

## Toward a “Pataphysical Architecture

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Following a lecture on art and artists presented by Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), a puzzled friend of Jarry’s conceded that while it was all quite interesting, he hadn’t understood a word. Jarry responded: “That’s exactly what I wanted. Talking about things that are understandable only weighs down the mind and falsifies the memory, but the absurd exercises the mind and makes the memory work.” For his use of absurd disjunction to activate the imagination, Jarry’s influence on Dada and Surrealism may be readily appreciated. Less obvious is how Jarry’s approach inspired the methodical anti-methods pursued by such writers as Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, Harry Mathews, Italo Calvino, and Roland Barthes, who proposed “why couldn’t there be, in some way, a new science for every object? A mathesis singularis and no longer universalis?” Through the examples of Carlo Scarpa and Le Corbusier, this brief note investigates how Jarry’s ‘pataphysics offers an imaginative science suitable for the practice of architecture.

In his “neo-scientific novel,” *The Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*, Alfred Jarry envisions ‘pataphysics as “above all, the science of the particular, despite the common opinion that the only science is that of the general.” He continues that ‘pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions and laws governing exceptions, “which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their lineaments. ‘Pataphysics lies as far beyond metaphysics as metaphysics lies beyond physics—in one direction or another.”<sup>1</sup>

On first reading, *Dr. Faustroll* offers a strident spoof of Scientific Reason and its methods. Jarry peppered his protagonist’s lectures and “writings” with extracts from science manuals of his day, including experiments on soap bubbles and surface tension, lending a mock air of certainty to the Doctor. Yet in the course of the narrative, which proceeds with little concern for continuity or logic—Faustroll is said to abhor continuity—

these factual nuggets of data never quite align with one another, at least in the manner that scientific facts tend to prove or disprove one another. For Jarry, gaps in logic evoke the participation of the reader’s imagination to reconcile the apparent nonsense. His description of Faustroll’s mode of transportation offers a quintessential example:

The skiff is not only propelled by oar blades but also by suction disks at the end of spring levers. And its keel travels on three steel rollers at the same level. I am all the more convinced of the excellence of my calculations and of its insubmersibility in that, as is my invariable habit, we shall not be navigating on water but on dry land.<sup>2</sup>

Examining *Dr. Faustroll* more carefully, one notes other levels of critique and invention. The imaginary, alterior realm of ‘pataphysics refers, according to Roger Shattuck, “to a systematic toying with the arrangement of things and their significance until we see the improbable hypothesis as real.”<sup>3</sup> Scientific imagination (Jarry believed in no other kind) bends the logic of proofs, yielding a poetic logic—a logic of making—centered on the exceptional. It is here, at the heart of the unresolvable tension between general laws and personal experience that ‘pataphysics offers an enigmatic clarity for architecture. Shattuck writes:

If mathematics is the dream of science, ubiquity the dream of morality, and poetry the dream of speech, ‘pataphysics fuses them into the “common sense” of Doctor Faustroll, who lives all dreams as one. Beneath the double talk and ellipsis, its formal definition seem to mean that the virtual or imaginary nature of things glimpsed by the heightened vision of poetry or science or love can be seized and lived as real. This is ultimate form of ‘authentic enactment.<sup>4</sup>

The creative potency of Jarry's neo-science might tempt one to search out a set of formal procedures to generate imaginative architectural solutions. Such a literal translation would, however, be contrary to 'pataphysics, since one of its fundamental laws stipulates that 'pataphysics is a science governing *exceptions* and thus any attempt to formulate *general* laws of practice would be self-contradictory. Rather than guidelines or recipes, insight for architectural practice may be gained from the *character* of Jarry's inventions. We might consider the design studio and oneself — through one's own habits of living, designing, making — as sites for unforeseen unions. The studio, in the profession as in the academy, is not only a laboratory for reducing design problems to their essence, but an *elaboratory* for conceiving their possible and impossible combinations and permutations. Each project might be viewed as an improbable new science of the unique, a *mathesis singularis*, cast within specific constraints. Such an architectural practice would not be consulted or applied as a prescribed agenda, but enacted day-to-day, as a 'pataphysical habitude.

