Towards an Unfindable Architecture: A Ludic Theory of 'Pataphysics and Architecture'

An unfindable architecture "will describe a universe which can be - and perhaps should be - envisaged in the place of the traditional one, since the laws that are supposed to have been discovered in the traditional universe are also correlations of exceptions, albeit more frequent ones, but in any case accidental data which, reduced to the status of unexceptional exceptions, posses no longer even the virtue of or iginality."[1]

—Alfred Jarry, from *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*

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THE UNFINDABLE

In 1969, Jaques Carelman, artist and Régent of the Collège de Pataphysique, published the Catalogue of Unfindable Objects. This publication of fantastic inventions (Figure 1) was a parody of the mail order catalog and presented a series of objects that question utility and offer impossible solutions to seemingly irrelevant problems. *Towards an Unfindable Architecture* contemplates an architectural translation of this catalog.

This paper examines the relationship between radical speculations for architecture and the experimental literary movement known as 'pataphysics, an absurd, pseudo-science originating from the late 19th century writings of playwright, poet and prankster Alfred Jarry. In the posthumously published *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*, Jarry defines pataphysics as the "science of imaginary solutions and the laws governing exceptions." While Jarry's avant-garde literary fictions caused riots amongst the complacent Parisian bourgeoisie and received unabashed criticism, dismissing the work as "wild, bizarre and comic" at the time of publication, it has gained revolutionary importance over the 20th century, prompting two influential trajectories through art, literature and philosophy. The first path is seen in irrationalism and the work of Symbolist, Dadaist, and Surrealist, which argue for "a poetic emancipation from science." The second path relates to surrationalism and the work of Futurist, Oulipians and Jarryites, which argue for "a poetic appropriation of science."[2] Today, in a moment when architecture is chasing rapid developments in science and technology, this paper deploys pataphysics to challenge the field's overzealous reliance on computation and optimization for rationalist agendas. It asks, how can

the architect operate as a pataphysician and disrupt the "truths" of "reality" with alternate futures, rooted in chimerical science and ludic theories?

What is an unfindable architecture and why is it important? This question motivates the primary objective for the paper. There is no Google entry for an unfindable architecture. An unfindable architecture is the exception, the special occurrence, the outlier. The paper will develop a critical manifesto that positions pataphysics, the science of the particular, as a methodology for architectural production. The paper will exhibit architecture as a strange concoction of particular, seemingly irrelevant concerns that accidentally stumble upon undiscovered territories.

Finally, the paper outlines the exploits from an ongoing research studio at the University of Virginia's School of Architecture that is examining the limits of pataphysics through the development of a *Manifesto for an Unfindable Architecture*. In this studio, undergraduate students are working to imagine alternate, quasi-fictional futures for a series of "lost" Virginia towns. These are four towns that aimed to be pivotal cities for industry, natural resources, manufacturing, and education. Yet, they are four towns whose speculated developments were halted by an unfortunate swerve, and now they are four ghosts, awaiting to become architectural anomalies and visionary habitats for the future. To facilitate this speculative absurdity, students develop architectural fictions through the format of a graphic novel.

LOGICAL ABSURDITY

Carelman described his impossible objects as inventions that exhibit "logical absurdity or absurd logic."[3] This notion of an absurd logic is a fundamental motivation for pataphysics. Alfred Jarry invented the term pataphysics in the 1880's with his schoolboy friends in Renne. It was a way to describe the elaborate fables their science teacher would construct in attempts to answer difficult scientific questions beyond his knowledge base. From its inception pataphysics was a rigorous yet hypothetical deployment of science and fiction.

Jarry's ability to completely divorce narrative from reality influenced many key twentieth century artistic and cultural developments including dada, futurism, surrealism, situationism and absurdism. *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* along with Jarry's highly controversial play *Ubu Roi* became cult classics, spawning a covert institution known as the Collège de Pataphysique in Paris. Jaques Carelman was acting as the Regent of this mysterious academy at the time he published the *Catalog of Unfindable Objects.* Figures such as Marcel Duchamp, Jean Baudrillard, Umberto Eco, Eugène Ionesco, Italo Calvino, Groucho Marx and even James Joyce have been linked to the mischievous activities of the Collège de Pataphysique. Specifically, Jarry's writings had profound influence on Marcel Duchamp where "the whole of Duchamp's output might be read as an antinomy between the Ubuesque equivalence of the ready-mades and the Faustrollian preciosity of pieces such as *The Large Glass.*"[4]

