

The Commoning of Architectural Representation

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COMMONING REPRESENTATION

The notion of the commons invites us to reconsider the ownership of architectural space. But is this reconsideration limited to the physical space of architecture? How can we think of ideas of ownership, stewardship, and access through the lens of architectural representation? Further, can we cultivate a fresh audience for architecture by divorcing the representation of it from both the internal motivations and biases of the designers and the disciplinary baggage and esoteric values often embedded in architectural representation? By viewing the idea of the commons not through physical space but through the representation and imaging of the built environment, we may see possible opportunities for building a more universal and inclusive relationship to design.

SAME DIFFERENCE

A recent exhibition by our studio, *SPORTS*, entitled *Same Difference*, presented at the College of Architecture & Environmental Design at Kent State University, explores these questions and is an explicit experiment in the boundaries and role of representation. The exhibition presents four public space projects (three built and one unbuilt) by *SPORTS* through the varied perspectives of a diverse group of twelve visual and non-visual artists from outside of the discipline of architecture. Given that each project is a public space, they are inherently embedded with ideas of authorship, ownership, and interpretation. The exhibition intends to pick up and extend these themes.

The exhibition consists of eight visual (drawing, painting, video art) and four written (short stories, poetry) contributions, each representing one of the four projects by *SPORTS*. Artists were not given a specific directive, but rather, were charged simply with re-presenting the projects through their own reading and their unique medium. By “outsourcing” this representation, the exhibition is intended to distill multiple, parallel perspectives and narratives of the featured projects, both critical and celebratory, therefore dissociating it from

any singular understanding of ours (the designers), towards something more pluralistic. This notion is reinforced by having multiple artists re-present the same project; each project was portrayed by two visual artists and one writer in the exhibition.

The resulting work presented in the exhibition, ranging widely in size, medium and type, privileges these external perspectives as a way of revealing alternative interpretations and unfamiliar framing of the projects. For example, for the project *City Thread*, a public space located in Chattanooga, Tennessee, one artist, José Figueroa, produced a visually saturated, messy and exuberant child-like painting of people interacting in the space and included annotation of conversations, concepts and themes of these interactions, while another artist, Ana Galvañ, depicted a nine-panel comic-like depiction of shapes and 3D forms interacting with the geometry of the designed structure. Though each of the two artists were representing the same project, the former emphasized the richness of everyday life inhabiting the space, while the latter focused on the geometric logics and formal qualities – each distilling, prioritizing, and speculating on different qualities they saw in the project.

While all twelve pieces in the exhibition re-present the four public space projects in ways that highlight each artists’ own individual and personal perspectives, the artists were not required to celebrate the projects, but rather, the exhibition charge prioritized authentic readings even if indifferent or critical. This is particularly evident in some of the written work. A poem written by Rage Hezekiah depicts an emotional and personal moment of reflection overlaid on the atmospheric experience of the project *Runaway*. In contrast, the teenage protagonist in Dominica Phetteplace’s science fiction short story sardonically comments that the project *Heart of Gold* “was pink and green and covered in life size slinkies...They looked like silly straws. To look upon then was to desire a soda.” The projects are made vulnerable to the varied interpretations, seeking a more “authentic” representation of how architecture might actually be perceived or experienced in the world by individual members of the public when compared with our (the designers) curated images, drawings, and renderings.



