Punning as Process

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The pun is a doubling of meaning, a layering on of content, communicating within communication. This paper reports on a recently opened exhibition of experiments into using syntactical arguments in design to investigate the double-faced quality of puns in language. Paranomasiac presents an exaggerated environment, a space of mixed metaphors and misaligned referents. Using the techniques of comedy and improvisation as alibi, it deliberately confuses scale, material, and identity in an effort to recontextualize the architectural exhibition as a productive contrivance. The layering of meaning present in wordplay is used to choreograph architectural effects. The projects collected in Paranomasiac send out feelers on the many fronts of linguistics, comedy performance, precedent, and humor theory to develop parameters for how architects might begin to talk about funny things in a serious way. This paper will outline propositions for operating with a punning sensibility in architecture, in particular in how the structure of the pun might be leveraged for the communication of architectural ideas.

> "True laxatives, puns help to loosen up costive thinking and speech."
> —Walter David Redfern, *Puns: Second Thoughts*

> "Puns are the ultimate example of . . . defunctionalization of language - that is the use of language for play, not for communication."
> —Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*

I love puns. There was no greater dinner-table triumph to be had when I was growing up than to elicit groans of mock horror with a quick pun. Those groans, what I see as the acknowledgment of the pun as a special kind of joke, as a little bit stupid or obvious or easy, are exactly why I think the pun contains a kernel of something productive – it operates in a couple of different registers.[1] This strategy is aligned with the first of Susan Sontag's Notes on Camp: "I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it. That is why I want to talk about it, and why I can."[2] I feel similarly about a study of puns. They are dumb and enthralling. They are a surface gesture, adjacent to communication, but never the main event. As I will elaborate, this sideshow position gives puns a bad rap but it also permits a special and very specific type of thinking to hide in plain sight. The intent of this paper is to outline a potential strategy for the architectural design process by examining the act of punning as read through findings in my recent exhibition, *Paranomasiac*.[3]

The objective in being so explicit about the roots of these design experiments is to offer them as preliminary test volleys of what I believe could and should be a larger disciplinary undertaking. Paranomasia is the rhetorical term for a pun, so the show *Paranomasiac* was a kind of tongue-in-cheek pathologization of the drive to find a way forward with the techniques and processes suggested by an analysis of punning. While literature on linguistics and translation has plumbed the possibilities of language destabilized by the punning act, the pun remains for most people so dumb that it goes unnoticed. My hope would be that with more study and attention, the pun and the unique structure of punning could be used by designers with nuance rather than as a clumsy punch line.

There are lots of different types of puns, and examples to dissect and scrutinize, but to return to Sontag's writing on camp again, punning might best be leveraged as a sensibility, as a willingness to entertain ideas about linguistic similarity and an openness to lateral thinking.[4] The punning sensibility, among other things, doesn't take itself too seriously, relishes the uncool, and laughs at its own jokes. The punning sensibility is not only the drive to think laterally between arbitrary signs as a way of loosening up the grip of sense- and meaning-making, it's also the un-self-conscious pleasure that is quickly followed by "pun intended."

In its most common form, a pun is a naturally occurring phenomenon, a play on the multiple meanings a word can have. Puns deal with *incidental* acts of signification, so they don't translate well. There's no reason why the word "saw" represents both the past tense of "to see" and also a tool with which to cut wood, but there is a functional contextual distance between the two senses that does a lot of the work of clarifying meaning. According to Catherine Bates, a professor at the University of Warwick in England, "puns destabilize [the] neat formulation," of a Saussurean linguistic model where "a signifier and a signified emerge from the otherwise undifferentiated, jumbled planes of sounds and ideas, joining together to form a sign."[5] She continues – "it is not that puns expose the arbitrariness of signification (every sign does that) but that puns reveal the discrimination of meaning to be a haphazard, approximate, and error-prone affair. A pun subverts the one-to-one relation between signifier . . . and signified."[6]

Bates also distinguishes between good and bad puns, where good ones tidily follow the rules of similarity and can be easily

Figure 1: The furnished environment of Paranomasiac. Banvard Gallery, The Knowlton School of Architecture, Columbus, OH, April 2018. Image courtesy of Phil Arnold, OSU.

and unproblemmatically resolved. The groaning response is reserved for the bad pun, the one that doesn't quite fit the mold or which displays too much of a stretch, too much ambition. Bates writes that this type of pun "offers an alarming glimpse of language gone out of control," which is perhaps the best possible defense of a pun in poor taste.[7]

Similarly, Derek Attridge, a Professor at the University of York, sees the pun as disrupting context, what we normally can rely on for clues about meaning when we're confronted with a sign that could point in multiple directions.[8] He sees the marginalization of the pun as a direct effect of its destabilizing the last vestige of linguistic certainty. He offers a scenario opposite from the pun, where "the more the context bears down upon the word, the less the word will quiver with signification; until we reach a fully determining context, under whose pressure the word will lie inert, pinned down, proffering its single meaning."[9] Attridge lauds the pun's blatant embrace of multiplicity when the specter of completely redundant signification is offered as an alternative.

