolutionary thinking? This paper examines the guidebook genre, both within and outside of architecture, to ask where agency resides within its own culture of permissiveness.³

THE IMPERATIVE MOOD

What do guidebooks do? Some take us on a tour. The Works Progress Administration-sponsored “American Guide Series,” for example, captured the “spirit of American life”⁴ for the uninitiated either “on the road or in the armchair.”⁵ *Murray* travel guides—a precursor to *Baedeker* volumes—prided themselves on their “matter-of-fact”⁶ clarity and accuracy. These books suppressed room for interpretations of tourist sites to avoid bewildering the reader, and were thus subject to critiques that they promoted “passive,” “superficial,” and “mindless consumerism.”⁷

Guidebooks also open inaccessible sites, and experiences beyond the grind of everyday life. 18th century English country estates permitted entry to “those who could only be spectators,”⁸ through the aid of small, portable, relatively inexpensive publications. Or, more recently, the LA Urban Rangers encourage their readers to ignore “No Trespassing” signs installed at Malibu beaches by teaching them the intricacies of dry-sand easement law. This guide teaches you how to just barely stay within the limits of the law.

Still other guidebooks convince and command: they encourage us to act, and train us to get



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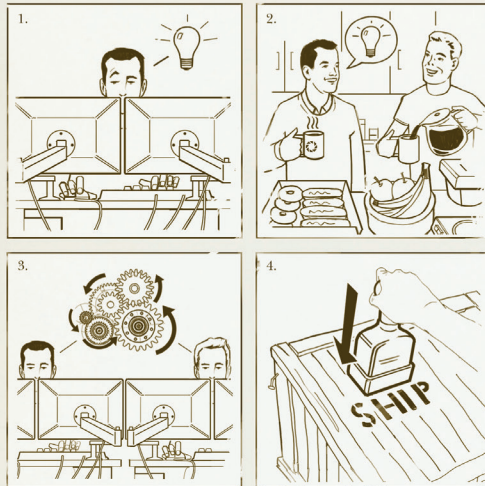
it right. And, as with the tour, these actions both constrict and empower. Thus, books on sustainability suggest ‘best practices,’ with a ‘can do approach.’ Reference manuals enforce building codes standards, and offer instructions for replicable sequences for production. As a site for research the guidebook is not often a site in which knowledge is verified, but rather a site where it is put into practice.

I’d like to take a closer look at one particular guidebook, which comes not from architecture, but from workplace management. In 2012, Valve--a software company in Bellevue, Washington most famous for creating the first-person shooter video game, Half-Life--created the *Valve Handbook for New Employees: A fearless adventure in knowing what to do when no one’s there telling you what to do.*⁹ The manual declares, “You’ll decide what to work on.”¹⁰ Each employee is encouraged to choose their teams organically, decide for themselves which product to support, and what experiments to run. “Employees vote on projects with their feet (or desk wheels),”¹¹ illustrated in this little diagram. Like many workplaces in today’s creative economy, the premise here is that workers are the company’s most valuable capital, and that the best system for an enlightened workforce is self-organization: “when you’re an entertainment company that’s spent the last decade going out of its way to recruit the most intelligent, innovative, talented people on earth, telling them to sit at a desk and do what they’re told obliterates 90 percent of their value... We do have a founder/president, but even he isn’t your manager... You have the power to green-light projects. You have the power to ship products.”¹²

This book exists not to tell us what to do, exactly, but to help us understand the lack of structure, and a culture of permissiveness. The book is very aware of the fact that it is just making all of this up. It reminds you that you’re on your own, and admits that “Valve is NOT good

Figure 1: Architectural Guidebooks

Fig. 3-1 Method to working without a boss



- step 1. Come up with a bright idea
 step 2. Tell a coworker about it
 step 3. Work on it together
 step 4. Ship it!

VALVE | METHOD DIAG. 3

amount of money back into each employee's pocket. Valve does not win if you're paid less than the value you create. And people who work here ultimately don't win if they get paid more than the value they create.

So Valve's goal is to get your compensation to be "correct." We tend to be very flexible when new employees are joining the company, listening to their salary requirements and doing what we can for them. Over time, compensation gets adjusted to fit an employee's internal peer-driven valuation. That's what we mean by "correct"—paying someone what they're worth (as best we can tell using the opinions of peers).

