Casting Contradictive Landscapes: The objects of an Obsolescent* Future

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Casting Contradictive Landscapes:
The Objects of An Obsolescent* Future

a thesis by sarah catherine beaudoin
syracuse university school of architecture
Dear Architecture,

I want my daydreams back.

I want the marvelous scenes of the future: with ominous scapes and monuments that fold into the sky.

I spent my childhood drawing you, though I didn’t know your name at the time. I drew you in magnificent color and superfluous confidence. I drew with no responsibility and little knowledge.

But I was young. It was my opera, and I could do what I wanted.

Then I came to college, and I met you. You were one hell of a teacher: optimistic yet stubborn, inspiring yet demanding. You showed me how to see the world, really see it, and for that I am forever thankful.

But you also took something away. And I am here now to ask for it back.

So, my dear architecture, for just 45 short minutes I ask you to keep reality to yourself. I don’t want it right now.

This is my opera.

I made it for you.

Sincerely Yours,
s.c.b
Casting Contradictive Landscapes

A THESIS BY:
Sarah Catherine Beaudoin

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Syracuse University School of Architecture
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“Today, there is potential in character to offer new capacities in the architectural condition. It continues to privilege the idiosyncratic and the outliers over the universe, and the outliers over the system. Character can be funny, but seriously. It is quirky, it calls for distinct and articulate parts rather than proportionately unified wholes. It is a mechanism for appealing to both the intellect and the senses, without a necessary alignment between the two.”
potential in character: to for the contemporary on. It continues to ratic over the universe, the system. Character it takes its humor y but misaligned. It articulate parts rather unified wholes. It is appealing to both the s, without a necessary veen the two. ”
the contention

pg 6-7, quote:
Design w/ Company, Mis-Guided Tactics for Propriety
Calibration, 2015
This thesis pays homage to the longevity of the ordinary yet iconic elements of the German Ruhr Valley, aiming to bring its functionally obsolescent architectural characters to the forefront of design analysis. The investigation catalogs, dissects, and speculates a series of conditions that arise from the mixed array of economic, geographic, and cultural pressures of the contemporary Ruhr Valley. Rather than merely describing and critiquing the found industrial objects, a series of paradigms visualize a fictitious world in which a family of could-be-architectures can take stage. They act as prototypes for unspecified places while still exploring the consequences of their previous cultural actions and uses. In this, the thesis contention becomes just as interested in the visual as in the formal, capable of creating new realities and artificial natures through architectural motifs. It packages a set of formal objects ready to enter the canon of the architectural discourse, with projective character as their strongest weapon.

Projective character is understood to be achieved through the precise miscalibration of everyday objects, be it through scale, copies, or image. These techniques de-familiarize the everyday as a means to remove it far enough to see it anew. The process is culturally specific while its outcome often bears an illogical relationship to use. With the mass exit of industry from the Ruhr, the industrial objects of the region become a vehicle for formal and spatial miscalibrations: a stage for contemporary projective character.

In this, I chose to investigate the Ruhr via a series of smaller paradigms. It is not an exhausted list, but rather a confined visual series. Together, the visuals straddle the line between real and unreal through precise and specific miscalibrations of scale and image. Depending on the model at stake, the miscalibrated objects at hand are moved, tilted, gathered, disoriented, magnified, hidden, and/or crutched in order to cast new smaller narratives on their surroundings. Together, they present a cross-section of examples to prove the benefit of projective character and the specific circumstances, techniques, and cultural requirements in producing it.
Part I: Research
In the 18th century manifesto, *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, Quatremere de Quincy is considered to have set the stage for the discussion of character in the architectural discourse. In it, he described it as “a relationship between the physical reality of a building, its outward appearance, and its ulterior meaning.”

But beyond this definition of character proposed by de Quincy, there lives a new understanding of the 21st century: Projective character. Stewart Hicks and Alison Newmeyer write extensively of projective characters in their 2015 treatise, *Misguided Tactics for Propriety Calibration*.
Projective character is achieved through the precise mis-calibrations of everyday objects, be it a racecar bed you can buy at Walmart, or a globally recognized destination resort. Miscalibration techniques defamiliarize the everyday as a means to remove it far enough to see it anew, with a restored sense of cultural admiration as its only goal.

Projective character can be achieved through processes of scale, copies, and image castings. Hicks and Newmeyer write: “Objects with projective character equally privilege irony and sincerity: they are formal dreams on display, activated only through interactions with a willing audience.”

