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SPACES OF COMPLEXITY. ON NOT-KNOWING, UN-LEARNING AND 'PANORAMAS OF POSSIBILITIES'

“Damage done by expertise may be cured only by more expertise. More expertise means, in its turn, yet more damage and more demand for expert cure.”

-Zygmunt Bauman¹

“The best way to get a handle on how a person is situated in the world is actually to construct one, a handle expressly made for the purpose.”

- Arakawa + Gins²

'Sublime Uselessness'

The media, politicians and the public have accused architects of many things in the recent past. They design 'inhuman' environments. They ignore the conditions and consequences of construction. They create social and economic segregation. They add cost without adding value – economic, cultural or otherwise.³ Given this hostility, many within the profession feel underappreciated, which was further exacerbated after the financial crisis of 2008. Adding to the critique is an increasing number of 'bottom-up' initiatives frustrated by housing designs that are neither affordable nor conducive to non-traditional ideas of cohabitation. [Figure_1]) Once more, architectural theorists are declaring the death of architecture: it seems like Manfredo Tafuri's 1976 prediction that architecture as a discipline was fated to “sublime uselessness”⁴ has finally become fact.

This state of affairs has spurred a variety of responses. One was to try to document with greater precision exactly how architectural expertise adds value to the built environment. Studies that made this claim focused on the long-term financial savings (in maintenance, for example) that accrued by employing architectural expertise. Others stressed the added cultural capital that architectural service can provide.⁵ A third response was disaffiliation. Some architectural practices insisted that they had always been different, more socially concerned – thereby reinventing themselves as *the-guys-on-the-right-side-of-the-fence*. Whilst the overall situation seemed dire, in all of these responses the traditional notion of architectural expertise and the role of the

architect as expert designer proved resilient.⁶

Instead of aggressively reasserting or disavowing the architect's authority, the time is apt re-consider the idea of architects as experts. What are experts? How are they created? Where and how do they operate? And, given the enormous collapse of what we tend to refer to as expertise, are experts necessary at all when their specialized knowledge and accumulated experience over years of studying or working in a particular discipline yields little more than a limited and even myopic view of their very field?⁷

The *story* that follows here is about the architect as expert.⁸ I take as my place of departure the idea that specialised and fragmented knowledge is the constructed hallmark of architectural expertise. This idea derives from the sociology of Zygmunt Bauman, who argues that modernity, as itself, is a product of the application of expertise. Expertise, whether architectural or otherwise, identifies problems by fragmenting them in such a way that larger social frameworks and contexts are lost. "Expert 'solutions' are just what the local politician or private entrepreneur is after," Lucius Burckhardt writes. "He needs simple issues, and he wants implementation to proceed in specific, distinct phases that end before a new one begins. Strategic planning and a process-based approach are impossible when policy is oriented to the race to get things finished, rather than a discussion of potential alternative targets."⁹ The system of professional licensing and accreditation that has been established to regulate the architecture profession further impinges on the architect's ability to produce spaces that counteract modernity's processes of fragmentation.

In focusing on the work of two practices, that of Will Alsop and Reversible Destiny, I present two alternate means of working. They are attempts to challenge modernity's fragmentation, which results in the loss of multiplicity, contradiction and *other* possibilities. They make a case for the necessary re-complexification of architecture's field of work by rethinking how our understanding of expertise emerges from within the production of space.

Will Alsop

When asked about why he paints, the London-based architect Will Alsop states: "When you compare [painting] with the 0.2 rapidograph [pen, we see that with the pen] you may create great precise drawings that have great authority. Painting is not very precise. And also there can be accidents. You're exercising your brain beyond what you know."¹⁰ [Figure_2]) While architectural production is haunted by what Francesca Hughes calls "fear of error"¹¹ and

“addiction to precision”¹², Alsop deliberately counters architecture’s anxieties with processes that submit himself to chance. It is Alsop’s explicit use of (some of) the tools of another discipline to question his own which make his work compelling. In other words, it is not the fact that he paints that is significant, but his attention to the limitations of his main field of operation: architecture. He replaces the rapidograph with wide paintbrushes and buckets of paint that he swings for the paint to fly onto the flat surface of the canvas. In doing so, he surrenders exactness, precision, and the hyper-accuracy of architecture’s abstract space. Through his painting process, *things* happen without prior planning, deliberation or expectation – and new connections and relations emerge.