The works of Carlo Scarpa embody such attributes. His drawings overflow with constructive demonstrations. His elliptical investigations, fluent in historic precedent, transformed the given constraints of each project into fertile grounds for invention. Scarpa's projects reveal an exacting and playful submersion in the detail of the detail, a 'pataphysical sensibility deriving from an acute pleasure taken in the materials, clients and craftsmen at hand. Scarpa's poetic logic emerges from the materials, on the site of the building through the site of the drawing. His statement "I want to see, therefore I draw"<sup>5</sup> reminds that an architectural drawing is not only an image that *is seen* by others, it is an *apparatus through which one sees*, where past and future, general and exceptional, are cast together in spontaneous gestures.

Amid the world of fluid relationships in Scarpa's drawings one finds ironic subtleties, room for play<sup>6</sup> at the heart of constraints. During a design studio session in the late 1980's, Marco Frascari related one such example of Scarpa's playfulness in the Banca di Popolare of Verona. Being an ancient Roman city, Verona was planned with its *cardo* and *decumanus* set at ninety degrees to one another. As with many Roman cities, however, this ideal measure was in reality a close approximation. Whether as a result of adverse weather conditions or human "error," the actual lay of the streets is slightly acute. Instead of "rectifying" this preexisting condition in his own design, Scarpa incorporated the discrepancy in the layout of internal walls, binding the new building to the instant of the city's

inauguration. From this example, one may imagine that every city, and by extension each building and occupant within, embodies an exception to even the most rigorous formative rules. For architects, there is one certainty. Every site and enterprise is pregnant with discrepancies.

Architectural play incorporates and deflects the multitude of difficulties and problems, often beyond one's control, that are inherent to the process of design and construction. Ironically, Scarpa, who is posthumously revered for his curious and imaginative approach to architecture, was during his life sharply criticized and even sued by the Italian architectural profession for not obtaining a license to practice. Even today there are those who refuse to acknowledge Scarpa as an architect, referring to him instead as a "regional artist."<sup>7</sup>

IMAGELESS CAPTION 1. Another example of 'pataphysical architectonics: in his entrance to the Tolentini building of the Istituto Universitario d'Architettura di Venezia, Scarpa insinuated the school's acronym into Giambattista Vico's motto "vervm l.psU.m fA.ctV.m" (truth through making). The gate itself, a stone-glass "technical wonder... balanced on a track by a 'solo' wheel," weaves innovation with historic precedent. The gate's underlying geometry of 45 degrees evokes the ancient tool of architectural divination, the set square, which permits or denies access to the school of architecture in a traditional gesture of drafting, by "moving along the parallel bar of the sliding track."<sup>8</sup>

The conclusion of this paper begins with the thought that certain things should be left uncertain. Speaking of his own writing techniques, the OuLiPian writer Georges Perec noted: "when a system of constraints is established, there must also be anticonstraint within it. The system of constraints—and this is important—must be destroyed. It must not be rigid, there must be some play in it, it must, as they say, "creak" a bit; it must not be completely coherent; there must be a clinamen: "The world functions because from the outset there is a lack of balance."<sup>9</sup>

IMAGELESS CAPTION 2. What is a clinamen? Imagine a limitless forest of parallel lines, running straight up and down. Imagine that these parallel lines, never crossing, are in fact the traces of atoms, falling, gently falling endlessly straight downward through the void. Yet spontaneously, at uncertain times and at uncertain points, the path of an atom swerves a bit, striking another atom and precipitating patterns of disruption in the laminar flow of the universe. "And if they did not swerve/ No clashes would occur, no blows befall/ The atoms; nature would never have made a thing."<sup>10</sup>