Figure 3. Painting re-presenting *City Thread* by José Figueroa

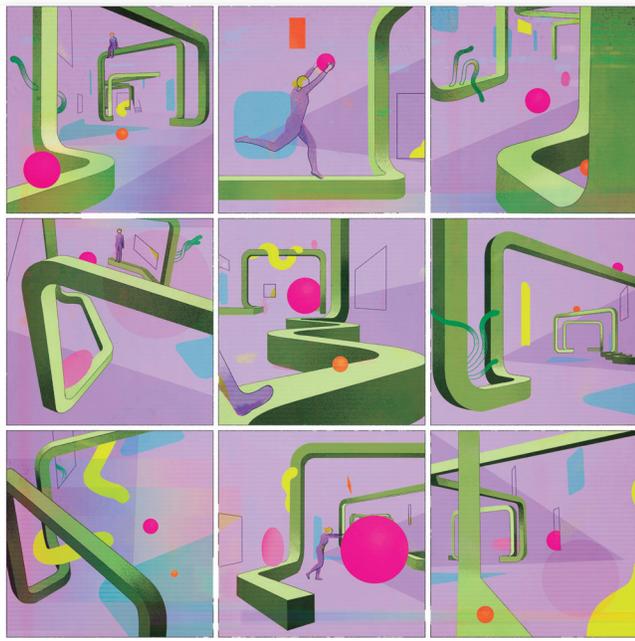


Figure 4. Comic book panels re-presenting *City Thread* by Ana Galvañ

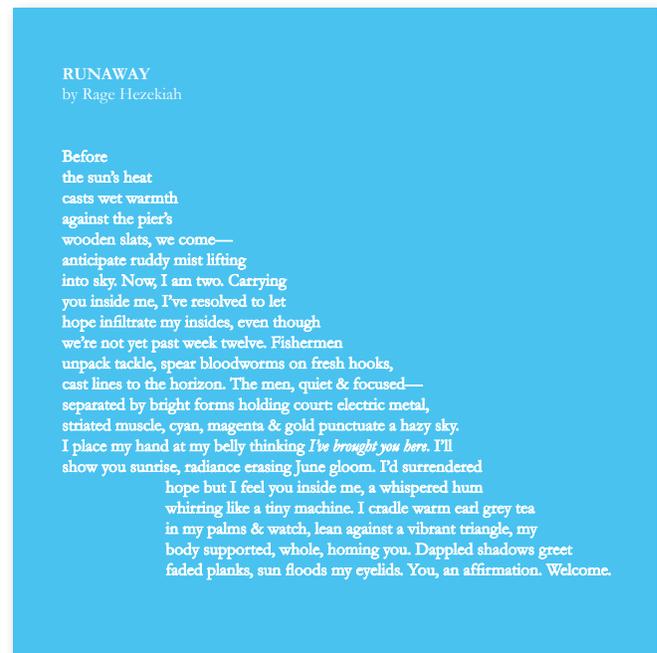


Figure 5. Poem re-presenting *Runaway* by Rage Hezekiah

Additionally, the exhibition presents architectural ideas in more familiar and accessible vehicles (comic books, short stories, etc), creating new entry points for a non-architect public. While abstract models of the four projects serve as a formal and spatial reference point in the exhibition, little additional information is included in order for the work of the twelve artists to be the primary information about the projects. A visitor's experience of the exhibition, then, would parallel one's experience in the real world - an experience without singular explanation of intent. Ultimately, by packaging the projects in these extra-disciplinary instruments that are authored by others, the exhibition challenges existing notions of authorship, audience, and access in architecture.

The exhibition builds off earlier instances of alternative or unconventional representations of the built environment - architects like Archigram¹, Wes Jones², and Jimenez Lai³, among others, have all utilized comics to provide a narrative or graphic commentary to their work. Similarly, Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine's *Koolhaas Houselife*⁴, which documents the day-to-day activities of the housecleaner at OMA's *Maison à Bordeaux*, attempts to illustrate the strange intersection of capital-A Architecture and needs and protocols of ordinary life. Both of these examples represent architectural ideas through new lenses, the former through its medium, the latter through the lens of the user. What is unique to this exhibition is the combination of the two approaches, a focus on both the vehicle