The pun, perhaps because of the simplicity of its structure, turns out to have relevance in lot of disciplines. Translators unsurprisingly are curious about questions surrounding second and third meanings in statements and the utility or necessity for bringing them into new languages. How much does intent matter when a pun is identified in a source text, and how useful is it to try and capture incidental adjacencies or similarities? Dirk Delabastita, a professor of literary theory and translation studies in Belgium, has done a good deal of work in creating a taxonomy of puns and types of wordplay. For him, the aim is to make informed judgment calls about what turns of phrase find their way into a translated text and what elements in an original might seem less critical.

Delabastita categorizes puns by the components that form them, whether as homonyms – words that both sound and are spelled alike, as homophones – words that sound alike but are written differently, homographs – words that are spelled alike but don't sound the same, or as paronyms – words that narrowly miss fitting into one of the other categories but work because of their relative proximity.[10] It's this last category that presents the biggest challenge to the translator and also that is the basis for most of what Catherine Bates would call "bad" puns.

Ludwig Wittgenstein provides a philosophical perspective in his study of visual polysemy using the proto-illusion of the duck/rabbit drawing later taken up in an art historical context by Ernst Gombrich.[11] Wittgenstein identifies the moment of recognition for multiple figures within an image as one of sequential surprise, and because of that it's a special type of observation. He writes that "If you search in a figure (1) for another figure (2), and then find it, you see (1) in a new way. Not only can you give a new kind of description of it, but noticing the second figure was a new visual experience."[12]

Figure 2: The furnished environment of Paranomasiac. Banvard Gallery, The Knowlton School of Architecture, Columbus, OH, April 2018. Image courtesy of Phil Arnold, OSU.

The layering of observation acts here allows for a kind of bonus experience that in fact enhances the first by suggesting depth. I would argue that the duck/rabbit is a type of visual pun – a sign that can oscillate between two interpretations. Following Wittgenstein and Gombrich, the punning act's very instability offers the receiver a jolt. Its teetering between two poles keeps meaning flexible and introduces a certain level of excitement. Gombrich lauds ambiguity for keeping observers on their toes, more alert to the volleys of interpretive projection involved in all acts of image reading.[13]

Walter Redfern, pun scholar and booster, takes pains to differentiate the optical nature of the duck/rabbit illusion from the working of linguistic puns, which collapse multiple meanings onto a single sign. He argues that the duck/rabbit treads instead into the territory of trompe-l'oeil, an important distinction to be made for teasing apart the punning process as it applies to architecture.[14] This discussion of imagery and problems of signification is crucial for architects, who work within layers of established codes of representation. It is an area that a couple of the *Paranomasiac* experiments explore, particularly the use of hand-drawn elevations of furniture.

In the interior environment of the exhibition space, I provided furniture that, in the original working model, was indistinguishable from "real" furniture. In client projects, I often marvel at how tenuous the connection of drawings to the final product can be and how much trust and translation is required as a rule. In *Paranomasiac*, my fantasy was that I had drawn a legitimate set of sketch elevations, had them "reviewed and approved" and installed only for my hypothetical client to realize that there had been a serious mistake – everything was rendered in hand drawings affixed to cardboard easels. Per Gombrich, "In visual representation, signs stand for objects of the visible world, and these can never be 'given' as such. Any picture, by its very nature, remains an appeal to the visual imagination; it must be supplemented in order to be understood."[15] Not only is this not a pipe, there are many ways in which small adjustments of material or scale can radically alter any architectural manifestation, which is exactly how puns, relying so heavily on context to confirm meaning, can be mobilized.

And that's where a spec comes in – an enriched drawing with clearly defined ambitions. I was interested in addressing the role of trick images and optical illusions in the exhibition because those are so often associated with jokes and puns. The translation from two-dimensional figure-ground effects to three-dimensional physicality provided some room for complication. The Rubin's Vase rests on a balance between light and dark and the ability to alter one's own perception to, essentially, "see" different things in it at different times, much like the duck/rabbit. Using a tracing of a woman's profile, I produced a simple base spec – a single line rotated about a vertical axis.