Derived from the Greek *klesis* (bending or swerving), the clinamen appears in the poem *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), in which Lucretius (94-54 B.C.) conveys the epicurean critique of Democritus' view that the universe is composed of an invariable flow of atoms. In such a uniform universal model, Lucretius/Epicurus argue, knowledge and experience could never change, invention could not occur, and the future of humankind would be inexorably determined by the *foedera fati*—the chains of fate. The disruptive swerve of the clinamen is thus tantamount to the expression of free will, a notion resuscitated almost two millennia later by the poet Samuel Coleridge and one of his translators, Alfred Jarry. In a chapter of *Dr. Faustroll* entitled CLINAMEN, a "painting Machine"—the clinamen—dashes itself against the pillars inside the Palace of Machines, the only monument left standing in a post-apocalyptic Paris. While ejaculating the primary colors contained in its stomach into the "dead smoothness" of an otherwise barren world, the painting Machine spins wildly out of control toward its own demise. The clinamen represents an act of simultaneous creation and self-destruction, a pattern followed by Jarry in his own life and emulated by Jarryphiles in the enigmatic assemblies of so-called "bachelor machines." The College of 'Pataphysics, formed in 1949 to perpetuate Jarry's inventions and destructions, included such members as Bunuel, Cortazar, Duchamp, Escher, Picabia, and the Marx Brothers. Numbered among their inventions is a thirteen-month calendar, which begins on Jarry's birth date of September 8th. The invention of 'pataphysics lies at the heart of the eighth month, named *Clinamen*. OuLiPo (Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle), is one of the sub-committees of the College. "For Oulipians," according to Harry Mathews, "the clinamen is a deviation from the strict consequences of a restriction...often justified on aesthetic grounds."<sup>11</sup> One of the most celebrated and haunting examples of a clinamen is offered by Georges Perec's *La disparition* (in English, *A Void*), a detective novel in which the letter "e" is absent throughout the text.

Following a lecture presented by Rem Koolhaas, a student hurled a question: "Le Corbusier gave us five points, Mr. Koolhaas! What do you give us?" Koolhaas responded, "I have no points to offer you: I have only my architecture."<sup>12</sup>

Architecture is caught in a predicament of certitude and finitude. It is a general perception that architects provide, as a fundamental service to clients, an accurate prediction of a complete and economically feasible building. Although a relatively recent development, historically speaking, this perception has become so deeply embedded as to appear an unquestioned truth.

This is part of our professional inheritance. From the early nineteenth century, the project of architecture has been radically reduced to concerns of material and economic expenditure. Subsequently, two familiar characters have been fitted with new clothing: space and time have been transformed by quantitative analyses into program and budget, respectively. Trained on the spasm-cycles of the building industry, it is not surprising that most architects currently describe projects in the following manner: "We're working on a 1.1 million dollar, 11,000 square foot extension to a school..."

To forecast buildings more accurately, drawings and models are enlisted to demonstrate an efficient expenditure of time and money. Drawings in particular have become contractual documents that must leave no ambiguous ground: the finishing phase of construction consists of punch lists and other aggressive stances. Drawings are summoned to draw the lines for these altercations as compared with their traditional role as a convivial ground for investigation and invention. Thus the building becomes a finished product, weighed in the specific gravity of budgetary equations and space management.