Oulipian writing, or the Oulipo, was a subcommision of the College de 'Pataphysque and attracted Italo Calvino in the early 1970s. It was within this group of writers, mathematicians, engineers, and computer scientist that Calvino honed an "extraordinary willingness to submit to the remorseless demands of an imagined and self-imposed logic, within the context of allegorical fantasy." Calvino's craft in pataphysical pursuits can be seen in the architectural favorite *Invisible Cities.*
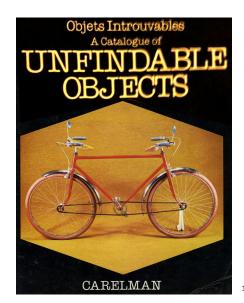

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Figure 1: Cover of Jaques Carelman's *Catalogue of Unfindable Objects* showing The Symmetrical Cycle: a cycle specially designed to go backwards or forwards with equal ease.

Despite the acknowledged influence of pataphysics on 20th century philosophy, literature and art, architecture has been reluctant to investigate this subject (at least publicly). It is difficult to find an architect who will cite a theoretical alliance to pataphysics. However, it is fairly easy to make connections between the movement and the highly experimental, mostly paper architecture of modernity and postmodernity. This is largely due to the fact that architects have been unconsciously soaking in pataphysics through the venues of philosophy and the likes of Deleuze, Derrida or Baudrillard as well as art and the work of Duchamp and Calvino.

The objective then, is to examine this science of imaginary solutions as a lucid theory for architecture. This is aimed at critically questioning a design culture that is increasingly becoming bounded by the logics of science and computation. This overzealous rationalization of architecture is paving a precarious path where architecture is evaluated by performance and optimization. The intention is to shift this direction towards an unfindable architecture. An architecture that pokes at the philosophical pranks of 'pataphysics. An architecture that does not solve the urgent matters of today, but rather questions the matters of urgency.

ELEMENTS OF EXCEPTION

> "Pataphysics will be, above all, the science of the particular, despite the common opinion that the only science is that of the general. Pataphysics will examine the laws governing the exceptions, and will explain a universe supplementary to this one; or less ambitiously, will a universe which can be – and perhaps should be."[1]

"Pataphysics, 'the science of the particular,' does not, therefore, study the rules governing the general recurrence of a periodic incident (the expected case) so much as study the games governing the special occurrence of a sporadic accident (the excepted case)."[2] Translating this statement to an architectural agenda, we shall understand architecture as the exception to "the building." This allows architecture to be defined as the moment when building becomes a manifestation of a particular person, culture or time and not merely the regurgitation of general, generic practices and principles. Hence, an unfindable architecture has not been indexed. It is unsearchable. There is no Google entry for this spatial anomaly.

At the core of an unfindable architecture is the condition of the swerve, the unexplainable change in momentum that enables the exception. "Exceptions can resort to an assortment of modalities: variance (anomalos), alliance (syzygia), deviance (clinamen)," or dysfunction (the détournement). The anomaly finds a way to differ from every other thing in a system that values the norm of equivalence. The syzygy finds a way to equate things to each other in a system that values the norm of difference. The clinamen finds a way to detour around things in a system that values the fate of contrivance. Then, there is the détournement, which hi-jacks the normal, altering or recontextualizing it in order to oppose the original intention. [2]

To position architecture within this framework of the exception is a critical action allowing, if not demanding, that the field offer up more than the expected cliché. It encourages the architect to step outside of an internalized dialogue with the troupes of architectural history and invent or imagine a new reality. It is not calling for the reinvention of the wheel; it is calling for the re-imagining of the rules that govern the wheel.

The Expanding Periphery and the Migrating Center

It is with the exception that architecture contains some resemblance of relevance. Architecture cannot solve the urgent matters of the world – it has limitations. Architecture, by nature, will create more problems than it can solve. Thus, the value of architecture lies in its ability to offer difference within a homogeneous context. An unfindable architecture accepts this responsibility and works to celebrate the condition of the exception.

CLINAMEN

Clinamen is a term originating from the atomistic doctrine of Epicurus and refers to the unpredictable swerve of atoms. The term has come to "imply that one is inclined or biased towards introducing a plausible but un-provable clinamen when a specific mechanism cannot be found to refute a credible argument against one's hypothesis or theory." Epicurus had no evidence or cause for the swerve, it was purely an imaginary solution. The clinamen is an important tool for an unfindable architecture and can be a method for hypothesizing the futures of cities, technologies and networks.