If you think your compensation isn't right for the work you do, then you should raise the issue. At Valve, these conversations are surprisingly easy and straightforward. Adjustments to compensation usually occur within the process described here. But talking about it is always the right thing if there's any issue. Fretting about your level of compensation without any outside information about how it got set is expensive for you and for Valve.

The removal of bias is of the utmost importance to Valve in this process. We believe that our peers are the best judges of our value as individuals. Our flat structure eliminates some of the bias that would be present in a peer-ranking system elsewhere. The design of our stack-ranking process is meant to eliminate as much as possible of the remainder.

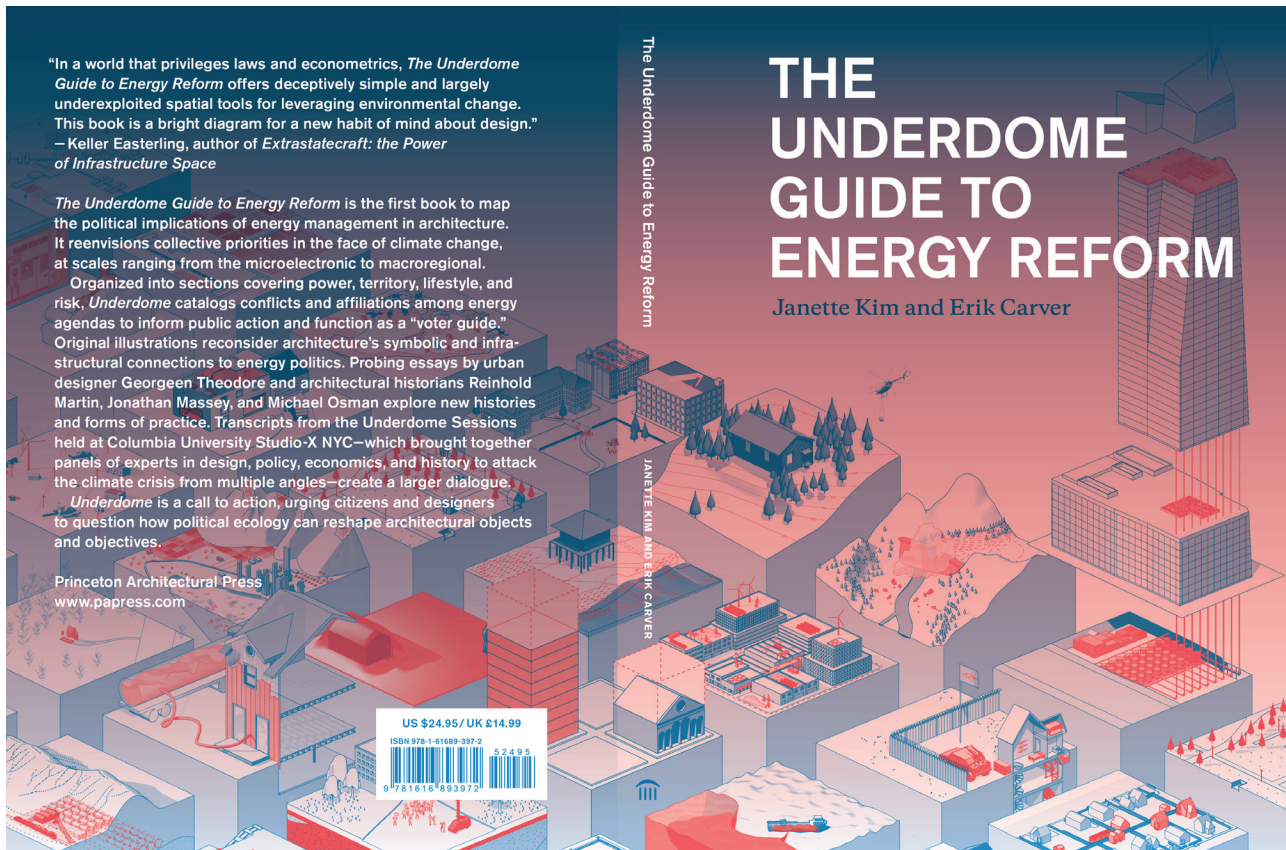
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at... Helping new people find their way, mentoring people,"¹³ and can even tend to exclude "people in completely new disciplines." This book also reassures you that this uncertainty is okay. And for this reason this is very much a guidebook of our time. "If you find yourself walking down the hall one morning with a bowl of fresh fruit and Stumptown-roasted espresso, dropping off your laundry to be washed, and heading into one of the massage rooms, don't freak out. All these things are here for you to actually use. And don't worry that somebody's going to judge you for taking advantage of it—relax!"¹⁴

