BROWSING FOR UTOPIA

THESIS

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By

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers browsing—a consumer activity motivated not by ends but means—as an alternative modus operandi for work on the problem of utopia. When browsing, one simply looks, without knowing what one is looking for, working at a leisurely pace and with vague desiring parameters. One often picks a genre and scans, yet within these vague parameters, a seemingly infinite variety exists. The search engine is a perfect example. Enter a simple query in Google's search algorithm and one is guaranteed at least one surprise. Likewise, utopian thought is often of vague constitution, and never demonstrable. A further distinction must be made between browsing and mere choice. Parametric design often bills itself as the medium of choice, generator of manifold possibilities from which one chooses. Browsing, however, is different from choice because the relationship between options is not always discernible. Parametrics are either overdetermined or lean too heavily on the "happy accident," their surprises either too specific or not specific enough. Moreover, to think utopically one must leave ration (and one's manifolds) behind. Must we leave parametric design behind in order to discover new utopic possibilities?

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BROWSING FOR UTOPIA

This essay offers browsing—a consumer activity motivated not by ends but means—as an alternative modus operandi for work on the problem of utopia. When browsing, one simply looks, without knowing what one is looking for, working at a leisurely pace and with vague desiring parameters. One often picks a genre and scans, yet within these vague parameters, a seemingly infinite variety exists. The search engine is a perfect example. Enter a simple query in Google's search algorithm and one is guaranteed at least one surprise. Likewise, utopian thought is often of vague constitution, and never demonstrable.

What browsing means and how it works, particularly in relation to the Internet search engine and parametric design will be explored in the first section of the essay. The second will deal with recent incarnations of utopian thinking in architecture and urbanism, interrogating their formal and conceptual bases for connections to the ideas hereby outlined. These seemingly unrelated phenomena are juxtaposed not because of a common language element, but because of a more basic structural relationship. They work in similar ways. Each creates a space for experiment and play because of a simple input. The search engine is most transparent in this regard. The results displayed on the

frontispiece of this essay illustrate such a space, and are selected from a Google search for “utopia.” They are intended to be read as an analogue to the process being undertaken, but do not necessarily present parallel content. That being said, their content is almost disturbingly scattershot, and reading them is amusing if not terribly productive.

What, then, is meant by browsing? As opposed to searching, browsing is a consumer activity with no defined ends in mind. One simply looks, without knowing what one is looking for. This does not mean that browsing doesn’t result in purchases. Quite the contrary. But the browser works at a leisurely pace and with vague desiring parameters. In other words, one picks a genre and scans, however nonlinearly, in order to find that perfect thing you just didn’t know you were looking for. One might say it is the sheer unpredictability of browsing that makes it so appealing. These notions will be explored in detail in the first part of this essay. As stated above, the second section will deal with the search for utopia in recent architecture and urbanism, using a few examples and integrating the notion of browsing. Of these, the Ordos villa project serves double duty as both a utopian plan and a peculiar example of browsing as a consumer activity.

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Nothing attests to browsing’s importance quite like the continued appeal of vinyl records. Since hardly any are presently produced, the vinyl enthusiast becomes
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a “crate-digger,” engaged in an endless scan of used record shops and flea markets, not knowing what in particular they’re looking for, but finding nonetheless. This exercise is obviously pleasurable given the continued success of such shops. Recreating this visceral unpredictability has become somewhat of a holy grail for Internet retailers; leading to many a programmer-hour spent developing recommendation engines and indexes in vain. It seems there are only two approaches to this problem: either one recommends based on similar purchases by other customers or based on genre. But in contrast to physical browsing, these supposed discovery-inducing systems are intractably dull, their recommendations plucked from coarsely-grained genre models.

It’s easy for physical retailers to provide for the needs of searchers. Their stock must merely be organized and catalogued. But the browser is more difficult to plan for. There are, after all, as many ways of to browse as there are browsers. Likely many more. Retailers know this better than anyone. There are many different schools of thought on how to foster browsing. A typical approach is to separate a group of popular highlights, simultaneously providing a reduced selection and pushing items you might have overstocked. From there, stock is usually organized by genre and alphabetically. Within this differentiated field, browsers must somehow orient themselves, usually accomplished by genre selection or another vague starting point.