Whilst Alsop’s paintings have been described as a “generator of proposals,”¹³ focusing on them solely as a means to an end would be to miss the point. In Alsop’s particular case, the act of painting on large scale canvases forces a different engagement not only with one’s own body and its relation to the surface of the canvas but also with deeper anxieties about perfection [Figure_3]. How deeply rooted this fear of chance and the need for beauty and perfection is even outside the profession of architecture is elaborated when he talks about the process of a workshop he conducted with prospective students of architecture at the Royal Academy of Arts, where participants who expected to do a workshop about buildings were instead confronted with buckets of paint. The participants, he says, “are worried, particularly if there is a nice bit that comes out. They’d go around that. They don’t want to go over it. One shouldn’t be afraid of that. This is about carrying on with the same sort of intensity. Until you see something, which actually makes you want to start something else because you are already on to a train of thought. So, for the boys and girls here today: [the lesson is] nothing is very precious, you know. If you think it is precious, that’s a killer.”¹⁴

Alsop’s words bring to mind the self-description of Crimson Architectural Historians, a Dutch practice, as “painting panoramas of possibilities”¹⁵. These panoramas, produced by avoiding clear-cut answers and the distancing of themselves with their research, but engaging instead with “mythology and truth, writing and building and demolition” lead to what they call “hallucination of what was, never was, could have been, should have been, should not have been, might still become and can be made to be believed by some that it actually is.”¹⁶ Alsop’s canvases also contain this promise of multiple possibilities – through the very lack of precision. It is as much the lack of accuracy that makes these compound readings thinkable, as it is his unwillingness to separate or cut off different ideas from one another.¹⁷ The paintings, as a prominent feature in and of his practice, are a tool for valuing chance, the accidental and unintended. They allow fragments, inaccuracies

and ambivalences to exist.¹⁸

Reversible Destiny

Like Alsop's paintings, the work of Reversible Destiny, the practice of the late Shusaku Arakawa and Madeleine Gins (now a non-profit architectural foundation based out of New York), fundamentally challenges architectural conceptions of order and construction while it investigates processes of learning and their spatial expressions. In projects entitled 'The Mechanism of Meaning' or 'Landing Site(s)', 'Architectural Body', and 'Architecture against Death', Reversible Destiny invites us to take part in a rethinking of what it means to live, dwell and build.¹⁹ Some of these projects are paper-based, others are three-dimensional installations, whilst yet others are large scale, architecture-like structures.

One of these built examples is the 'Site of Reversible Destiny' in Yoro, Japan, realized between 1993-95, which comes with a detailed map and, if visitors wish so, a helmet upon entering; additional advice suggests the usefulness of rubber-soled shoes [Figure_4]. The map, or rather 'Initial Directions for Use' of the central part of this park, 'The Elliptical Field', state that visitors should "[i]nstead of being fearful of losing your balance, look forward to it (as a desirable reordering of the landing sites, formerly known as the senses)."²⁰ At this site, the philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels writes, one is "not only invited to refrain from judging, but to stop walking in the usual manner, always taking terrain for granted"²¹. And indeed, one cannot navigate this field with one's previous bodily experience of space. The regular street patterns of cities to which we are accustomed, from Berlin and Tokyo to New York – and whose miniaturized imprints are engraved and painted onto the slopes surrounding the Elliptical Field – are non-existent here. "The body as body is always at risk"²² writes Samira Kawash about this field that is a sequence of mounds and depressions upon which streets are laid and 'Architectural Fragments' (including armchairs and kitchen units) are clustered into a series of zones with names such as 'Neutralized and Neutralizing Delta', 'Reversible Destiny Redoubled Effort Zone', 'Scale Adjustment Zone' and 'Elsewhere and Not'. The conceptual and theoretical underpinning of a space that constantly challenges the body is literally transposed into 'real' space: common phrases, as expressed in the quote at the beginning of this text ('getting a handle on'), are translated into objects and sceneries which are placed on the irregular terrain of the park. Arakawa and Gins expose the terror created by dismantling those notions of order upon which most of our experiences are based.