To position the clinamen in relation to imaginary futures for cities and networks a reflection of the twentieth century is required to trace the lineage of the speculative, utopian vision of the city. Beginning with Modernism, the late 18th century – 1960's presented a strategy of ideals - utopian in vision. These visions were fueled by industrialization and internationalization and employed the emerging technologies to reach for infinite boundaries. One imaginary solution comes from Edgar Chambless, an inventor. In his 1910 book entitled *Roadtown* (Figure 2), Chambless attempts to resolve a multiplicity of problems facing the 20th century city such as congested population, increased cost of living, affordable transportation, and the absorption of industries by big capital. The solution was an earthscraper that ran from New York to San Francisco in a straight line. It was a city built over a line of trains. It was an absurd logic. It is an unfindable architecture.

With Postmodernity, the 1960s – 1990s a strategy of criticism and theory was developed. Visions were critiques of the contemporary society and politics. These visions were fueled by popular culture and multinationalism. The visions become more theoretical and more hypothetical. The modes of representation tended to yield on the side of cartoons and sketches rather than the more resolved plans and perspectives of modernity. Post Modernity approached the imaginary solution with ideology.

One of the many unfindable, impossible projects from this period is *No-Stop-City* by Archizoom. No-Stop-City is one of the most radical visions of the city of the future; without boundaries, artificially lit and air-conditioned. It was simultaneously utopian and dystopian. No-Stop-City was envisioned as a "well-equipped residential parking lot" composed of "large floors, micro-climatized and artificially lite interiors." Rather than serving to identify a place, No-Stop-City would be a neutral field in which the creation of identity through consumption could be unfettered." This exemplified the condition of the clinamen as it rendered an extreme swerve in habitation based on newly discovered technologies.

The clinamen is operating with full force in today's world, a period Michael Speaks has dubbed the "SuperModern". With Supermodernity, intelligence has replaced ideals and ideology. Knowledge is understood not as a fixed condition but something that is always changing. A pataphysical approach can be seen in projects like *In-Vitro Meat Habitat* (Figure 3) by Mitchell Joachim and the design laboratory Terraform One, where an architecture is proposed for the fabrication of 3D printed extruded pig cells. The project positions design within
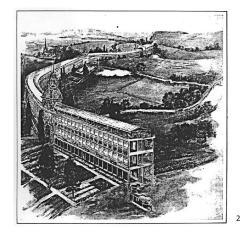
Figure 2: Edgar Chambless' *Roadtown*, 1910.

Figure 3: Terraform One, *In Vitro Meat Habitat,* 2010

a laboratory and architecture is explored like a scientific experiment. This is the "SuperMondern" version of surrationalism. Architecture has become a poetic appropriation of science. An unfindable architecture is grown from a biological process.

WHAT IF………….?

> "Bachelard suggests that all scientific radicalism begins with 'an epoche, a placing of reality between parentheses' so that science might systematically explore an otherwise impossible hypothesis: 'it is in this area of dialectical surrationalism that the scientific mind dreams.' Every question about what if leads to a science of as if."[2]

The pataphysical methodology for an unfindable architecture employs the question What If as a design catalyst. This involves taking a significant event and speculating about what might happen. Marvel Comics experimented with this in the "What if" series where each issue offers a look at characters we know in situations they might never really face. Each story takes place in a separate reality that doesn't affect the central continuity, so there are no rules and no limits. Characters can die--and often do. By opening a statement with the phrase "What if…" you are automatically positioning the proposal within a framework of speculation and thus allowing for architecture to venture to risky, fantastic territories.

This approach could be linked to the writing about innovation by Peter Rice, the structural engineer and author of *The Engineer Imagines*, where he emphasizes that intelligence is derived from the technique of reassessment of the problem. Rice states that "instead of proposing alternative solutions to the problem, the engineer reassess the problem from another point of view." By reassessing the problem the engineer is able to escape objective parameters that formulate one solution. Breaking the paradigm of the "what is" with pursuit of the "what if" allows the engineer to use design to solve the problem with innovation.

ALTERNATE FUTURES FOR THE "LOST TOWN"

This ludic theory of pataphysics is under investigation in a research studio at the University of Virginia's School of Architecture. This studio is examining the limits of speculation through the development of a *Manifesto for An Unfindable Architecture.* This involves undergraduate students working to imagine alternate, fictional futures for a series of "lost" Virginia towns. The setting is two towns that have, for all practical purposes, disappeared. Each town at one point in history had spectacular ambitions to become a regional center. However, each town faced a detrimental blow that crippled and finally dissolved its growth. The premise for the studio is to deploy the theories of pataphysics to imagine alternate futures for the ghost town.

