

**Pidgin 25**

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# Architectural Things: From Verbs to Nouns

Max Kuo

The diversity of stylistic and formal experimentation in contemporary American architecture is striking. The epochal proliferation of styles in architecture, however, is nothing new. As early as 1828, Heinrich Hübsch asked: *In What Style Should We Build?*<sup>1</sup> A century later, Reyner Banham would determine this “style worry” a cyclical phenomenon, where the inevitable waning of any great epoch leads to eclecticism with an attendant anxiety over how to choose one out of the many. Today’s own architectural variety, then, is characterized by a renewed worry, perhaps best described with a timelier #FOMO—a fear of

missing out. Unlike yesteryear's monogamy, the pervasive sharing of experimental work, especially via the internet and social media, encourages promiscuity among architects and students who quickly absorb and redeploy each other's insights, techniques, and agendas—however contradictory the combinations. This hallmark of accelerated participation is one clue to understanding the new diversity. Another trend of the times is that the emerging generation of architects make no explicit claims for a collective program or project, happy to be absorbed within their own individual cliques but also happy to oblige when others stroll onto their turf. However content they might be to disclaim any unified agenda, there are undeniable common characteristics taking shape in contradistinction to their predecessors. Perhaps precisely because the digital architecture of yesteryear was so heavily involved in the purging of building elements identifiable as nouns (columns, windows, stairs, roofs), a nascent post-digital interest in architectural form has led to a rediscovery of the pleasure of foraging an architectural history for peculiar objects—a foraging that has extended into the wide open terrain of the internet as a cultural repository.

In the 1990s—and into the early 2000s—recalibration was heavily influenced by the adoption of animation software and Deleuzian thought, an intoxicating cocktail that dissolved much of architecture's vestigial histories. At the

time, architects sifted through the subdisciplines of complexity theory. These cognitive models homed in on relational networks and biomorphic figuration while de-emphasizing disciplinary signifiers such as ornamentation, building components, and historicism. In retrospect, digital architecture approached design through the application of an arsenal of verbs—innovative actions, techniques, and operations that would manipulate some primitive form into complex systems of architecture. In “Architectural Curvilinearity,” Greg Lynn compared architectural design to the culinary theory of mixing.<sup>2</sup> Form was a non-static gooey substance to be whisked, folded, plied, latticed, vaulted, diffused, attenuated, and pinched. This catalog of verbs provided a variety of options to achieve smooth mixtures in architecture, a dialectic path beyond “the reactionary call for unity [or] the avant-garde dismantling of it” in architecture and urban design.<sup>3</sup> Farshid Moussavi’s catalog of proto-architectural gerunds in *The Function of Form* is also considered part of the canon in digital form-making. Each book section in Moussavi’s work begins with a specific architectural building, and then extracts and distills a chosen part into a new magical gooey substance where “the amorphous nature of the base unit means that it has no fixed shape but is embedded with proto-geometric properties that govern the ways it can tessellate in response to external contingencies.”<sup>4</sup> No matter what environmental, programmatic, and urban context,

the goo is robust enough to take on the challenge with transformational capacities to diffuse, distort, segment, coffer, variegate, extrude, or pleat its way into architecture. Like an economic widget, any particular commodity unit will do—what mattered greatly is what one did to the *thing*, or what verb one used to cultivate and extract ultimate value.

### A Multitude of Nouns

In stark contrast, today's post-digital generation of emerging architects has abandoned the emphasis on operational processes and moved collectively towards the foraging and incorporation of nouns. Architects are delighting in the rediscovery of architectural history as an archive of discarded concepts, forms, and readymades full of things both beautiful and meretricious. This prolific use of reference has notably extended into non-architectural objects with no qualms about the use value and appropriateness of incorporating nouns that have never been associated with architecture in the past. The cacophony of references surpasses even the din of post-modern architects. To cite one recent example, Michael Meredith points to a generation of youngish American architects representing "an irresolvable diversity of ideas and identities."<sup>5</sup> Upon surveying this group's work, a collection of nouns immediately spill forth: awkward stud walls, cartoon characters, lumpy disks, dolmens, sand piles, hats, squishy babies,