It may be necessary to distinguish further between browsers who intend to make a purchase and those who don’t. Some browse to buy, and others to fill

time. The former are here the preferred constituency for their decisiveness. The latter group one might describe as *flâneurs*, Baudelaire's word for the wandering dandies of the Paris streets that later fascinated Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project*. For these characters, the means are the end. There is no goal other than filling "island paradises of idle time."[i] Their activity lacks motivation and is indifferent to the subtle changes in course that browsing might bring. The *flâneur* has what Georg Simmel would later call a *blasé* attitude toward their surroundings. The browser-to-buy carries a curiosity and opportunism that *blasé* dandyism precludes. Browsing-to-buy is not unmotivated action, but action with a pace and level of directness suited to problems of vague constitution.

A more apt model might be the Situationist *dérive*. The *dérive* is delimited temporally and spatially, and has a goal in mind. Participants are required to build interest in order to provide momentum and direction to the group. Where the browser differs is in terminus. The *dérive* ends somewhat arbitrarily when participants lose interest, but browsing-to-buy ends when a purchase is made. This purchase doesn't automatically equal success, as the "impulse buy" and the fad demonstrate. Like Sylvia Lavin says of the Pet Rock, these purchases might merely be "good enough" objects, provisional placeholders inept enough not to turn on you.[ii] But the Pet Rock is a stand-in for something larger, a conceptual Other that one might call Utopia. The placeholders are ultimately all we have, but that doesn't mean progress is impossible. Each lets one collect just that little bit more information, further confining the field of inquiry and enabling projections to

extend farther afield. Even placeholders beget information, and being informed is the name of the game. An uninformed browser, one outside their usual genre, is often unfounded in their decisions. Imagine being at a bookstore or record shop and stepping beyond one's usual genres or areas of interest. With all point of reference removed, judgment is suspended, and one's buying decisions might not be sound. Even if one does not know what one is looking for, one still must know what one is looking at. A level of attentiveness to one's activity is required to enable discovery.

The blogger is a perfect model of such an attentive, critical browser. They are attentive enough to the grain of the data they encounter that they can construct a kind of continuous manifesto in relation to said data, curating and collecting to construct a whole greater than the sum of its parts. But the range from which a blog's content can come must not be unlimited. In order to build an audience, readers must know the genre in which a blogger operates and the relationship (in general) they take to said genre. This means consistency is the name of the game. Misdirected ramblings are common in the blogosphere, but readership tends to tell the truth. Unlike television, the blogosphere is constituted of individuals who cast a suspicious eye on their media. Blogs, therefore, are both specialized and have a specialized audience, one that is interested first of all in reading, and second of all with confirming already held beliefs.

Browsing is difficult when one's environment—and, by extension, one's unconscious—are saturated with information. One always seems to be looking

for something, however vague or fleeting that something may be. The blogger is more attentive than a mere surfer, more curious than one with a question to be answered. The blogger will always make purchases; will always find something, but that something must be open to interrogation for the blogger to continue an established project. It is a matter of curation, in the toolbox for which sit two battling possibilities, hypertext and the search engine. Both of these claim objectivity, but in each case it means something different. For hypertext, it means that its structure is a network in which no points are unequal, just more or less accessible. For the search engine, it means that lists are constructed from pure, unadulterated data indexed to provide said objectivity.