But a person *can* get fired from Valve. This book encourages us to take risks, to ignore the fear of making a mistake. It also acknowledges that "there are still some bad ways to fail. Repeating the same mistake over and over. Not listening to customers or peers before or after a failure is another."¹⁵ As the handbook explains, employees review and rank each other, producing an evaluation that determines salary. The deepest contradiction of this handbook is that every reminder to think independently is matched with one to serve Valve's customers: Every company will tell you that "the customer is boss," but here that statement has weight."¹⁶ This is a contradiction that ultimately has to be resolved in the mind of each employee, it is a risk passed on from management to the individual.

The guidebook is clever in the way it institutionalizes the principles of Valve's founders, and translates this into the social and intellectual life of the company. In this sense we might be tempted to call this a kind of manifesto. But beneath this 'can do' spirit, the text shies away from acknowledging responsibility for the company's most critical contradiction. This guidebook has killed the manifesto; it has stripped away the manifesto's revolutionary spirit with reassurances amidst a lack of moral certitude.

Figure 2: Valve Handbook



"In a world that privileges laws and econometrics, *The Underdome Guide to Energy Reform* offers deceptively simple and largely underexploited spatial tools for leveraging environmental change. This book is a bright diagram for a new habit of mind about design."
 —Keller Easterling, author of *Extrastatecraft: the Power of Infrastructure Space*

The Underdome Guide to Energy Reform is the first book to map the political implications of energy management in architecture. It reenvision[s] collective priorities in the face of climate change, at scales ranging from the microelectronic to macroregional.

Organized into sections covering power, territory, lifestyle, and risk, *Underdome* catalogs conflicts and affiliations among energy agendas to inform public action and function as a "voter guide." Original illustrations reconsider architecture's symbolic and infrastructural connections to energy politics. Probing essays by urban designer Georger Theodore and architectural historians Reinhold Martin, Jonathan Massey, and Michael Osman explore new histories and forms of practice. Transcripts from the Underdome Sessions held at Columbia University Studio-X NYC—which brought together panels of experts in design, policy, economics, and history to attack the climate crisis from multiple angles—create a larger dialogue.

Underdome is a call to action, urging citizens and designers to question how political ecology can reshape architectural objects and objectives.

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The Underdome Guide to Energy Reform