Clearly, this is not the realm by which the 'pataphysical demeanor abides. Yet how might one negotiate this terrain? Valuable clues are found in a (perhaps) unexpected figure, Le Corbusier. As reflected by the student's challenge to Rem Koolhaas, Le Corbusier is either championed or ridiculed as the visionary of architectural certitude, the radical colossus of sweeping agendas, of rationality, of the "house as a machine for living in..." We must reexamine our teaspoons regarding this matter.<sup>13</sup> At seventy-three, he stated: "Great things are made out of a multitude of little things, and those little things are daily, successive, without end from morning to night. Daily life is made of perseverance, courage, modesty, and difficulties."<sup>14</sup> For many years, Le Corbusier had pursued the Modular as a thread that might bind buildings to the underlying fabric of nature—an expression of a *mathesis universalis*. Unlike the rigid meter, which he held in disdain, the Modular had a bit of "play" to it; it "creaked" a bit; it was never (and could never be) completely coherent. For Le Corbusier the Modular was far more than a catalyst, lubricant or panacea for the building process. In fact, as Grey Read notes, "Le Corbusier eventually became exasperated at the Modular being used to justify bad design and banned it from his office saying that the system could regulate but could not create."<sup>15</sup> What absorbed Le Corbusier had been reduced to a replicable, non-generative recipe for bad cooks.

By contrast, 'pataphysics hints at a methodical anti-method that would magnify awareness of the unique, the occasion, the improbable circumstances for such an unforeseeable being as a person or building. Curiosity, wonder, the clinamen, imagination, monsters—these are all activating agents that evade and dissolve categories of certainty. The self, this paper, the studio and building site are commonplaces of invention, theatres where memory engages uncertainty. To avoid drowning amid speculation, architects may playfully draw from the problematic heart of our current practice,<sup>16</sup> the certainty of the program. In his final works, it is precisely this topic that occupied Le Corbusier. Projects such as La Tourette and the Philips pavilion for the *Poème Electronique* (a collaboration with the composer Edgard Varèse) demonstrate at each turn, at each joint, exacting subversions of the obligatory program. Overworked and undernourished, the program awaits our imaginative in(ter)vention.

Despite the boldest assertions of Vitruvius and Alberti, perhaps the role of the architect is not to seamlessly unite all the spheres of an architect's activities and responsibilities. Rather, perhaps the challenge is to incorporate and counterpose continuity with discontinuity, embracing and enduring the unforeseeable "multitude of little things" that beset architecture. Each morning, as ritual, Le Corbusier painted or sculpted in his private studio: in the afternoon, he practiced architecture at his atelier. A place for personal meditation: a place for convivial mediation. In this *going-between* Le Corbusier became the threshold, the topos in which the flux of personal and communal inquiry generated uncertain unions, as guided by an exacting imagination. With his "five points of architecture" and monastic habits etched into our well-educated minds, we might have difficulty imagining Le Corbusier as a 'pataphysical architect. Yet, in his private work in the years following the Second World War, he worked continuously on a series of drawings and sculptures called "Ubu," a direct reference to Alfred Jarry's notorious character, Père Ubu (from the play *Ubu Roi*). He referred to these works as "monsters" or "gods." We should attend to these late projects more carefully, particularly considering his own description of the Ubu series as a "secret labor destined for architecture."<sup>17</sup> In his final letter, addressed to the younger members of his atelier (and the architectural profession in general), Le Corbusier writes: "perhaps in years to come the young people will think a little of Père Corbu who now tells them, 'we work in terms of our own conscience...the human drama unfolds within this closed circle."<sup>18</sup>

Architecture conducts itself on the threshold of action and contemplation. Practice and theory are never

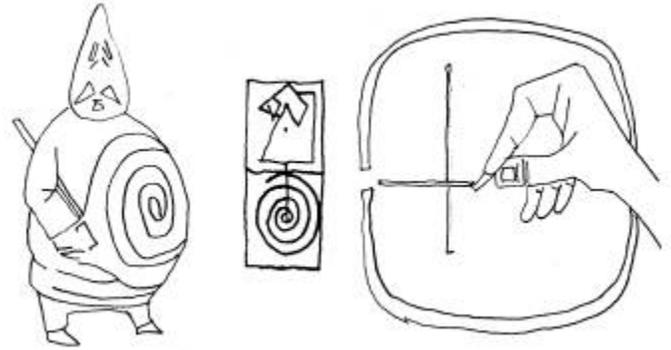


Fig. 1. (l) Portrait of Père Ubu, drawn by author after original woodcut by Alfred Jarry. Fig. 2. (c) From *Poème de l'angle droit*, drawn by author after Le Corbusier. In comparing these images, Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier observe, "The rule and the labyrinth, the archetypal instruments of architectural "projection," are transformed into a pataphysical emblem."<sup>19</sup> Fig. 3. (r) Image from *Poème de l'angle droit*, drawn by author after Le Corbusier, demonstrating how the architect establishes a right angle within the circle of the horizon.