This disruption of what we take for granted in our daily lives, the

abstraction of tasks and movements into rectilinear shapes, is further advanced in a series of apartments, 'The Reversible Destiny Lofts', which were built in Tokyo in 2005. [Figure_5]) It is the body's own expertise that is challenged here in a similar yet slightly more subtle way than in Yoro Park. If knowing is an obstacle to seeing, as Hans Venhuizen – who describes himself as “an expert in not-knowing”²³ – argues, and if it is unquestioned habit, convenience and learned practice which makes us blind, then the uneven and hard surfaces, the unusual layout and material choices of the Lofts force us to truly see. Pushing us into not-knowing (by abandoning the things that our bodies know) renegotiates and reconfigures anxieties of disorder, error and ambivalence. What is considered normal is here subverted. In doing so, the body is no longer, as in most conceptions of space, an abstracted fragment but an integral part of space.

'The Reversible Destiny Lofts' are in this reading an extension of Arakawa and Gins' earlier work entitled 'The Mechanism of Meaning': a series of panels developed between 1963-73 and in 1996 which, as F. L. Rush argues, contend in no uncertain terms firmly held beliefs and concepts.²⁴ [Figure_6]) 'The Mechanism of Meaning', like all of the projects by Arakawa and Gins, is systematic in its exploration of a topic – in this case, meaning. It is an arrangement of 83 panels that present logical puzzles, cognitive or behavioural games, to be followed step-by-step in sixteen journeys.²⁵ These journeys are based on, initially, un-learning conventional meanings (they call this 'Neutralization of Subjectivity'), examining notions of ambiguity in the context of meaning (noting that “everything is ambiguous as well as the judgement that something is ambiguous”²⁶), before reaching the final section – added in 1996 – called 'Review and Self-Criticism'. In doing so, Arakawa and Gins use the term 'meaning' as a vehicle to explore conventions – what is accepted in everyday use – and introduce other possible and probable applications. In that way, their practice becomes a means to critically question phrases, objects and structures so established and standard that they have come to be taken for granted.

Experts in not-knowing

To be sure, Alsop and Reversible Destiny present only two stories. Yet, they belong to a larger set of practices, individuals and groups who work in ways that challenge established processes and practices critically and, at the same time, don't “care about [...] status, but instead engage with the world as expert citizens, working with others, the citizen experts, on equal terms.”²⁷ It is here, in the ways of working and doing of Alsop and Reversible Destiny, where the discussion of expertise gets much more interesting. It becomes more

interesting because it creates spaces for ambivalence, for doubt, for inconsistency, variation and alternative actions. None of this, however, is seen as a positive trait in a world that is obsessed with hierarchies, line management and the clear distribution of responsibilities, because ambivalence doesn't produce neat problems. And, if there aren't any neat problems to address, if there is ambivalence, there will be, as Zygmunt Bauman writes, "anxiety," which is why "we experience ambivalence as disorder."²⁸ This is clearly most threatening to those who like to bundle up problems into well-ordered packages since expert knowledge, as Bédard and Chi write, is most likely to fail in situations where tasks require lateral thinking instead of standard and learned responses.²⁹ In other words: questions that resist clear definition (or are not even questions to begin with) challenge those who think of themselves as experts (the politicians and private entrepreneurs that Burckhardt talks about, or the self-proclaimed experts of the field of architecture) and undermine the managerial machine that is focused on solving momentary problems. It is therefore unlikely that this machine, and those who seek certainty in order to control others and profits through it, will create openings for discourses or practices that acknowledge the complexities in which architectural problems are embedded. Their inability or unwillingness to take a broader view presents one possible reason why things do not change for the better.

