

The Post-Digital Picturesque: Sinister Dishevelment?

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Sidney K. Robinson's 1988 essay, *The Picturesque: Sinister Dishevelment*, critically reframes the English Picturesque through the social and political implications of compositional strategies and mechanisms used for landscape design. Most critically, Robinson identifies sinister qualities of the Picturesque in the hidden power, or power in reserve, that gentlemanly landscape designers used to create scenes in the landscape that only they could discern as having been either labored upon or the result of natural decay. Today some post-digital practices have continued the digital project in a picturesque mode similar to these historic landscape designers. These designers and practices obscure authorial labor in their work with simulations of disorder or material decay. Labor that was evident and abundant in designs of earlier digital work is rendered ambiguous. Viewers are left unsure if the computer-simulated these scenes using computational physics or if a person has directly authored the digital model or image. Computational power is intentionally rendered ambiguous. For these practices, digital expertise and labor have continued, but it is not clear where the computer's agency stops and starts in the design process. The labor required to produce this sort of work appears indiscernible to all but the expert viewer when, in fact, the practices spared no effort in creating the appearance of a casual lack of labor. Only those knowledgeable of the post-digital techniques used to generate this work can discern where labor has been applied, creating a novel form of sinister dishevelment. Today's post-digital picturesque does not protect an aristocratic elite as those of the 18th century did with parlor talk but continues the digital project with intentionally limited discourse while sidestepping its excess. The reuse of Sidney Robinson's essay and a comparison to alternative post-digital practices provides a lens to understand these post-digital picturesque practices and the implications of concealing the indexes of labor.

INTRODUCTION

Originally published in the Spring 1988 issue of MIT's *Thresholds* journal, Sidney K. Robinson's essay *The Picturesque: Sinister*

Dishevelment reframed the mechanisms of English Picturesque compositional strategies through their social and political implications.¹ In the article, Robinson contrasts systems against naturalism. Formal systems of evaluating and creating beauty were opposed to Nature or naturalism and what Edmund Burke termed the sublime, the awe-inspiring power or fear of the non-human world. The sublime power of Nature became intentionally ambiguous in its relation to the extent of human compositional effort and notions of beauty needed to compose a landscape. Today, as the digital turn becomes historicized and a post-digital discourse develops, many insights from this criticism of the pictorial organization of material can again find relevance. Robinson's analysis of an aesthetic movement from over 200 years ago provides a tool to find the edges and inner workings of this new post-digital work by examining the labor evident (or not) in it and making clear the difficult political and cultural positions at play.

The digital turn is broadly understood as the period in architecture when computational tools dominated architectural thinking and technology. During this period, digital tools for design and fabrication possessed a raw undisciplined power for architects. They helped produce a technological sublime not unlike that which the Romantic period ascribed to Nature or the non-human world. Fear and awe of digital tools and those wielding them drove this sublime effect as the power of digital tools was not easily understood in relation to the amount of labor utilized in their application. Hernan Diaz Alonzo, and his firm HDA-X, are exemplary of this work, meant to overwhelm the viewer with mastery, excess, and awe of new and novel digital tools and the labor needed to achieve these qualities.

According to Architectural historian Mario Carpo, the digital turn effectively ended in 2012, after which enough time had passed that the initial fear and awe of digital waned.² After this time, the discipline could begin historicizing the impact of computers and computation.³ Sublime fear of digital tools gave way to the post-digital context of today, where both the overwhelming ubiquity of computation and skepticism of the computer's unquestioned power are equally prevalent. Broadly, two specific framings of the post-digital stand out: Marios Carpo's notion of digital quitters and Adam Fure's self-aware reframing of the post-digital as an extension of the

digital.^{4,5} A historical parallel between a softening fear of Nature in the Picturesque and a softening fear of the digital in post-digital rhetoric is hard to ignore. This parallel helps frame the post-digital, particularly when related to an older and more established analysis of the historic Picturesque.