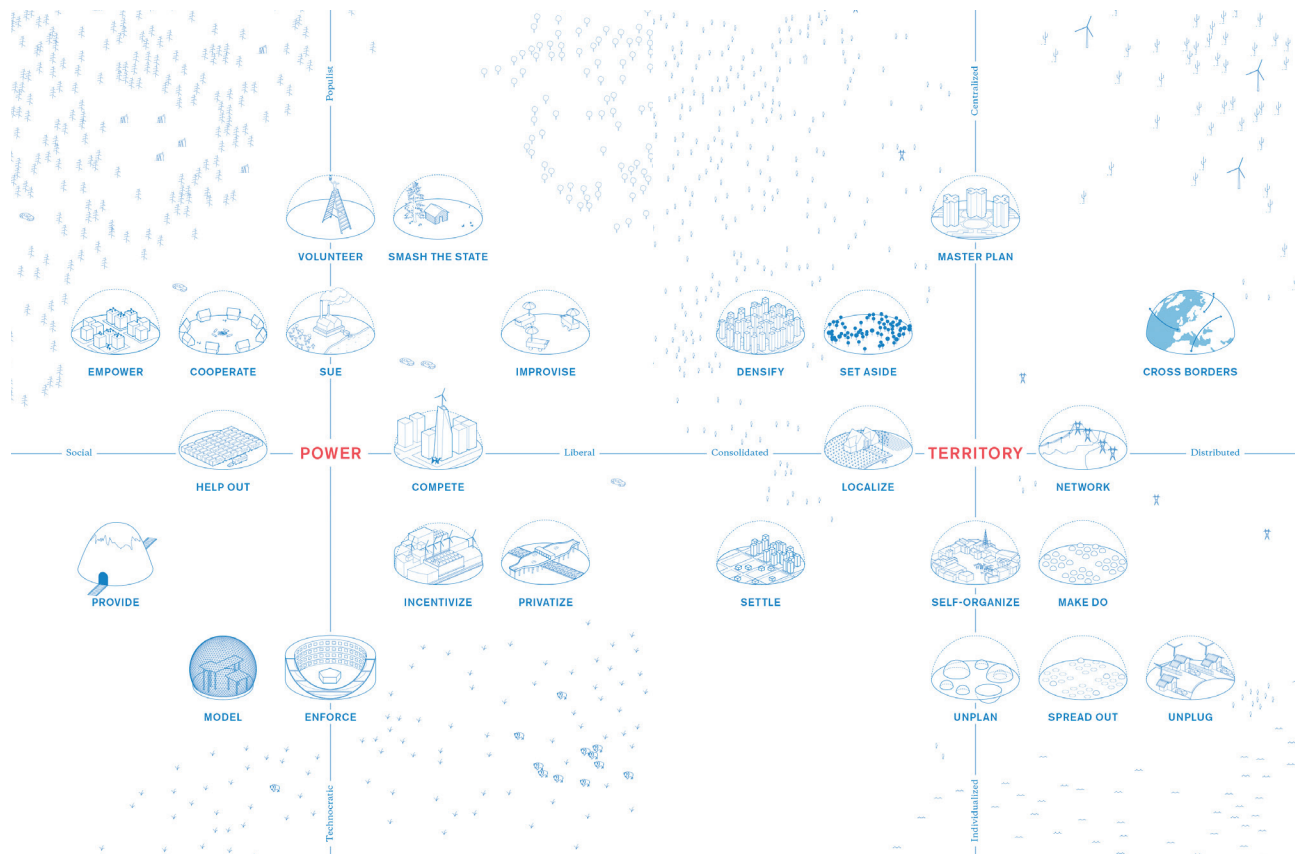
JANETTE KIM AND ERIK CARVER

THE MANIFESTO

At a conference hosted by the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation called "What happened to the architectural manifesto?"¹⁷ Anthony Vidler both celebrated and mourned its loss. Manifestos in their modernist form were "[t]o attack. To feast. They make trouble, and celebrate.... They are a call to action; to reform or to revolutionize." In contrast, the "shift from manifesto to theory reflects increasing doubt." Its "revolutionary stridency has given way to worry about the right way to do architecture" in what is ultimately a "shift from manifesto to rumination."

Rem Koolhaas has famously called *Learning from Las Vegas*¹⁸ the last manifesto, albeit a gentle one. In a recent interview, historian Arindam Dutta described *Learning from Las Vegas* and *Delirious New York*¹⁹ as "brilliant examples of polemics in architecture, exemplary not so much as 'research'... as in their imaginative and spectacular use of evidence. Their practice is more like of magic, and I am happy to confess that I am one of the bewitched. ...[N]either of them leave us a whit wiser about the actual dynamics of real estate, land acquisition patterns, capitalization, etc., ... What these books represent instead are magisterial curations of architectural impressions, word images concatenated into persuasive fictions such that more conventional historiography confronts its own truth-telling rhetoric as itself a kind of fiction. In that sense, they expose the vulnerabilities of "research" or truth criteria as founded. [W]hat these books seek to change is the grand narrative."²⁰

Koolhaas defines a lineage from the manifestos—*Delirious New York* and *Learning from Las Vegas*—to "books about cities that imply manifestos"²¹—such as the Harvard Project on the City volumes *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, *Great Leap Forward*, and *Mutations*. More pointedly, these guides are what Enrique Walker has called "the cliché of 'research' without the definition of an argument."²² Published almost the same time as the Project on the City volumes, however, Atelier Bow-wow's extraordinarily influential *Made in Tokyo* and *Pet Architecture Guide Books* do both.



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One of the pitfalls of the guidebook is that it presumes to speak for you. By giving instructions, the guidebook both empowers us to take action and strips away our ability to interrogate its underlying arguments. And yet, the guidebook is critical for us today because it dares to go beyond the naiveté of the manifesto. It can venture arguments aware of their own contradictions. It can frame a range of possibilities, and frame uncertainties in a way that makes a nuanced argument.