Can a ghost town be transformed into a 21st century boom town? Or perhaps we should encase the ghost town and call it a museum? Each student in the studio is required to construct a fictional narrative that addresses one of those two scenarios. Built into this design narrative is a solution for an unfindable architecture for civic activities, commerce, industry, and domestic activities. The narrative determines if these constructs are the limits of a new town or if this is the seed for a new urban center. Each studio participant develops individual, unique visions of the future. It is an invitation for radical, risky visions.

Does the exception still exist in today's globally connected world? We now share everything, possibly leading to the elimination of particular identity. The concern with this design project is can the exception produce stability for a "lost town".

Can a unique, particular spatiality act to propel civic momentum?

The small town is a critical icon and mystical setting in American culture. It has been parodied by television shows like "The Andy Griffith Show" or the more recent "Parks and Recreation". It has been scrutinized by literary greats Henry David Thoreau, William Faulkner, Mark Twain and Harper Lee. It has been an incubator for the avant-garde: Donald Judd escaped to Marfa, Texas. John Cage, Buckminster Fuller and others escaped to Black Mountain, North Carolina. Thus, it is this mythological setting that stimulates the work on an unfindable architecture. The studio escapes to the forgotten dreams of Mineral City and Basic City, Virginia.

Mineral City is now known as Mineral, Virginia (Louisa County). The discovery of gold on the branches of Contrary Creek in the early 1800s brought gold fever to the area and established a mining operation in the town known as Mineral. In 1890, interest in pyrite for making sulfuric acid and the sulfur dioxide used in the paper industry prompted a boom in this town encouraging a change in its name to "Mineral City". Mineral City was laid out in 152 blocks with a contract to erect 1,500 houses a year to fill the lots. It was called "the natural location for the metropolis of the county" as it was in the center of the richest mineral belts in the Appalachian formation.
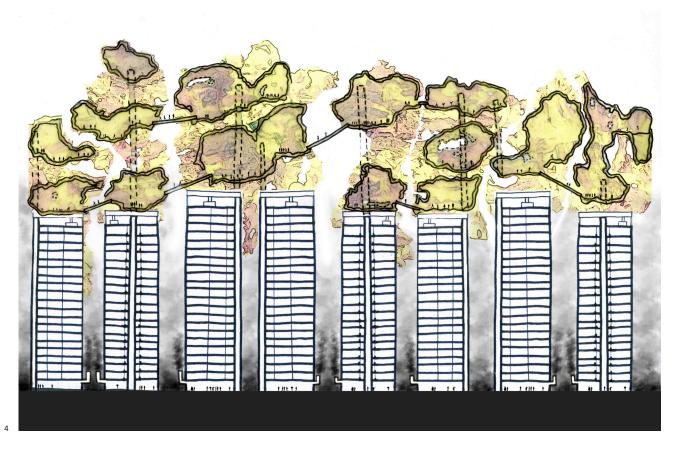
Unfortunately, despite early optimism, the envisioned city was not to be. By 1899, Mineral had dropped the "City" from its name as the town's ambitions were never realized. Mineral was too far from the mines to become a residential center and an early shooting incident prohibited saloons within the town's borders eliminating the town as a social center. [5]

Students examining Mineral City as a setting for a fictional, unfindable architecture focus on the history of mining and the effects of resource extraction. The design narratives describe fantastic subterranean worlds that are developed in the abandoned underground tunnels. They described new architectures constructed from magical minerals found when the earth opened up due to an earthquake. They describe a city built of solidified mineral particles harvested from the polluted air of a major mining town. (Figure 4) They describe a town built from a never seen before Frank Lloyd Wright sketch, that sinks into the ground during the night and rises again in the morning.

Basic City, the second ghost town of investigation, is now incorporated into Waynesboro, Virginia (Augusta County). Sitting at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains developed began in 1856 when Claudius Crozet, a French engineer and one of Napoleon's Generals, completed a tunnel through the Afton Mountain. This lead to an explosion of manufacturing and commercial development in Basic City between 1890 and 1893 as two railroads crossed here, the Norfolk and Western and the Chesapeake and Ohio.