Carpo and Fure frame two opposite reactions to the digital, both inadvertently related to methods of indexing or showing labor in the visual composition of a work. Carpo describes a series of practices that characteristically reperform Enlightenment beauty using digital analogs of physical tools, with clear articulations of the labor used in producing work. Alternatively, Fure describes methods pushing the digital forward by obscuring and making a mess of the labor utilized in its production of design work - a reperformance of the techniques of the historical Picturesque. In this second set of practices, when the digital turn is historicized and compared to the post-digital, a clear parallel to the period of transition from the Romantic to the Picturesque can be made, particularly by examining the delineation of labor evident in visual composition. The Picturesque: Sinister Dishevelment critically frames the historic Picturesque as fundamentally about how labor is selectively exposed and hidden in visual composition. Reusing or borrowing this criticism is useful to examine the post-digital picturesque, parse parallels, and note a possible next step for contemporary digital design.

EXPOSED LABOR

How the labor used to create a work is expressed via tools and composition will form the larger arc of comparison between the historical Picturesque and what will be termed here as the post-digital picturesque. Human labor power is communicated via indexes in architectural images and models. These indexes of labor are a form of liveliness. Renaissance painting has historically identified liveliness with the ability of a representation to evoke life through the quality of its image and its similarity in appearance to lived reality. The concept has more recently been expanded by Art Critic Isabella Graw to include the labor expended upon a work as seen in indexical signs of that labor.⁶ As Graw further states, this definition of liveliness can be seen in most other art forms, such as the scratches on the film of experimental film.⁷ Following this model, Graw's definition of liveliness helps discuss the models and images architects create. Liveliness in painting, sculpture, or our case, digital models and images can be understood as the index of human agency in an artifact. This agency can be the clear mark made by the body or subject used in the artifact's creation or the ability of the artifact to convey authorial agency.⁸ Labor is implicit in this definition of liveliness as the value of the work is related to the actual human life expended during the artifact's creation. The viewer sees this indexed labor as a sign. Just as this labor can take many forms in art, such as brush strokes or carved lines, so too can it take many forms in digital architecture, such as

manipulated control points on NURBS surfaces, drawn lines, text notes, dimensions, constructed seams, joints, etc.

OVERWHELMING LABOR / DIGITAL ROMANTICISM

Hernan Alanzo Diaz and his firm, HDA-X, are champions of the digital project and its expression of labor. Their work has an exuberant excess of authorial agency, and their digital models and images appear to have been tirelessly labored upon. The amount of labor needed to complete the forms and images of a given work is overwhelming, if not impossible, to comprehend by looking at the visual indexes of labor present in the finished work. The abundant curvilinear digital forms composed of millions of manipulated mesh control points indicate millions of mouse clicks in Maya to articulate. Mouse clicks, like brush strokes, can indicate human effort in the final form of a work made legible to the viewing subject. The sublime effect HDA-X's work has upon the viewer comes not from a roughly understandable amount of work presented in the final form, but instead awe at the power of the digital tools and their practitioners. Labor in such work verges upon naturalism as the raw power of the forms suggests an overabundance or inexhaustible supply of labor power.

In painting, a similar effect is exemplified in the work of the early romantic painter of Fredrik Turner, who attempted to capture the raw power of nature in paint by making the number of brush strokes more evident and numerous.⁹ The contradiction in both Turner's and Hernan's work is that while no labor is concealed, the images created verge upon chaos and naturalism. Labor is not hidden from the nonexpert eye in the images of Hernan's work, as each formal articulation is indicated, like a "pointing finger" to "the absent author who seems to be somewhat physically present."¹⁰ It may not be entirely possible to determine precisely how much labor was used in creating Hernan's architecture; clicks don't index as easily as brush strokes, but there is no doubt that it is a significant amount. There is also no doubt that the projects could accept more. Here the labor used to create the models and rendered images is seemingly limitless in scale, and this appearance of limitless digital labor capacity creates scenes whose effect mirrors that of sublime naturalism. The message is to fear computational prowess and power, as we once did nature, and understand that an infinite and inexhaustible pool of labor power exists behind the work.