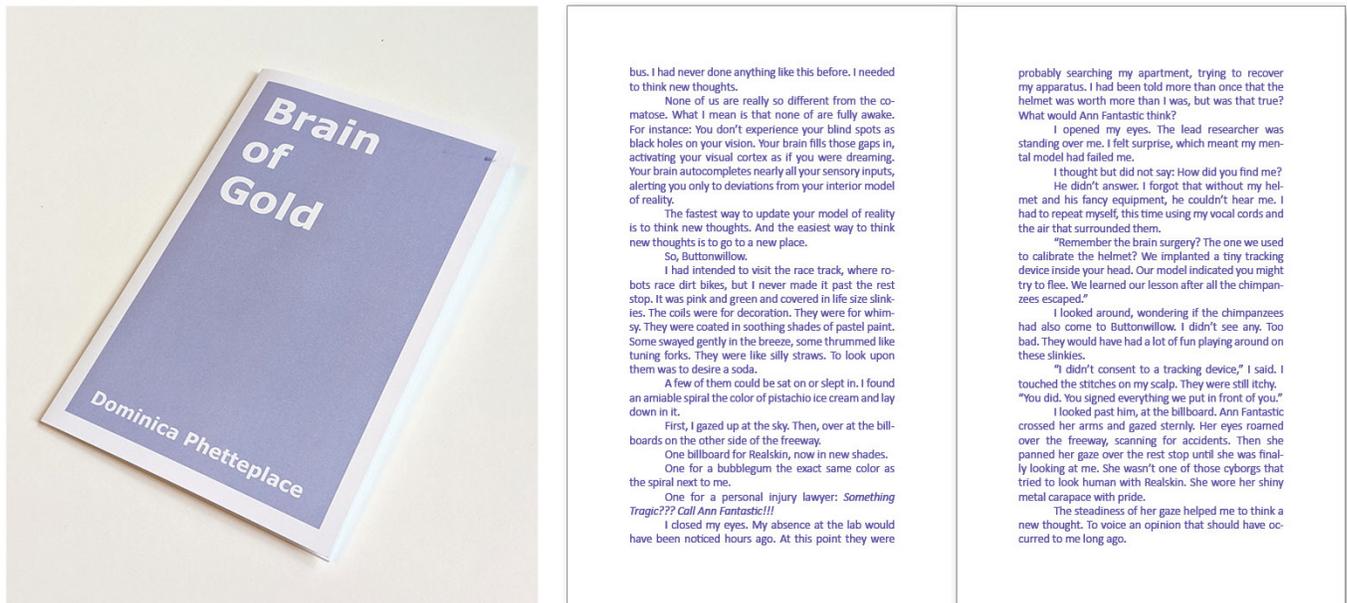


Figure 6. Science fiction short story re-presenting *Heart of Gold* by Dominica Phetteplace

and the perspective to disrupt the often formulaic nature of architectural representation.

As architects, we have significant ambitions relative to what we feel is possible through good design, but none of it matters if we cannot build a wide and engaged audience and bring a multitude of productive perspectives to the table. This exhibition presents a way in which architects may challenge the current insular nature of architectural representation with alternative modes of communication and representation to both extract different readings of architecture as well as reach a larger, more general audience. In so doing, the narrative around architecture becomes less top down, allowing for new voices, and a greater number of them, to participate.

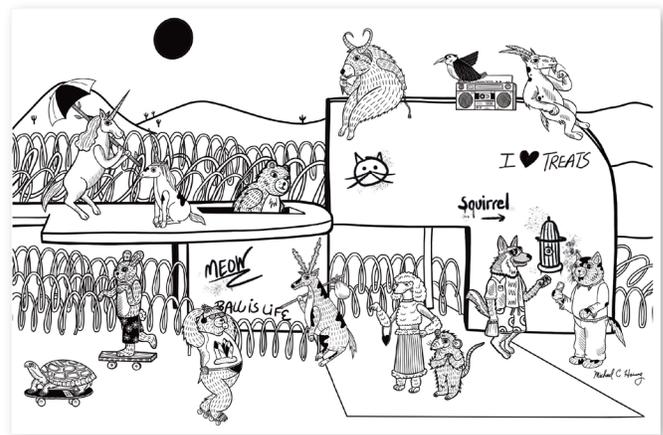


Figure7. Illustration re-presenting *Heart of Gold* by Mike Hsiung

ENDNOTES

1. Amazing Archigram 4: Zoom Issue (May, 1964)
2. Wes Jones, Meet the Nelsons (L.A. Forum for Architecture and Urban Design, 2010)
3. Jimenez Lai, Citizens of No Place: An Architectural Graphic Novel (Princeton Architectural Press; Illustrated edition, 2012)
4. Koolhaas Houselife, Directed by Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine (2013)

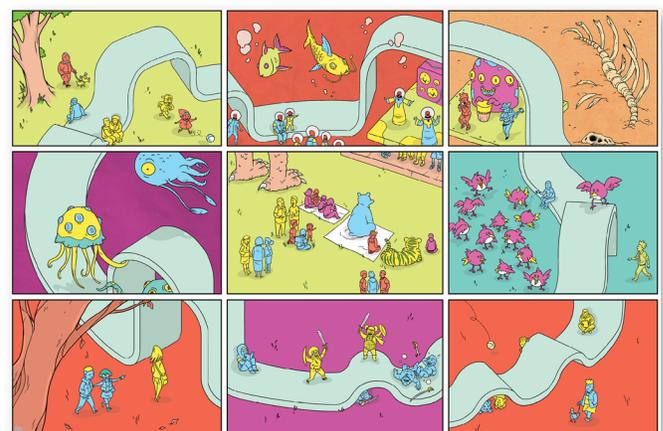


Figure 8. Comic Book Panels re-presenting *Rounds* by Dave Crosland