Maybe this is too pessimistic. But, if calls for a more social and just production of space are to be pushed forward in their somewhat necessary urgency – if these goals, complex and messy by nature, are to stand the slightest chance of being realised – then accepted notions of expertism, prevalent mechanisms of fragmentation, the immense will to control and order, and the condescension towards everything non-expert and amateurish will have to be interrupted, for the city, as Burckhardt writes, requires "overlap and multiple uses. It is precisely the fuzzy definition of uses, the versatility of urban institutions, which creates structures that make the city both appealing and viable".³⁰ The prolongation of the aforementioned fragmenting and problem-oriented approach, whereby issues are translated into programmatically defined or explicitly over-defined spaces and projects, has to be reconsidered. However, this can only happen, Burckhardt argues, if experts stop what he calls "Technik der Überrumpelung durch Perfektion"³¹: or the 'technique' of presenting of complete solutions to pre-defined or pre-learned problems that are perfected to a degree that shuts off any further discussion. Yet this technique does not only limit engagement in planning and spatial processes to those who hold expertise; more importantly, it is, as Venhuizen argues, "an obstacle to seeing"³². Whilst it is important to emphasise that becoming and being an expert in not-knowing is also a skill (that needs to be learned and practiced), Venhuizen describes an ambition that goes beyond a concern

with the 'solution' and the 'ego' and instead calls for a knowing openness towards the otherwise: inconsistent, ambivalent and disordered as it may be.

Re-complexifying modernity's fragments

What emerges from the work of Reversible Destiny and Will Alsop – seen through the lens of Burckhardt, Baumann and Venhuizen – is the notion that simply applying expertise or learned knowledge is as limited as it is boring. It is limited because expertise is limited in its possible application. Working in other ways and with other means (which might include but certainly is not limited to painting or experimental apparatuses) helps to bring the seemingly peripheral into vision and thereby challenges not only others' but also one's own thinking and doing. Neither Alsop's nor Reversible Destiny's approach concerns expertise as a harbinger of value creation as described in the beginning of this text, but both fundamentally challenge established processes.

Alsop's focus on painting as a tool to critique an obsession with precision points to the necessity to rethink the very processes through which designs are made and presented. Line drawings and computer renderings seem to clearly indicate a much more refined, finished and closed process than a canvas – but this can actually be a detriment, not an advantage, to thinking through a particular issue; even if painting is only used as an educational tool, multiple ideas and positions can emerge, different readings can be made, and this multiplicity may illuminate things in a new way. Reversible Destiny approaches expertise from a different angle. Their work questions the role of language in contributing to fragmentation as well as our bodies' disjunction from the surrounding environment through their abstraction in space. By attempting to re-sensitise and reconfigure our mind and our senses, their experimental apparatuses indicate the possibility of an altogether different reality by multiplying the possible and suggesting different trajectories. They push us into abandoning knowledge, to 'un-learn'.

It could be argued that the momentary crisis of expertise and expertism that we find ourselves in presents an opening to see the dangers and limitations of a fragmentation that resulted from the industrialising of nations and was further exacerbated under interpretations of modernist ideologies. It also offers an opportunity, as the work of Alsop and Reversible Destiny so clearly shows, to challenge ways of simply applying learned knowledge to solve problems. Arguably, this needs to be taken up most urgently by those places of higher education and institutions who are currently training future 'experts'.