CLEAR LABOR / DIGITAL BEAUTY

One response to an excessive digital condition returns to pre-digital modes of architectural representation, reacting against the display of limitless labor and computational power. The reintroduction of renaissance concepts of beauty and easily indexed labor can be found in the disciplined work of Fala Atelier and Office Kersten Geers David van Serven (KGDVS). Both firms have created a proliferation of images using digital counterparts

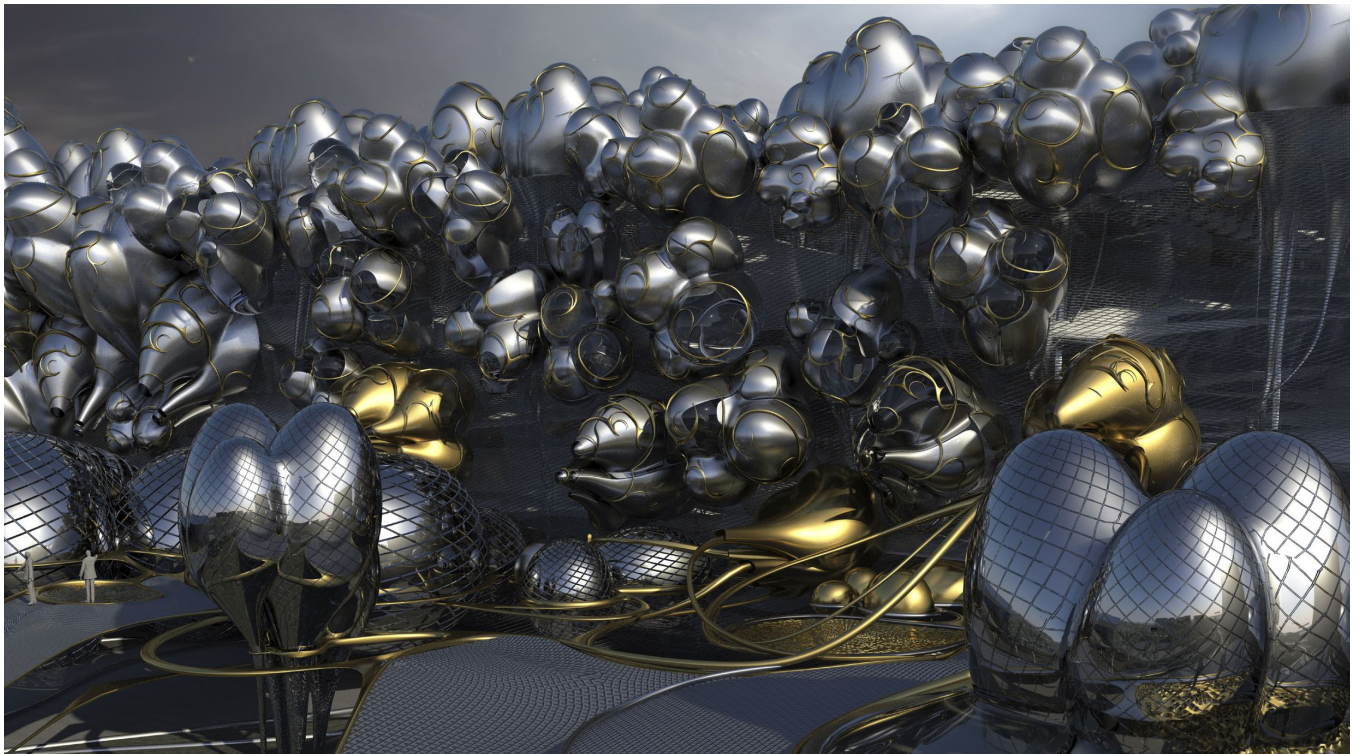


Figure 1. Excessive labor expressed in the digital model as articulated manipulation of digital geometry. Helsinki National Library. HDA-X



Figure 2. Collage with clear seams and minimally applied labor. United States Mexico Border Crossing. OFFICE KGVDS

to predigital tools. AutoCAD and Photoshop recreate representational modes that would have previously been handmade, such as collage, one-point constructed perspective, and the geometrically constructed plan. The amount of labor needed to produce images in this mode is visually evident as a form of liveliness with clear historical antecedents and evidence of the presence of a hand or subject crafting the artifacts.