Of course this was taking into account only the basic ingredients of the illusion. The lengths to which the problems of executing this spec in different materials became part of the punning riff for this experiment. Knowing the intended form,

Figure 3: A series of Rubin's Vases in varied materials, Paranomasiac. Banvard Gallery, The Knowlton School of Architecture, Columbus, OH, April 2018. Image courtesy of Phil Arnold, OSU.

the objective here was to arrive at it by a variety of means. I was producing a series of signifiers all leading back to a single signified. There are nine pieces in total, and each one came with its own tolerances and challenges. I came to understand the act of multiplication and the exercise of futility to be part of the punning comedy process.

Throughout the production of these experiments, I was reminded of Keller Easterling's call in the "design & money" issue of Thresholds to understand the role of the architect as "not that of an optimizer but that of a comedian."[16] It's an appetite for futility and effort that characterizes the drive to satisfy the "appeal to the visual imagination," that Gombrich lays out as the act of making images into something real. In contrast to the translator's fixation on transmission of content, psychoanalysis looks to alliterative wordplay for what it reveals about the player in a kind of forensic accounting. In his Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Freud derides puns as the "lowest form of verbal joke," as well as "the 'cheapest'" since they are so easy to concoct.[17] He writes that puns "make the least demand on the technique of expression," while the "play upon words proper makes the highest," though later on in the same chapter he goes on to describe a friend whose clear delight in punning makes up for the poor quality of his jokes.[18] Though his conclusion is somewhat lukewarm on puns – they can be funny and smart, but only if wielded by the right person in an entertaining way – Freud usefully points out that jokes and humor occur between people, that humor is an exchange that benefits both parties engaged. He calls the joke, "a double-dealing rascal who serves two masters at once. Everything in jokes that is aimed at gaining pleasure is calculated with an eye toward the third person, as though there were internal and unsurmountable obstacles to it in the first person."[19]

Because puns riff on observed correspondences often secondary to communication, they're perceived as corny and relatable – both very human characteristics. Cognitive Linguistics Researchers interested in Natural Language Generation have taken advantage of this fact, along with the formulaic construction of puns, to lend models of Artificial Intelligence a sense of spontaneity. Their aim is to use humor to make interactions with computers feel more natural by seeding conversation with the types of asides you might expect from a human. The categories of puns developed for this purpose, unlike those used by translators, have to do with reliable setup and delivery strategies. To deliver archetypal forms like the shaggy dog story, or question-and-answer variants of the knock-knock joke, a vast database of encoded word relationships is used to create self-contained punning jokes. The 2004 STANDUP (System to Augment Non-speaker's Dialogue Using Puns) program, for example, was designed to

Figure 4: A 3D printed Rubin's Vase in Paranomasiac. Banvard Gallery, The Knowlton School of Architecture, Columbus, OH, April 2018.
Image courtesy of the author.

Figure 3: A wall of vacation snapshots in Paranomasiac. Banvard Gallery, The Knowlton School of Architecture, Columbus, OH, April 2018. Image courtesy of Phil Arnold, OSU.

work with conversational input to produce spontaneous contextual jokes.[20]

Thinking about the way that AI was making use of rigid forms of humor generation, I created a mad-lib pattern exercise of my own for the show. Starting with a familiar William Morris pattern, I created a script that pulled the top ten most downloaded 3d models of the day from a variety of popular free-access websites. Just as the computational pun researchers were doing with punchlines, I scraped a finite database looking for correspondences to produce a repeatable effect. These patterns are assemblages of models downloaded from cults.com, google 3d warehouse, GrabCAD, and pinshape.com and arranged according to a prescribed logic. One unexpected result of this technique was the strangely differentiated characters it illustrates for each of these sites.

It was a primary fiction of *Paranomasiac* that all of the experiments fit together to form a kind of domestic scene in opposition to the typical exhibition. In this, I took what I think of as an FF&E approach, imbuing the Furniture, Fixtures, and Equipment with the conceptual content, and leaving what architecture there was – a skeletal frame for a house – more ambiguous. The pattern exercise naturally found its way onto a gigantic curtain at the back of the gallery and onto a tablecloth in the dining room area as well as onto clothing my assistant and I wore to the opening.

It was my intent with *Paranomasiac* to create an environment that's just ever so slightly off from something real. What might in another context be a wall of family photos taken on vacation appears confused and appeals to simultaneous readings in multiple scales. It's not quite obvious what the status of the model is, and where it feels like we might have become estranged from our own surroundings or those of the exhibition. The show presents an exaggerated environment, a place where metaphors mix and aren't entirely clear and where references are not directly or easily mapped onto one referent.