Racecar Bed, Walmart, 2018
Bergman Walls Associates, Paris Las Vegas, 1995
Focused on the culture of the Midwest United States, Hicks and Newmeyer deploy the research in projects such as the Monument to Bruce and Farmland world. Both proposals take pleasure in references and appears somewhat culturally familiar. But, at the same time, the very forms of familiarity possess qualities and attributes that begin to look like something else completely.

Design w/ Company, Farmland World, 2011
Design w/ Company, The Monument to Bruce, 2012
While Hicks and Niemeyer operate almost exclusively within the culture of the Midwest United States, this thesis takes the act of self conscious culturing abroad, to the Ruhr Valley in northwest Germany.

Studying the growing functional de-necessity of the chimneys in today’s culture, both in the domestic and industrials realms, a contention was born that obsolescent architectural objects, such as the chimney, could be a testing ground for formal projective character miscalibrations.
In the early research phases, a series of catalog exercises studied the formal and didactic qualities of the architectural chimney. The catalog was kept broad on purpose, without consideration for site or culture. From it, I could culturally map the broad locations of these objects.
Part III: A Ruhr
In January 2019, the thesis research was furthered by the funding of the 2018 Syracuse Architecture Ralph T. Walker Travel Prize. This opportunity allowed for physical travel to the Ruhr District to gain a further cultural understanding of the site.

Conducting research in the Ruhr Valley allowed me to integrate theory-heavy research with an intellectually rewarding hands-on experience. The Ruhr District covers an area of only 450 square kilometers, making for a historically complex polycentric region. The travel offered me the opportunity to better understand the characteristics of contemporary industrial objects, and the accompanying vernacular elements that add to their visual narratives. Additionally, it allowed me to develop a proto-site within the contemporary Ruhr.
This thesis focuses on the, Emscher Valley Landscape Park, at the heart of the region. The park, seen here in gray, is an infamous 20 year green initiative to link the major cities of the Ruhr by means of new bike paths, tracks, and municipal parks. It is flanked by the Rheine river to the west, the Ruhr to the south, and the nearly dried up Emscher to the north.
But not even 30 years ago, the Ruhr was the industrial heart of all of European Industrialization, for nearly 100 years. The history of the Ruhr can be understood through the work of German photographer Josef Stoffels, shown here, who captured the contradictive nature of what was still then an industrial region. To me, his work depicts a sense of romanticism, featuring clouds of smoke and iconic formal characters juxtaposed with mundane cultural activities.

But more than anything, the work of Stoffel serves as an artifact of the unique and stronghold cultural roots of the region. The photographs makes a contradictory impression on the reader: is the Ruhr green or gray? Antiquated or contemporary? Masculine or feminine?

Josef Stoffels, Red Dot Design Museum
Special Collection, 1951-1953
The regions skyline still to this day is characterized by industrial architecture of its past: Gasometers, chimney stacks, cooling and wind towers, overpasses and underpasses. But slowly, and perhaps unintentionally, a new category of authentic Ruhr characters has emerged.

They are monstrosities of public art, sprinkled throughout the Emscher valley park as major cultural panorama points. Their architectural identity appears contemporary as they are framed and reframed as culturally significant in the hands of a new generation. By intentionally incorporating inappropriate social and physical forms into the landscape, the region becomes a prime contemporary testing ground for projective character and self-conscious culturing.

Laurens Corijn, Red Dot Design Museum
Special Collection, 2018
Part III: A Catalog
Studying the impressions of the vast landscapes and the formal objects imbedded in them, I returned to my initial catalog exercise. This time, I narrowed the culture scope, focusing only on Ruhr characters, while broadening the formal scope to include the chimney and its industrial family members.

Through a combination of sketching and photography, a catalog of Ruhr forms emerged. The two mediums combined allowed for both a formal, spatial, and visual documentation of the region.
ROCK DEPOSITS FROM COAL PRODUCTION. NO USE FOR ACQUIRED ROCS, SO TURNED INTO LANDSCAPING FOR SURROUNDING NATION TO 10/10.
Casting Contradictive Landscapes

Diagram:

- Elements:
  1. arc
  2. mound
  3. chute
  4. supports
  5. walkway
  6. grass board

View:

- Structures:
  - Overlapping forms/shapes
  - Train tracks
Pipelines pushed and pulled, viaducts swayed above my head, and chimney stacks rose for their spot in the limelight. I was introduced to the brothers, sisters, and cousins of the industrial chimney: monolithic “industrial monsters” that stood together, yet just far enough apart, as if for an awkward Ruhr family photo.