Office KGDVS creates digital collages with apparent seams, in contrast to their long-time collaborator photographer Bas Princen's seamless photoshop collages, who utilizes the extensive capabilities of photoshop as a digital tool to hide seams expressly.¹¹ The seams are intentional and necessary to index the labor spent on these images. Additionally, the practice states that their early projects only used Photoshop and one other software, AutoCAD, a simple digital drafting tool in 2D. Little of the program's computational power outside the copy and undo command are brought into the design process. Resources are not hidden in the images of the work, and KGDVS's crisp plan drawings and exposed edge collage representations stand out clearly from the world surrounding them, like the formal geometric gardens which predated the Romantic period. Fala Atelier works similarly through plans and collaged one-point perspectives. Most of their work is enacted upon residential interiors, where they overlay and manipulate existing conditions in photoshop from a singular viewpoint with new material textures, plants, and objects to make an improved scene. Spaces are refigured and wholly coated with material textures in photoshop, utilizing constructed one-point perspectives to improve upon cosmetic notions of beauty.¹² Interestingly, both practices discuss their working methods and representations as containing minimal effort and labor. Fala so they can work on projects and competitions quickly, and KGDVS as a stated desire for thrift of effort. KGDVS said they are often asked to provide more project images, to which the response is, they do not exist.¹³

Amy Kulper explains in her lecture *Architecture's Digital Turn and the Advent of Photoshop* that Photoshop is a program containing a suite of digital analogs to physical tools or processes.¹⁴ From Amy's analysis, practices such as Fala Atelier or KGDVS are not so much post-digital as they are practicing the digital in one of its earliest forms. Using minimal digital tools to speed up access to images or to have the ability to undo mistakes only slightly obscures our ability to glean the labor indexed into their images. Once completed by hand, the performance of representational modes in this way maintains the marks, seams, and edges analogous to their physical counterparts, making the understanding of labor clear.

AMBIGUOUS LABOR / DIGITAL PICTURESQUE

Mirroring the transition from Romanticism to Picturesque landscape aesthetics during the 18th century, some of today's post-digital practitioners maintain architectural agency for

computational design tools while attempting to obscure the extent of the labor needed to produce that work. The authorial effort is camouflaged, and no mental labor is solicited from the casual viewer, while those "in the know" have refined discussions of aesthetics. Access to deeper analysis is limited to a small group versed in the rhetorical framework and specialized tools or techniques. For the uninitiated, the work's casual appearance obscures the labor required.

The Los Angeles Design Group (LADG) uses simulated digital physics engines, such as Maya, to create various studies of objects organized informally by dropping them. This process arrives at organizations using preexisting objects by what appears to be noncompositional means. In this case, aesthetic criteria are needed to choose from a seemingly infinite array of organizational options for the objects dropped. The simulated models that appear to one outside this process as a casual arrangement are evaluated and chosen through a developed connoisseurship and expertise. Was this arrangement simply dropped once, or was it dropped as a computational simulation in a particular way, many times, with controllable variables and evaluated with a particular aesthetic?

Sydney Robinson notes a similar practice in the historic Picturesque, "The picturesque is a physical arrangement that looks as though no expenses had been paid when in fact, no expense has been spared."¹⁵ For both the LADG's piles and the Picturesque described by Robinson, the authorial effort is camouflaged, and no mental labor is solicited from the causal viewer. The only participants who can access the work are that small group versed in the day's discussions. Digital tools from the earlier digital turn are used to ambiguous effect without becoming overwhelming and without being made apparent to the viewer. Maybe the objects were just apathetically dropped?