Looking at the way that translation, philosophy, art history, psychoanalysis, and cognitive linguistics have made use of different aspects of pun operation and pun structure, it's in fact surprising that architecture isn't already on board. The pun has indeed been proposed as a kind of syntactical framework for a research strategy, this present argument only extends it to design. Jonathan Culler suggests that the such a framework might take the shape of a "signifying cluster [that] works to bring together material for thought and to suggest structural relationships, curious turns."[21] He calls puns, "lively instances of lateral thinking, exploiting the fact that language has ideas of its own. Thinking that suspends familiar distinctions between the fortuitous or frivolous (accidental linguistic connections) and the serious of essential (substantive conceptual

connections) arguably has a chance of productivity denied to other procedures."[22] It's this productivity that I aim for in using punning as a process, a comfort with instability and a purposeful suspension of the drive for resolution. Second, it is to inject the recognition of ambiguous intent into our understanding of space and authorship. There are things that I as a designer am not conscious of embedding into my work but which are nonetheless there and read or experienced as a part of it.[23]

While the projects of Paranomasiac aim toward an embrace of a particular type of lateral thinking based on injecting humor's strategies into the design process, my argument is rooted in the fact that we all already know how to do this, we are all unwitting pun experts. Returning to one of Sontag's last "Notes": "Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character.' . . . . Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying."[24] I believe that that same kind of enjoyment can be found when operating in the punning sensibility.

ENDNOTES

1. I am indebted to Dr. David Kleinberg for his encouragement of, appetite for, and support of extreme flights of punning fancy. This work and related research are dedicated to his memory.
2. Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp*. New York: Penguin Books Limited, 2018, 13.
3. Paranomasiac was first exhibited at the Banvard Gallery at the Knowlton School of Architecture at The Ohio State University April – August 2018. It has since traveled to the Keller Gallery at MIT Architecture, Cambridge, MA. The work was the product of research conducted as the Howard E. LeFevre '29 Emerging Practitioner Fellow 2017-2018.
4. Sontag, 1.
5. Catherine Bates, "The Point of Puns," in *Modern Philology*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (May, 1999), 424.
6. Bates, 424.
7. Bates, 429.
8. Derek Attridge, "Unpacking the Portmanteau" in Culler, ed. *On Puns*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988, 142.
9. Attridge, 142.
10. Dirk Delabastita, "Introduction," in Traductio; Essays on Punning and Translation ed. Dirk Delabastita, Manchester UK: St. Jerome Publishing, 1997, 128.
11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, *Philosophical Investigations*; The German Text with a Revised English Translation, Third Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001, 165e.& E.H. Gombrich. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Revised 2nd Edition. New York: Bollingen Foundation, Pantheon Books, 1961, 5.
12. Wittgenstein, 170e.
13. Gombrich, 238. "Ambiguity – rabbit or duck? – is clearly the key to the whole problem of image reading. For as we have seen, it allows us to test the idea that such interpretation involves a tentative projection, a trial shot which transforms the image if it turns out to be a hit. It is just because we are so well trained in this game and miss so rarely that we are not often aware of this act of interpretation."
14. Walter Redfern, *Puns*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984, 143. "The trick-pictures beloved of experimental psychologists of perception indicate that we see what we elect to see, just as we hear in puns what we want to hear. Objects can be puns in that they are capable of plural interpretation. Kökeritz compares the pun to 'the optical illusion created by certain geometrical designs which the mind of the viewer can at will arrange in two different patterns.' Is Wittgenstein's famous duck/rabbit a pun of perception? Not strictly, or even laxly, as the two animals are alternatives, not simultaneities, and they do not create a meaningful synthesis. We are in the area of trompe-l'oeil."
15. Gombrich, 243.
16. Keller Easterling, "A Short Contemplation on Money and Comedy," in *Thresholds* No. 18, design & money (1999), pp. 15.
17. Sigmund Freud, trans. ed., James Strachey, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1960, 50.
18. Freud, 50.
19. Freud, 190.
20. Graeme Ritchie, "Computational Mechanisms for Pun Generation," Proceedings of the 10th European Natural Language Generation Workshop, pp. 125-132. ACL Anthology, Morristown (2005), Sect. 4.1.& Sam Leith, "A lot to be learned from computer's bad jokes," The Telegraph 23 Oct 2004. Accessed at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1474865/A-lot-to-be-learned-from-computers-bad-jokes.html 1:37pm 15 March 2018.
21. Jonathan Culler, "The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction" in Culler, ed. *On Puns; The Foundation of Letters*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988, 15.
22. Culler, 15.
23. Frederic Ahl, "Ars Est Caelare Artem (Art in Puns and Anagrams Engraved)" in Culler, ed., 25. "Since our culture 'objects to' puns, we are desensitized to their presence. Blindness to multiple entendre is only one dimension of our education which trains us to think (and to express ourselves) dissociatively, not associatively – to suppose, that is, that the speaker or writer does not intend us to construe his or her words too carefully: to assume carelessness not ambiguous intent."
24. Sontag, 13.