And as they stood, a series of complex and contradictive spatial narratives began to unravel at their feet, seen in their linear movements in the landscape, how and where they perch, and their presence against the ominous sky.
So it is seen that this immense planned and unplanned process of de-industrialization in the Ruhr, produced a rapid and radical change in the Ruhr’s landscapes, architecture, and the cultures embedded in them. And so, in my travels I searched for these formal characters.

The formal catalog, later transcribed digitally, ranges in functionality, size, age, context, and degree of functional obsolescence.
With the Emscher cycle trails weaving in, under, and around them, these industrial characters can be seen far and wide. Their contemporary presence in the park has given the Ruhr an unmatched identity comparable to that of cathedrals, castles and fortresses elsewhere. They transcend generations: aware of their prolonged cultural duties, yet open to formal miscalibrations.

And so, with the mass exit of industry from the Ruhr, the objects seen standing freely on its horizon are no longer being utilized. In this sense, the industrial objects of the Ruhr become a vehicle for formal and spatial miscalibrations: a stage for contemporary projective character.
Part IV: A Project
Because of the multitude of circumstances, techniques, and cultural requirements for projective character miscalibrations, I chose to investigate the Ruhr’s rich stage via a series of smaller paradigms.

**par·a·digm**

(noun)

: example, pattern

: a theoretical framework within which theories, laws, and experiments are formulated and performed in support of a specific discipline, i.e. architecture
1. A Cultural Miscalibration
2. A Contradictive Impression
3. A Regional Identity
4. An Autonomous Artifact
5. An Instant Monument
Together, the 5 Paradigms are not an exhausted list, but rather a confined visual series. Together, they straddle the line between real and unreal through precise and specific mis-calibrations of scale and image. They present a reasonable and supportive cross-section of examples to prove the benefit of projective character and the specific circumstances, techniques, and cultural requirements needed to produce it.
i. a cultural miscalibration

The miscalibrated objects live in two parallel worlds: one in our imagination, a fictional yet optimistic world, and the other in its own physical context of the Ruhr, the reality of its existence. In this sense, the character becomes a delamination and recombination of function and cultural metaphor. Paradigm I seeks this misaligned image, juxtaposing the cultural keystones of the contemporary Ruhr: industry, agriculture, and sustainable & technological innovation. Although this treatment creates an illusion through formal play, it bears its presence without pretense or precedent.

miscalibrations:

7  8  11  17
ii. a contradictive impression

Formal miscalibrations may present themselves in different ways. In the case of an original built form, the civic and regional importance is expected to be much greater than its original use value. This intended use may be lost to time, or a new context, such as the case with ruins, and adaptive reuse projects. But it is also possible for an object or building to be newly constructed with an intentionally parallel identity: a newborn object within an existing context. Paradigm ii draws on this notion of deliberate contradiction. The formal body is drawn from its chimney stack cousins, but is achieved through inconsistent imagery, changing elevations, and consistent participatory celebration. Its outward appearance is specific, yet bears a new and illogical relationship to use.

miscalibrations:

7 8 13 16
iii. a regional identity

Repetition is a fundamental architectural principle to achieve a sense of rhythm, hierarchy, and texture within a culture. Almost all buildings, urban realms, and natural landscapes incorporate elements that are by their nature repetitive... columns, streets, trees, etc. Copies provide continuity and leads us to anticipate what comes next: in this case a framed regional identity. The notion of both copying and miscopying create visual patterns in the Ruhr landscape that then develop a regional identity, or formal language. Any break in the pattern, or miscopy, announces and emphasizes the importance of the interrupting element or interval. Mis-copying is a form of repetition, but merely creates the expectation that something else will happen. The wireframe construction of common Ruhr characters operates in this.

miscalibrations:

1 3 10 14 20
Casting Contradictive Landscapes
iv. an autonomous artifact

The reconstitution of leftover-Ruhr-characters is used to promote a greater significance upon found industrial objects and dislodge their fixed historical associations. The resulting artifact pursues incongruity and informality over style and elegance. In this, the composition straddles the line between haphazard and deliberate. The artifact achieves a cultural autonomy, able to shed its previous associations and functions as they are replaced with more complex spatial sequences. The Paradigm seeks to elevate the obsolete industrial objects to paint a grandeur reality of their reimagined existence.

miscalibrations:

4 9 17 18 19
v. an instant monument

Perhaps a more immediate answer lies in a temporary or instant solution: Paradigm V, the instant monument. The instant monument adheres to the following: scalar oddity and formal familiarity. More than any of the other paradigms, it models the outline of the miscalibrated cataloged objects. In this, its faint physical line work is just familiar enough to be recognized, and its size and proportions just off enough to be considered a scalar oddity. The instant monument is a vehicle in which the Ruhr can ask for your recognition, despite a general discomfort for its regional icons.

miscalibrations:

6 7 10
Part V: Bibliography
Written a decade after Somol published his pivotal “12 Reasons to Get Back into Shape,” this essay speculates upon new tactics for creating audience-building architecture by cultivating companionable qualities in architecture—states of being and tones of voice that prompt us to relate to built matter and things on an equal footing with personhood.