David Eskenazi of D.esk similarly approaches computational tools. D.esk's work repetitively simulates paper material crumpling between multiple media and scales. A viewer is unsure how the paper walls of the designs will crumple and if the crumpling results from the paper's behavior or the author's curated simulation of paper failing. Are they crumpled as desktop models, human-size dollhouses, or skyscrapers? When describing forms scaled with material properties to small and large-scale buildings, Eskenazi says:

...the paper slumps are both pre-and postdigital in that the physical models incorporate digitally simulated paper slumps and actual paper. The effect of these models is to make it debatable whether these are geometries we can anticipate in the building or if the models simply denote the proposed material of the building.¹⁶

- David Eskenazi, *Tired ... and Behaving Poorly*

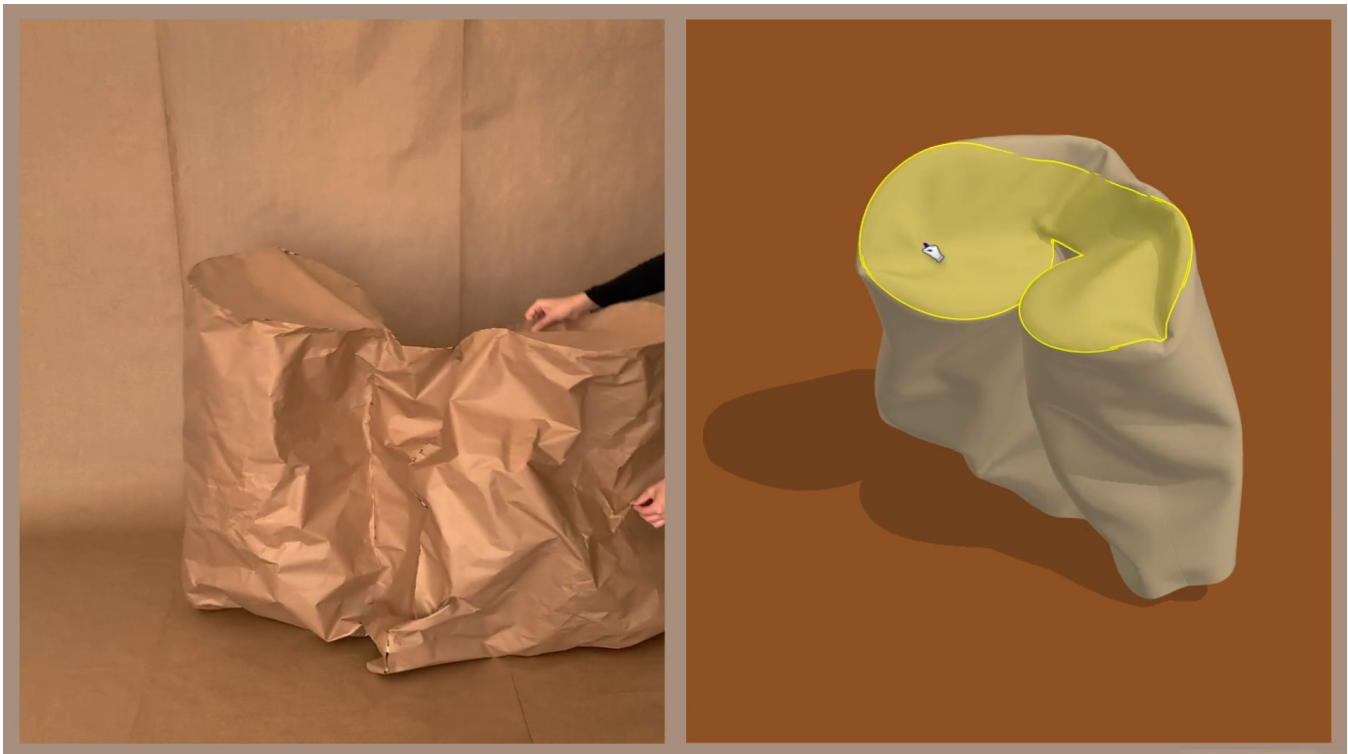


Figure 3. Two Scrolls: A Gravity Simulation Comparison. D.esk.