separated by but merely *in* theory or practice. Contemporary economics and broadened interdisciplinary horizons test the elasticity of the architectural profession, precipitating a range of unforeseen hybrid activities built and unbuilt, permanent and ephemeral, tangible and virtual. The capacity for architecture to lend itself to physical and imaginary constructs must be nourished with an exacting care that addresses every project as an opportunity to dwell within and without ourselves; as an occasion for resourceful reinvention of the commonplace, with egress for uncertainty and play within precise constraints, whether at the drawing table, the computer, the construction site, the city, or within ourselves.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Jarry, "The Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, 'Pataphysician: a Neo-Scientific Novel," trans. Simon Watson Taylor, from *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*; ed. Roger Shattuck & Simon Watson Taylor (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Jarry, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Roger Shattuck, Introduction to *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Shattuck, *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Giuseppe Zambonini, "Process and Theme in the Work of Carlo Scarpa," *Prospecta 21: The Yale Architectural Journal* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983) 23.

<sup>6</sup> The German *spielraum* ('playroom') and Italian *gioco* ('play') signifies the allowance made between materials for the 'play' of their unique properties. While English includes this notion of "play," the term most often used with regard to design is "tolerance," reflecting a remarkably different demeanor for detailing and construction.

<sup>7</sup> "He [Scarpa] was destined to be treated with suspicion and dismissed as an outsider from the general debate while he was alive." Zambonini, *ibid.*, 22. According to Zambonini, a student of Scarpa's, Francesco dal Co was one of the detractors who fought to have

Scarpa removed as the Director of the I.U.A.V. Later, Dal Co published a biography on Scarpa.

<sup>8</sup> Marco Frascari, *Monsters of Architecture* (Princeton, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Quote from Perec cited by Warren F. Motte, Jr., "Clinamen Redux," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 23.4, Winter 1986, 275.

<sup>10</sup> Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. Frank O. Copley (New York: Norton, 1977), 2.216-24.

<sup>11</sup> *Oulipo Compendium*, ed. H. Mathews & A. Brotchie (London: Atlas Press, 1998), 126-28.

<sup>12</sup> This episode occurred at the University of Pennsylvania in the fall of 1989.

<sup>13</sup> And we appear to be doing just that. Alex T. Anderson, for example, has examined in his Ph.D. dissertation Le Corbusier's concerns for the equipment of inhabitation, a quality often been overlooked by historians who have centered on his role as a modernist.

<sup>14</sup> Le Corbusier's acceptance speech for receiving the AIA Gold Medal in 1961. *AIA Journal*, June 1961, 97.

<sup>15</sup> Alice Grey Read, "Le Corbusier's 'Ubu' Sculpture: Monster or God," *Proceedings of the 81st Annual Meeting of the ACSA*, 149.

<sup>16</sup> "If someone is looking for something, and perhaps roots around in a certain place, he shows that he believes that what he is looking for is there." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 37e.

<sup>17</sup> Read, *ibid*, 145.

<sup>18</sup> Read, *ibid*, 149. Père Corbu is, of course, a play on Jarry's Père Ubu.

<sup>19</sup> "Truth must be sought in the unique coincidences disclosed in each artistic work, a wondrous truth that cannot be repeated or universalized. Like pataphysics, the *Poème* is a search for the exceptional, which is the universal, and architecture is therefore construed as a 'science' of imaginary solutions." Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 359.