Not Interesting proposes another set of terms and structures to talk about architecture, without requiring that it be interesting. This book explores a set of alternatives to the interesting and imagines how architecture might be positioned more broadly in the world using other terms: boring, confusing, and comforting.

Dear Architecture is an ideas competition that challenged designers to explore one of the most important communication tools of all time – the letter. With entries submitted from over 60 countries around the world – the open letters challenge architects and designers to think deeply about the profession they are participating in.

Blank Space. Fairy Tales. Vol 1-3. 2015-2018
Fairy Tales brings together a collection of aptivating architecture fairy tales from over 300 entries in Blank Space’s “Fairy Tales” competition. The competition challenges entrants to develop visionary, narrative-based design proposals. In an eclectic array of forms – from stories, to poems, memoirs, and comics – these fairy tales bring new meaning to architecture,

Peter Carl substitutes the term ‘type’ for the typical, and ‘typology’ for typicality. In so doing he frees up the notion of type for contemporary design, liberating it from the strictures of its performance history and precedents that have often veered towards standardisation.

Alan Colquhoun’s explains history in three very different terms:1) theory, in which all sociocultural phenomena are determined, 2) attitude, which revolves around concern for the tradition of the past, and 3) artistic practice, which involves the use of historical forms.

A groundbreaking manifesto on the role of character within the architectural discourse.

Hicks, Stewart and Newmeyer, Allison. Mis-Guided Tactics for Propriety Calibration. Chicago: The Graham Foundation, 2015
Examines the concept of character in architecture by looking closely at constructions in the Midwest which self-consciously construct regional identity through the built environment.
It is also a book about a book by revealing the origins of a fictional design manual called the Midwestern Guide to Propriety Calibration.

Brings together two lectures given by Rem Koolhaas at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, along with a response (framed as a supplement to the original lectures) by Jorge Otero-Pailos. In the first essay Koolhaas describes alternative strategies for preserving Beijing, China.

Rafael Moneo gives an overview of the research of typology in architecture. For Moneo, the typology is a theory of the essential, the beginnings of architecture. Although typologically oriented approaches may be helpful for designers, these are, however, just tools which are neither essential nor an analysis of the design process itself.

Petrov analyzes how architects fear designing ordinary and aim for work that is always/super extraordinary. He argues that the ordinary is mundane, lacking specialness or distinct features. The superordinary exists as an antithesis of ordinary, helping define each other. They can only clearly exist in the presence of each other.

In part a protest against functionalism and the Modern Movement, in part an attempt to restore the craft of architecture to its position as the only valid object of architectural study, and in part an analysis of the rules and forms of the city’s construction. Arhues typology presents itself as the study of types of elements that cannot be further reduced.

Simon Sadler argues that Archigram's sense of fun takes its place beside the other cultural events of the 1960s, creating their own attitudes and techniques that became standard for architects rethinking social space and building strategies.

A “gentle manifesto for a non straightforward architecture,” Venturi’s Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture expresses in the most compelling and original terms the postmodern rebellion against modernism.

The new typology is not built of separate elements but stands complete and ready to be decomposed into fragments. Inherited from meanings ascribed by the past existence of forms, derived from choice of specific fragments and its boundaries and proposed by a re-composition of these fragments in a new context.
Part VI: Acknowledgments
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This thesis pays homage to the longevity of the ordinary yet iconic elements of the German Ruhr Valley, aiming to bring its functionally obsolescent architectural characters to the forefront of design analysis. The investigation catalogs, dissects, and speculates a series of conditions that arise from the mixed array of economic, geographic, and cultural pressures of the contemporary Ruhr Valley. Rather than merely describing and critiquing the found industrial objects, a series of paradigms visualize a fictitious world in which a family of could-be-architectures can take stage. They act as prototypes for unspecified places while still exploring the consequences of their previous cultural actions and uses. In this, the thesis contention becomes just as interested in the visual as in the formal, capable of creating new realities and artificial natures through architectural motifs. It packages a set of formal objects ready to enter the canon of the architectural discourse, with projective character as their strongest weapon.