Alsop and Reversible Destiny clarify how the sustained and skilled

elaboration of one's own position in the context of wider networks can become a productive tool. As their practices show, there are multiple ways to perforate, puncture and resist existing mechanisms and systems of doing which have the power to overcome modernity's fragments through the painting of 'panoramas of possibility', which allow for a new breed of experts to emerge: experts of *knowing* not-knowing, whose task is no longer to focus on fragmented and separated sectors of knowledge, but to question and re-shape the tools, words and practices through which bodies and spaces relate to each other.

NOTES

- ¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1991), 220.
- ² Arakawa and Madeleine Gins, 'Elliptical Field. Site of Reversible Destiny. Yoro', *Reversible Destiny: Arakawa + Gins*, accessed 8 January 2016, <http://www.reversibledestiny.org/#!elliptical-field-%E2%96%91%E2%96%91-site-of-reversible-destiny-%E2%96%91%E2%96%91-yoro>.
- ³ Often, it is only the direct cost of employing an architect that are taken into account when, as some argue, the true cost of a building should be calculated by using the life-time cost, rather than the upfront investment. See for example: Paul Finch, 'The Case for the Value of Architecture Would Be Helped If We Knew What Buildings Really Cost', *The Architects' Journal*, 16 September 2013.
- ⁴ Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and utopia: design and capitalist development* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 1976), ix.
- ⁵ See for example: Flora Samuel et al., 'Cultural Value. Of Architecture in Homes and Neighbourhoods' (Sheffield: The University of Sheffield, School of Architecture, 2014).
- ⁶ The prominent architecture writer Paul Finch has recently argued in an article for the Architects' Journal that architecture "may be political, but it is fundamentally about creative ideas". See: Paul Finch, 'Regime Values Are Less Important than a Building's Use', *Architects' Journal*, 30 September 2015. For a critique of architects as experts see: Barbara L. Allen and Roberta M. Feldman, 'Beyond Expert Culture', *Journal of Architectural Education* 53, no. 3 (2000): 128. And, for a broader discussion of the dramatic failure of expertise – linked to the wider crises of capitalism see David Harvey, 'The Crises of Capitalism' (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, 26 April 2010), <https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/event-videos/2010/04/the-crises-of-capitalism/>.
- ⁷ The term 'expert' has a relatively short history. It has only been used since the early nineteenth century when an industrialising society, as Raymond Williams writes, "put increasing emphasis on specialization and qualification". See: Raymond Williams, *Keywords – A Vocabulary of Culture*

and Society, revised and expanded edition (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), 129.

- ⁸ The use of the word ‘story’ is intentional. As Jeremy Till and I write, it counters inward-looking and excluding discourses and instead looks at related instances that, read next to each other, develop and drive the topic. See: Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, ‘Beyond Discourse: Notes on Spatial Agency’, *Footprint*, no. 4 (2009): 97–98.
- ⁹ Lucius Burckhardt, ‘Building - A Process with No Obligations to Heritage Preservation (1967)’, in *Lucius Burckhardt. Writings. Rethinking Man-Made Environments* (Wien, New York: Springer, 2012), 44–45.
- ¹⁰ Will Alsop, The Laboratory Exhibition and the Experimental Production of Architecture, interview by Florian Kossak, 15 August 2005.
- ¹¹ Francesca Hughes, *The Architecture of Error. Matter, Measure, and the Misadventures of Precision* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 2014), 3.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 4.
- ¹³ Jonathan Adams, ‘Three Projects by Will Alsop’, *AA Files*, no. 20 (1990): 30.
- ¹⁴ The Learning Department at The Royal Academy of Arts, *Will Alsop RA Leads an Architecture Workshop as Part of the Royal Academy’s attRAct Programme for a-Level Students*, 2012, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/artist/will-alsop-ra>.
- ¹⁵ *Crimson, Too Blessed to Be Depressed: Crimson Architectural Historians 1994-2002* (Rotterdam: 010, 2002), 7.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7–8.
- ¹⁷ One of the key definitions of precision refers to „The action or an act of separating or cutting off, esp. the mental separation of one fact or idea from another; abstraction, definition.” In Alsop’s example, the conscious decision to leave precision behind could therefore not only be read as a ‘lack’ of accuracy, but also as an intent to go against the abstraction and separation of ideas. For the full definition of the term see: ‘Precision, N. and Adj.’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed 7 January 2016, <http://www.oed.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/view/Entry/149667>.
- ¹⁸ This is in stark contrast to his built architecture where the avoidance of perfection and the notion of multiplicity is arguably often lost. This is unlike other architects whose understanding of a building includes the continuation of these themes into the built object (for example: Lacaton & Vassal, Patrick Bouchain or Walter Segal).
- ¹⁹ For a discussion of Arakawa and Gins’ work see: Samira Kawash, ‘Safe House?: Body, Building, and the Question of Security’, *Cultural Critique*, no. 45 (2000): 185–221; Jean-Michel Rabaté, ‘Introduction to Interfaces. Arakawa and Gins Special Issue’, *Interfaces* 1, no. 21/22 (2003): 5–10. The practice’s website can be found here: <http://www.reversibledestiny.org>.