APPENDIX

*The Underdome Guide to Energy Reform*²³ is an architect's guide to energy that my collaborator, Erik Carver, and I published in October 2015. In the spirit of *Delirious New York* or *Learning from Las Vegas*, it'll form the 'appendix' of this paper. The idea behind the book is to stage debates around energy in the built environment. We wanted to go beyond the technocratic assumptions behind greenness—to reject LEED standards and green sourcing mantras—and instead, to investigate tacit political narratives about governance, cities, domestic life, and the American Dream, among other questions. We hope architects can seize this opportunity to think big with energy; to address collective concerns it activates.

We mapped a new taxonomy of sometimes contending, sometimes affiliated positions on energy. We see the map as a kind of Mad-Max-style stage for debate. Each agenda is then positioned along one of four topics—Power, Territory, Lifestyle, and Risk—along a series of axes like those in a structuralist grid, or the approval matrix in *New York Magazine*. "Power," for example, asks how governments, corporations, organizations and individuals have the potential to restructure energy performance. Energy approaches on the top end of this axis activate grass-roots or libertarian ideals, while their opposite state-led reform. Agendas on the left support a redistribution of resources while the right support market-based models of investment. Each approach is drawn as a kind of dome under the premise that all



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architecture, like domes, connect spaces and people through new kinds of enclosures and infrastructures. We've also drawn out each position as a case study to examine its architectural strategies.

In some examples, fluctuating formations of public and private capital have been drawn together in constructing new forms of civic enclosure. The Living City Block, for example, is a non-profit associated with Amory Lovins' Rocky Mountain Institute that has collectivized power management at the scale of a city block in Denver and Brooklyn. This approach localizes the benefits of energy upgrades while distributing its risk beyond single landowners. Meanwhile, the Citadel separatist compound in Idaho empowers its citizens with control of their own means of survival, without fear of natural disaster, grid failure or taxation. Surprisingly, this level of independence is strangely echoed in the operations of the Bank of America tower, whose co-generation plant required Cook+Fox to acquire permits for a dedicated natural gas pipeline at 42nd street.

In still other examples, architecture reifies financial arrangements, such as tax incentives and revenues, while forming icons of collective identity. At new megastructures like the Hudson Yards Redevelopment, state energy incentives have supported co-generation and campus-wide smart systems. These infrastructural landscapes entangle public and private investment, and offer new definitions of civic space. Other energy incentives have carved up other icons of New York City into microclimates thanks to tenant sub-metering, or localized environmental controls. Meanwhile, Federal Weatherization Assistant Projects (WAP) smuggles energy-related funding into public housing projects to support maintenance and building upgrades, in the process relining and re-skinning buildings layer by layer. In each

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case, architects reconstruct relationships between resources and publics, grappling with nostalgic images of stability, shaping the faces of authority, and organizing bureaucracies to shape standards.

This book is a cross between a voter guide and an architectural handbook. But instead of offering guidance, it frames debates to inform the decisions affecting our environment. Like *Architectural Graphic Standards*, it illustrates a variety of techniques and protocols at work in contemporary design. Like a voter guide, it frames conflicts and affiliations among various energy agendas to inform the decisions and actions we take. This guide invites designers to take a stand on the issues while recognizing contradictions and opposing perspectives to this approach. In some cases, differences are irreconcilable, and frame choices that must be made through informed, public debate. In other cases, new alliances or new positions between previously entrenched positions can be found and activated. In this way, the role of the designer is not just to take sides but to reframe the very terms of debate.

CONCLUSION

As a site for action, the guidebook wavers between standardization and the proliferation of new ideas. It veers between the amelioration of anxiety and its closer examination. So while the guidebook runs the risk of subduing the manifesto's revolutionary tendencies, it can also offer a more nuanced examination of the contradictions behind such a revolution. The guidebook is thus propped delightfully between reflection and action.

The guidebook can thus offer us insight into the ever-evolving world of research in architecture. The guidebook wavers between the models of knowledge-production and the spectacle of demonstration. In the first model, one maintains rigor in its own form of documentation: This science-based model is a source of power for the researcher, and promises greater relevance by offering value to clients, collaborators and peers. In the latter, the lab tests exceptions to the rule—possibilities that emerge once laws, market dynamics or unaccountable variables are suspended—and wields influence by projecting images previously unthinkable., but it also—as with the witchcraft described by Dutta—helps to imagine. Ultimately, of course, the lab as model and lab as state of exception have never been very different. As we learn from the history of 'demonstration,' protocols of proof have been constructed for the sake of public reception, and are defined within institutions of consensus-building.