sandwiches, blocks, pixels as windows, bad chairs, computer codes, rocks, wardrobe accessories, and CAD hatches.<sup>6</sup> Architects today embrace the indiscriminant mode of internet culture as much as the high-mindedness of architectural canon. In some ways, the new approach celebrates the loss of authority and grand narratives both within the discipline and society. In their book *Non-Referential Architecture*, Markus Breitschmid and Valerio Olgiati voice their belief that architecture “can no longer be derived from a common social ideal, at least not in a direct way, because no such common social ideals as we might have shared in the past have endured in today’s world.”<sup>7</sup> In the absence of any higher authority, an invigorating pluralism of cultural sources is legitimate. Queer aesthetics, Corinthian columns, faux-wood laminate, and internet micro-genres are equally valid starting points. The freedom of this “flat ontology” is not without responsibility; undermining meaning and tradition in design, it requires a process of slow and tentative discovery.<sup>8</sup> Risking frivolity and obscurantism, architects must invent new design methods to consecrate the profane noun with disciplinary rigor and social relevance. While Breitschmid and Olgiati advocate for an architecture withdrawn from any external reference, their younger counterparts are clearly embracing pluralistic citation in an accelerated manner quite different from the postmodern pastiche of yesteryear.

The progression of architecture has always partially involved a historical search for origins that challenge the current lexicons, be they futurist machines, Robert Venturi's honky-tonk, or Archizoom's anti-architecture. Yet, no one seems to challenge objecthood as much as the embrace of online repositories, in particular Google's <https://3dwarehouse.sketchup.com/>. The batch downloads of internet's digital bazaar delimit the prospect of cataloging so much unruly stuff. Just take a look at your own PC folders, browser bookmarks, or app generated lists. The proliferation of sources and citations can no longer be sorted by an authoritative system and the user or designer begins to look for local affiliations, conjuring their own discursive meanings *in situ*. First explored in the Helsinki Guggenheim



Fig. 1: Helsinki Guggenheim Museum. Mark Foster Gage, 2014.

proposal, Mark Gage's *kitbashing* technique accumulates and then jams random figures into each other so that icon, ornament, materiality, and figure all go haywire in a simultaneous explosion of weird affiliations. In NEMESTUDIO's *Middle Earth: Dioramas*, junk is strewn about, bound into platonic bundles, and exhibited as scenography. The disheveled and vaguely usable props become a device to underscore the representational



Fig. 2:  
Rummage.  
T+E+A+M,  
2016.

havoc caused by climate change. *Rummage*, a speculative urban scenario by T+E+A+M, imagines new landscape piles of recycling and discarded waste organized to varying degrees of exactitude. A new urban coherence of granularity, color, and topography emerges from the deliberate sorting of an inordinate number of discernible things. These projects suggest that the overproduction of reference has obliterated the indexical sign. There are so many things from so many different places that it does not matter much how each identifiable reference got there and if they are used appropriately, relative to their source. In effect, references get recombined, undermined, and misappropriated so that authenticity is ultimately measured by the distance from both referent and any subsequent meaning.

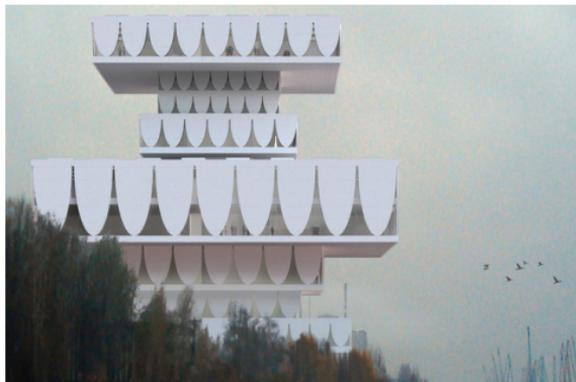
If the digital era in architecture was characterized by the overproduction of manuals on technique, then disjointed lists of objects seem to be the favored medium today. Lists are everywhere in architectural writing. In the aforementioned article, Michael Meredith uses lists to underscore the posture of “indifference” in architecture while Mark Gage subsequently points out that his coterie of friends began using them first.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, if architects are fighting over who used lists first, something is at stake. As philosopher and software designer Ian Bogost describes, the recent history of lists, or more poignantly, “litanies,” began with Bruno Latour, then seeped into the

philosophical work of Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (OOO), and was finally picked up by architects inspired by OOO philosophy such as Gage's own appropriation of kitbashing. Bogost describes the contemporary power of lists as such:

[A]n antidote to the obsession with Deleuzian becoming, a preference for continuity and smoothness instead of sequentiality and fitfulness. The familiar refrain of "becoming-whatever" (it doesn't matter what!)... The off-pitch sounds of lists to the literary ear only emphasizes their real purpose: disjunction instead of flow. Lists remind us that no matter how fluidly a system may operate, its members nevertheless remain utterly isolated, mutual aliens.<sup>10</sup>

As retold by Bogost, lists and litanies are instrumental as a cultural reaction against the philosophical predilections of the 90s and 00s, offering a new cognitive and sensational model of production. The editors of *Possible Mediums*, an architectural volume of collected works, also claim Michel Foucault's Chinese Encyclopedia as an inspiration—another list infamous for its litany of animal descriptors that confounds any attempt at classification and order.<sup>11</sup> Such incongruous compilations of unlike things announce the exhaustion of the Enlightenment project. There can be no virtuosic analysis of the listed items such that they could be assigned to newly

Fig. 3: Perm  
Museum XXI.  
Valerio Olgiati,  
2007.



discovered categories as if there were a higher complex ordering system waiting to be discovered. Instead, the listed items must remain unaffiliated, untethered, and unordered. This state of affairs does not resign itself to an absurdist end game. Rather, the list disrupts the whirl of our cultural expectations, instigating the slow scrutiny and improvisation of creative beginnings.

### The Thingness of Things

The preoccupation with lists and noun-making has enabled objects to develop thing-like qualities where object identity appears off-kilter, unlike itself, and elsewhere. We detect these nascent sensibilities in momentary flashes and in the recognition of “you know it when you see it.” Thing-like qualities have become a pervasive



Fig. 4: Legs.  
Laurel  
Broughton.

quality in American architecture, even appearing in significant works across the globe. Whether it be Valerio Olgiati's non-referential scaling in Perm Museum XXI, Junya Ishigami's combination of floatation, planarity, and sharp edges in *Cuboid Balloon*, First Office's closely observed though

awkward *New York Dolmen*, or Welcome Projects' too-literal urban mannequins *Legs*, a thingness permeates all these architectural projects. Up until now, the words "nouns, objects, things, widgets and items" generally have been interchangeable, but they have lacked the rhetorical specificity of *thingness* itself. To get at this specific idea, one can begin by simply recognizing that all things are objects, but not all objects are *things*. In his essay "The Thing," Martin Heidegger's distinction between the two, object and thing, is the centerpiece of his investigation: things remain noble, independent, and near to us yet beyond representation, while objects are representations appropriate to scientific measurability and utility.<sup>12</sup> Bill Brown picks up on Heidegger's understanding of thingness as a short-circuited object opaque to representation. In his introductory essay "Thing Theory," Brown elaborates on the nature and opacity of thingness:

We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us... when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.

The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.<sup>13</sup>

Brown's thing theory describes an enigmatic process by which an object can emerge from its milieu—a properly functioning signifying chain suddenly breaks, forcing the object to fall out of its orbit, becoming conspicuous and thing-like. Accordingly, thingness possesses a temporal quality even if compressed into simultaneity where the object shimmers in appearance, being both itself and something else. Just as important is the effect this has on the perceiving subject. You are more likely to stumble upon thingness, its oddness protruding out of place, poking at you or lying in wait as a tripping hazard. It can elicit surprise, doubt, curiosity, fear and/or bewilderment in the viewer precisely because things do not appear strictly as they are. While thingness tramples on similar territory as OOO, it is less concerned with a philosophical inquiry into existence than developing an aesthetic theory of similar occurrences across a broad range of aesthetic projects regardless of ideological affiliations.