Simulation and dissimulation work hand in hand, blurring the line between material behavior, scaled material behavior, and scenographic material behavior. What is coy about the article title, *Tired... and Behaving Poorly*, is that the implication of poor behavior is given to the material when, in fact, this obscures the authorship and labor used in choosing how and when to make the relationship between material and simulation legible. Closer to the sublime than the beautiful, the formation of these crumples is opaque to most, if not all, viewers. What looks to be 1:1 material failure could be a simulation, a scaled material failure, or a combination of both. Crumpling is consistent, but the production of the crumple is willfully ambiguous. Deliberately limiting architectural discourse to those in the know finds a corollary in the historic Picturesque. As recounted by Robinson:

Price and Knight argued that the picturesque was not accessible without studying painting and reading books. It took education and practice to look at a scene that would ordinarily suggest trimming, painting, and fixing up and to find its neglect perfect. The point was not to be taken for a poor man but for someone in control of the landscape.¹⁷

- Sidney K Robinson, *The Picturesque: Sinister Dishevelment*

D.esk may be behaving poorly, but they are not poor. The work crumples and simulates failure with perfect neglect and the studied expertise of one who is educated and practiced.

Cracks, Crumples, & Piles: How Power is Hidden

The digital picturesque uses the computer solely to create something whose digital prowess is only understood by the connoisseur. We can find complementary sensibilities and modes of action in the irregular visual structure of the picturesque, where the aesthetic work of the designer is hidden and expanded all at once: power kept hidden in reserve. The seam between the wild and the manipulated is unclear, and unauthored landscape is often appropriated into picturesque composition's tableaux, extending and blurring the extent of the designer's control.

One means of allowing the obscuring of a composition's edges was to allow them to erode and decay literally. In the formal gardens that preceded the Picturesque, clear distinctions are drawn between the site of human effort and entropic decay or weathering. A decaying or cracking wall within the manicured landscape would not be tolerated. Yet, the Picturesque's more informal and loose edges need the crack in the building's wall to theatrically stage the landscape without neatly framing it. So what then is to keep the untrained eye from mistaking a genuine crack in a wall due to the unchecked passage of time from one placed by the architect or designer as a means of theatrical staging? To quote Robinson's essay:

Neglect or accident are usually the result of not being able to intervene and deflect the progress of nature's way. Not having



Figure 4. A Cast of Things (Osterhofen). The LADG.

the money or the time to correct the depredations of gravity, water, growth, and decay is one thing. To cultivate them is another. A crumbling, water stained wall on a poor man's hut may strike the eye exactly the same as the garden house in a gentleman's picturesque composition, but they are worlds apart. And power masquerading as weakness immediately raises suspicions. Being able to do more and choosing to do less involves a profound dissimulation.¹⁸

- Sidney K Robinson, *The Picturesque: Sinister Dishevelment*

Concealing one's thoughts, feelings, or character is often necessary to negotiate strong polemics which oppose one another. Existing between such poles without directly challenging them also requires operating in a minor mode that negotiates and replies but seldom proposes a major position for others to challenge outright. Piling, when done in a picturesque manner, does not include anything and everything but curates the pile, composing the parts into an informal composition through an application of an aesthetic and possibly even a notion of beauty. Crumpling works less as an overall compositional tool and more as a detail that changes the demeanor of a form. In D.esk's work, a precise and expert version of crumpling, and in LADG's work, a precise and expert version of piling (or dropping), has been developed as a site of discussion between experts, digital simulations, and material behavior.