- ²⁰ Arakawa and Gins, 'Site of Reversible Destiny - Yoro', in *REVERSIBLE DESTINY. WE HAVE DECIDED NOT TO DIE. ARAKAWA/GINS* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publication, 1997), 203.
- ²¹ Bernhard Waldenfels, 'Out of Balance', in *REVERSIBLE DESTINY. WE HAVE DECIDED NOT TO DIE. ARAKAWA/GINS* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publication, 1997), 210.
- ²² Samira Kawash, 'Bodies at Risk: The Architecture of Reversible Destiny', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 20, no. 2 (1998): 24.
- ²³ Hans Venhuizen, 'Planmaster' (Kassel, 26 June 2014).
- ²⁴ F. L. Rush, 'To Think, To Invent, To Be Invented. Reflections on The Mechanisms of Meaning', in *REVERSIBLE DESTINY. WE HAVE DECIDED NOT TO DIE. ARAKAWA/GINS* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publication, 1997), 42–53.
- ²⁵ The mechanisms are: 1. Neutralization of Subjectivity; 2. Localization and Transference; 3. Presentation of ambiguous zones; 4. The Energy of Meaning (Biochemical, Physical, and Psychophysical Aspects); 5. Degree of Meaning; 6. Expansion and Reduction-Meaning of Scale; 7. Splitting of Meaning; 8. Reassembling; 9. Reversibility; 10. Texture of Meaning; 11. Mapping of Meaning; 12. Feeling of Meaning; 13. Logic of Meaning; 14. Construction of the Memory of Meaning; 15. Meaning of Intelligence; 16. Review and Self-Criticism.
- ²⁶ Panel 3.1 of the work 'The Mechanism of Meaning' by Arakawa and Madeleine Gins (1963-73, 1996) and published in Arakawa and Gins, 'The Mechanism of Meaning', in *REVERSIBLE DESTINY. WE HAVE DECIDED NOT TO DIE. ARAKAWA/GINS* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publication, 1997), 55.
- ²⁷ Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, and Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency. Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011), 32.
- ²⁸ Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 1.
- ²⁹ Jean Bédard and Michelene T. H. Chi, 'Expertise', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 1, no. 4 (1992): 138.
- ³⁰ Burckhardt, 'Building - A Process with No Obligations to Heritage Preservation (1967)', 45.
- ³¹ Lucius Burckhardt, 'Politische Entscheidungen Der Bauplanung', in *Kapitalistischer Städtebau*, ed. Hans Georg Helms and Jörn Janssen (Neuwied und Berlin: Luchterhand, 1970), 53.
- ³² Hans Venhuizen, 'Planmaster' (Kassel, 26 June 2014).