A promotional brochure produced in 1890 claimed:

> "Basic City is located near the very heart of the greatest coal, iron and limestone fields of America. Manganese abounds and the Crimora Mine supplies four-fifths of the total consumption annually in the United States... Located in the richest portion of the famous Shenandoah Valley, it has unlimited mineral and timber resources. Impure water, that parent of fevers, is unknown in the whole region. Lithia Spring bubbles up spontaneously and fills a lake sufficient for a town of thousands. Its bottom throbs and palpitates with a force that produces 1000 gallons a minute. The air is full of balmy exhilarant, not unlike the southern district of California."

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The confluence of two large national railways and a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of natural resources provided the ideal catalysts for an economic boomtown. From its inception Basic City was envisioned as an industrial center. The very name of the town was derived from Jacob Reese's patent for a "basic" process for making steel. A proposed 200- ton iron blast furnace using the new system was projected as were a large facility to supply freight cars for the expanding railway systems, a paper mill, and playing-card factory.

Unfortunately the future was not without complications. The foundations for Jacob Reese's blast furnace were laid, but the enterprise became mired in protracted litigation between Reese and the Bessemer Company over patent rights. The Panic of 1893 and the growing unrest of the American labor force had a devastating effect on other interests in the Basic City economy.

Students examining an alternate future for Basic City speculate about the future of industry in America. Imaginary solutions include a city composed of continuous booms, built on top of each other. Another solution involves the emergence of a subterranean sub-culture that rebels against the industrial revolution. One narrative imagines Basic City as a covert data center, monitoring data transmission in and out of Washington D.C. in efforts to combat cyber attacks. One narrative imagines Basic City as frozen tundra, a city frozen due to an unexpected consequence of chemical alterations in the steel making process.

MANIFESTO FOR AN UNFINDABLE ARCHITECTURE

This research studio is formatted to build a manifesto for an unfindable architecture. Students are encouraged to think of their work as a declaration. They are producing a document that will declare a specific, radical position for

Figure 4: Student project from Manifesto for an Unfindable Architecture Studio at the University of Virginia (Drawing by LB Bell) 2014.

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architecture. Facilitating this, deliverables are structured within the format of a graphic novel. Emphasis is placed on developing a visual language that conveys the ideas and qualities of the vision.

This approach builds on the history of the architectural manifesto. The trajectory of the manifesto is examined through the 20th century and students are challenged to hi-jack and misread a precedent for an unfindable architecture. The list includes Paul Scheerbart's "Glass Architecture" of 1914, Antonio Sant' Elia / Filippo Tommaso's "Futurist Architecture" of 1914, Le Corbusier's "Towards a New Architecture: Guiding Principles" of 1920, Mies van der Rohe's, "Industrialized Building" of 1924, Walter Gropius / Martin Wagner's "A Programme for City Reconstruction" of 1943, Konrad Wachsmann's "Seven Theses" of 1957, GEAM's "Programme for a Mobile Architecture" of 1960, Werner Ruhnau / Yves Klein's "Project for an aerial architecture" of 1960, Constant's "New Babylon" of 1960 and Yona Friedman's "The Ten Principles of Space Town Planning" of 1962. Thus, the future visions of "lost towns" are heavily laced with past fictions and speculations.

So, what is an unfindable architecture and why is it important? Ultimately, unfindable architecture describes "a universe which can be - and perhaps should be - envisaged in the place of the traditional one." It is an architecture that strives to construct the anomaly. It is an architecture that poses more questions than answers. It is an architecture of contradictions and in these contradictions a complex, layered narrative is embedded. An unfindable architecture is an important condition for the field because it adds tension to the discourse. It encourages experimentation and seeks new solutions, however irrelevant they may be. While an unfindable architecture tends to yield an eccentric perspective tailored to an ostentatious audience it does have resolve in a popular culture as seen with science fiction, a genre born from Jarry's pataphysics. The sci-fi novel and film has always reflected our anxieties and used fantasy to propose solutions. This is evident in today's sub-genre of cli-fi which fixates on the evolving apocalyptic vision of climate change. The importance of this work is not in the reality of the vision, but the critique of the cultural fears. "Science fiction does not detail the realities of specific problems so that we might avoid them," rather it holds a mirror to our collective anxiety. An unfindable architecture is the mirror, the recognition of how similar and fragile the world is and how rewarding it can be to escape to a new frontier.

ENDNOTES

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2. Bök, Christian. *'Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science Avant-Garde & Modernism Studies*, Northwestern University Press, 2002..

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5. Fisher, Terri L, and Kirsten Sparenborg. *Lost Communities of Virginia*. Earlysville, Va.: Albemarle Books, 2011.