The practitioners of this digital picturesque find themselves in a similar political position to those in the historic Picturesque described by Robinson. Each has the power of the computer to organize material but to show this power as virtuosity would be

as offensive as the totalitarian tendencies of the politicians of Price and Rempton's day. Each tries to maintain architectural discourse without saying as much and by speaking to a small group of people. Highly curated simulations of physics require expert digital skills. They could easily be used to produce a sublime effect like that in the earlier digital turn, yet the LADG and D.esk's work appears casual to the nonexpert. Controlling the simulated natural forces and either curating or authoring the forces' behavior themselves removes the aesthete from the realm of the non-expert. Acceptance of a known condition, like a crack in a wall, that appears authored by neglect but is actually authored resubjects the non-expert viewer to the control as they are expressly kept from accessing that which they view aesthetically, intellectually, or discursively.

CONCLUSION

The digital picturesque examples discussed here need a parlor-talk discourse argued among a few. And while the products often appear to be undesigned or non-composed, not all piles are architectural piles. While an ever-expanding digital toolbox is available to a larger and larger population of architects, it is the "gentlemanly elite," the Uvedale Price and Henry Repton's of today, which seek to maintain a sense of control over an ever-expanding body of undisciplined digital-making through a mixed aesthetic. While the picturesque sought to retain a camouflaged control over the landscape as a domain of hidden power for the landed class escaping from the rapidly growing middle class of London, the digital picturesque hides digital techniques behind the informal yet highly curated organizations because everyone has access to Photoshop and Rhino.

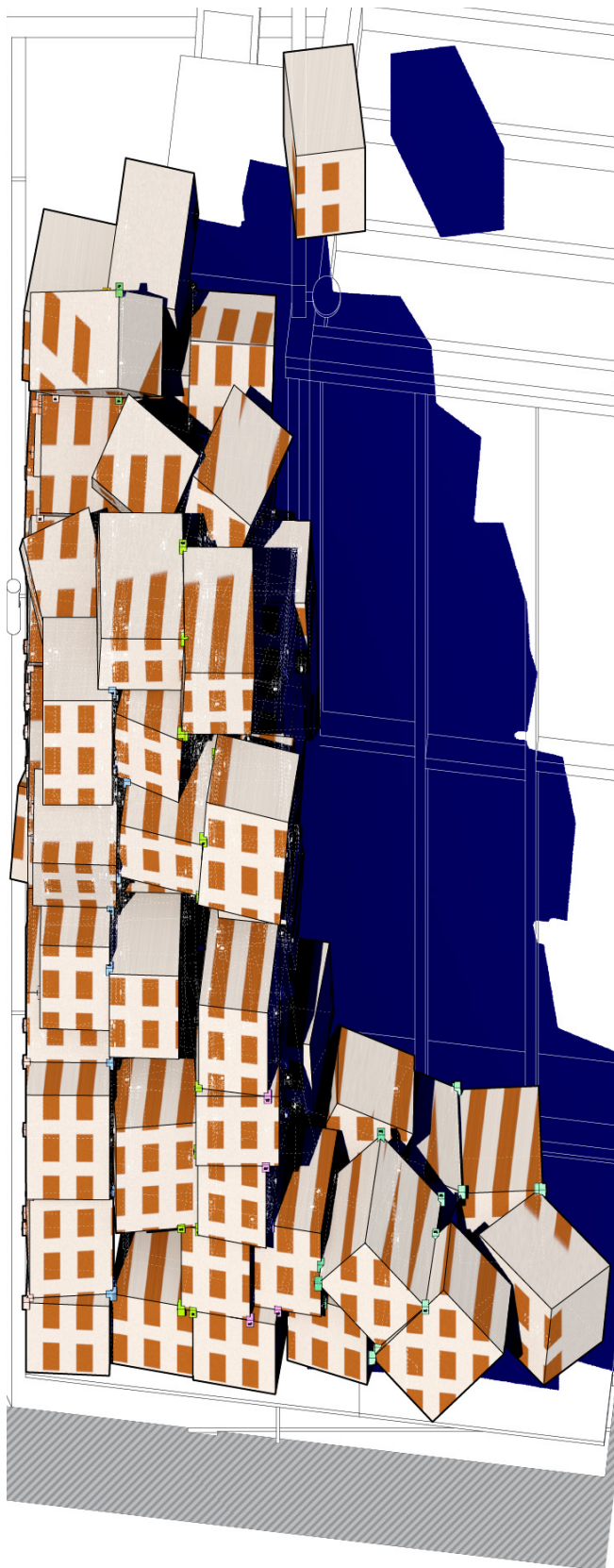


Figure 5. Color-coded guide to placement of 3D prints. MR Studio.