## Notes:

- 1 Hübsch, Heinrich, Rudolf Wiegmann, Carl Albert Rosenthal, Johann Heinrich Wolff, *In What Style Should We Build?: The German Debate on Architectural Style*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)
- 2 Greg Lynn, "Architectural Curvilinearity," in *Folding in Architecture*, Rev. ed., Architectural Design (London, England : 1971) (Chichester, West Sussex ; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Academy, 2004), 25.
- 3 Greg Lynn, "Architectural Curvilinearity," 24.
- 4 Farshid Moussavi, *The Function of Form*, (New York, N.Y.: Actar and Harvard Graduate School of Design, 2009).
- 5 Meredith, Michael. 2017. "Indifference, Again." *Log*, no. 39 (Spring/Summer):79.
- 6 Meredith, Michael. 2017. "Indifference, Again." *Log*, no. 39 (Spring/Summer): 75-79. This list of nouns corresponds in chronological order to things made by the architects listed on page 79.
- 7 Markus Breitschmid and Valerio Olgiati, *Non-Referential Architecture* (Basel: Simonett & Baer, 2018).
- 8 "Flat ontology, first coined by DeLanda, underscores the ontological democracy of objects. DeLanda, Manuel. (2004), *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*. London: Continuum. 48
- 9 Mark Gage, "Speculation vs. Indifference," *Log*, no. 40 (Spring/Summer 2017): 130.
- 10 Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012). 40
- 11 Kelly Bair et al., eds., *Possible Mediums* (New York, Barcelona: Actar, 2018). 17.
- 12 Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 1st Perennial Classics ed. (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001).
- 13 Bill Brown, *Things* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004). 4

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## **Brittany Utting**

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Fig. 7: Left: Andrea Palladio, Villa Mocenigo. *I quattro libri dell'architettura* di Andrea Palladio. Venice, 1581. Archive.org. Digitized by National Library of Scotland. CC: Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 UK: Scotland.

Fig. 7: Right: Formation of '300 pikes and two lunettes.' Battista Della Valle, Vallo. Venice, 1539. Courtesy of Princeton University Rare Books and Special Collections.  
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Fig. 4: Legs. Courtesy of WELCOME PROJECTS

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Fig.1: Shu Wang, Haining Youth Center, designed 1991, built 1992. Photo by Cole Roskam. From Cole Roskam, "Structures of Everyday Life: The Architecture of Wang Shu," *Artforum* (November 2013): 255.

Fig. 2: Liang Kai, Mitsu Memorial Museum, Japan. Creative Commons.

Fig.3: From Shu Wang 王澐, "Shijian tingzhi de chengshi" 时间停滞的城市 (The City Where Time Halts), Architect 建筑师 96 (October 2000): 41-42.

Fig.4: From Shu Wang 王澐, "Ziran xingtai de xushi yu jihe: Ningbo bowuguan chuanguo biji" 自然形态的叙事与几何: 宁波博物馆创作笔记 (The Narration and Geometry of Natural Appearance: Notes on the Design of Ningbo Historical Museum), Time+Architecture 时代建筑 3 (2009): 75.

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Fig 1: Robert Hooke, Drawing of Cells. Micrographia. London, 1665. Book held by British Library. Wikimedia Commons.

Fig 2: M. J. Schleiden, Cellular Tissue of Plants. "Beiträge über Phytogenesis," Müller's Archiv für Anatomie and Physiologie. Berlin, 1838. Image courtesy of Wellcome Library. Copyrighted work available under Creative Commons Attribution only licence CC BY 4.0.

Fig 3: James Ellis Humphreys, Diagram of mitotic plant cell division. "Some Modern Views of the Cell," Appleton's Popular Science Monthly 49. New York, 1896. Wikimedia Commons.

Fig 4: Gottfried Semper, Carribean Hut. Die vier Elemente der Baukunst. 1851. Courtesy of Oxford University Libraries. Digitized by Google.

Fig 5: Heinrich Anton de Bary's, Diagrams of myxomycetes (slime molds) from Comparative morphology and biology of the Fungi, Mycetozoa and bacteria. Oxford, 1887. Archive.org.

Fig 6: Edwin Abbott Abbott, Diagram of A Square's house from the cover. Flatland. London, 1884. Archive.org.

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Tapetito Tapetote

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The Machine is Broken!

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