Even toleration and incompleteness can become oppressive when the abstract exercise of power takes its clue from the artificial embodied by the picturesque and keeps the system obscured behind a benign image of informality and ease. As the isolated individual expects to be addressed in the relaxed posture of the minor mode, the picturesque becomes the ideal mode for manipulation and dissembling. Just as a cracked wall looks the same on the peasant's cottage and the gentleman's garden house but is totally different in meaning, the picturesque was either revolutionary or counterrevolutionary depending where one stood. It justifies the way things are by reassuring the country gentlemen that they are in league with nature while they were at the same time exploiting the land and the people. It undermines stability, on the other hand, by its love of irregularity and abrupt variation.¹⁹

- Sidney K Robinson, *The Picturesque: Sinister Dishevelment*

What appears informal is, in fact, discursive, and this discourse has allowed architects to talk amongst themselves, curating a range of techniques for deception. This limited series of example practices frame a loose reperformance of the historical transition from the Romantic period into the Picturesque. The briefly outlined post-digital picturesque practices discussed hold onto and continue the digital project while redeveloping notions of commonly held aesthetic value in a non-totalizing system. Robinson's article feared parlor talk and visual methods that maintained an aristocracy hidden in plain view in the landscape of England in the 1700s. What is faced today in architecture and culture more broadly is the production of too many images without discourse. The terrain of the digital architect has been unenclosed with the access of digital tools to the masses, which once drove the digital turn. While the aspirations of the post-digital picturesque might not be as sinister as those of the Picturesque, opening the discussion to a broader audience or leaving breadcrumbs for the non-expert to find the labor in the visual mess could be the next step for contemporary digital and post-digital design.

One final project exemplifies this approach. Jon Rieke of MR Studio proposes an alternative path forward in his 2019 Schidlowski Emerging Faculty Fellowship exhibit at Kent State University. In a small corner of the exhibit, *the Developed Surface*, MR Studio drops and piles boxes that reveal the labor of their creation with indexes of their authorship. Precisely crafted and located 3d printed joints connect the pile's composition, exposing the scenographic artifice of the loose pile as a tool of ambiguous labor. In this work, digitally derived joints hold the messy arrangement in place and a texture map covers the entire pile of boxes without regard to orientation, ignoring the randomness of the pile and making apparent authorial effort and control, even to the nonexpert. The connection



Figure 6. 3D prints holding together an informal pile of boxes in *teh Developed Surface*.MR Studio.

details and texture map are in the service of a labored-upon pile, working discreetly upon the detail and on the surface.

Manicured cracks, tended crumples, and composed piles hide control by making labor's role ambiguous in the presented artifact as an index. We must ask ourselves: to what service is labor and labor power concealed? The historic Picturesque strove to maintain the elite status of those in control of the land through an aesthetic project that hid the power of authorship from all but the educated viewer. The post-digital picturesque, as described here, extends the digital project yet bounds its excessive application of labor. Discourse is reinfused through the selective application of aesthetic criteria in digital work. A messy middle path is created between a digital romantic and a return to outright notions of beauty. Digital tools themselves cannot and will not form a discourse the same way they once did during the digital turn, but their application to discrete problems might be sites of discussion for small groups of experts. On the one hand, this is sinister elitism, yet on the other, it seems that parlor talk can itself have an index of labor that opens these works to a larger audience if the authors desire to do so. It is only a question of making the labor evident, if only in detail, and only for those willing to look.

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