In an August 2008 editorial for the New Republic, literary editor Leon Wieseltier articulated his discontent with the rise of such objectivity, referring to it as “Google progressivism,” the notion that a more efficient, easier-to-navigate world (and world wide web) is a better one.[iii] He faults this progressivism as a digital remastering of humanity’s existence: all traffic avoided, all detours removed. By his logic, eliminating friction from the information consumer’s experience unfortunately also eliminates surprise. But his straw man is shoddily constructed. What he overlooks is that the objectivity of a search engine never calcifies, never becomes a mere list, it is always a fleeting, shifting bulk of links surprised to be in one another’s company. In short, the search engine is not hierarchical. Because the network changes, so too does the list, as if both are in constant movement, neither in front of the other. The simultaneity (or nearly so)

of network and curation is always expressed at the top of Google's list, 0.02 seconds or something similar, marking the supremacy of an efficient but "surrational" index.[iv]

The search engine shines its light on various parts of the network and is therefore less hierarchical than the network itself, not more. In a network, there may be things linked to many other things, and others linked to only a few. But often these highlights each represent a capsular milieu. A list disables this encapsulation by bringing different milieus into alignment. This juxtaposition is provisional, lasting only until another links supplant their position, which may happen daily or by the minute given the rapidity of information travel on the web. The search brackets of certain possibilities as desirable, listing not necessarily by popularity but by density. Perhaps a series of brackets is necessary, leaving room for improvisation and misdirection at every juncture while maintaining movement with a goal in mind. This is similar in many ways to curation, a model advanced by R.E. Somol and Sarah Whiting as constitutive of new possibility. One can collect a group of things that add up to more than their sum. The whole can be greater than its parts.

No matter the relative specificity of one's query, a Google search always contains at least one surprise. The function of a search engine isn't to provide answers, but to curate a field. It enables discoveries that are within a network of relationships and implications. By it's very rationality, it enables the irrational. Naming aside, what Borgesian logic would put together an interactive online

game for medieval enthusiasts, a staggeringly comprehensive guide to the gay and lesbian scene on the continent of Asia, bars or restaurants in three US cities, a forum for discussing the music of Canadian pop star Alanis Morrissette, and an animal rescue ranch funded by the sale of proprietor Kinky Friedman's signature brand dips and salsas? The sheer improbability of these results' juxtaposition is staggering, and one can be sure even stranger constellations exist.

Google's is a remarkably uncritical curation, a gesture of selection and prioritization with opaque logic at best. Scanning such results is a hybrid activity, somewhere between searching and browsing. When one has something specific in mind, only that perfect match will suffice. But when one's query is less a question and more a provocation, said results can provide unexpected and ultimately fruitful detours leading one to answers or—perhaps more usefully—more questions. Hypertext, while networked and nonlinear, has difficulty providing a user with conflicting opinions or permitting them to leave a given milieu, merely reinforcing already held opinions and preventing the kind of juxtapositions permitted by an index of associations like the search engine. This is the central problematic of "surfing" in general, that one is almost never exposed to content outside a given range. With hypertext, it is difficult to leave one's comfort level and find conflicting opinions. Websites don't often link to things with which they disagree, and if they do it is often in jest. Hypertext surfing means a stream of information is always passing by, but the vast majority of it is

content of one's own selection. Search engines are great at providing an extra jolt of surprise when one's browsing habits have become sclerotic.

It seems to this author that search engines and web browsers should have their names reversed. When one enters a web address in a browser window, something specific appears for which no alternative will suffice. The search engine, however, provides an assortment of options. All remain connected to a given query, though their relevance varies according to Google's algorithms. The connection between these results is often opaque and this opacity is a proprietary necessity. Google's search algorithms are a closely guarded secret, a holy grail of sorts in the business of indexes. Their level of satisfaction is unparalleled, giving users (almost) exactly what they want at their fingertips. But at the same time, such accuracy and satisfaction gives Google capital to collect information about its users, information they can then use to construct equally complex advertising algorithms to determine what one might want now, next week or in the future. There is always a circuitous information flow from search engines, a give-and-take that enables the engine's developers to collect data for the improvement of its index. The ordinary web patron has no need to understand the complex algorithms that enable their searches, so revealing them would only complicate their experience unnecessarily. In this case, one turns oneself over to the engine's capacity at the expense of customization.

Isn't it better to be in control of the system yourself? Better to know what to expect than to merely know to expect something? This logic permeates current

architectural discourse surrounding parametric design software. There is a shift afoot from designers as software consumers to software creators. From Gehry Partners' CATIA reformation to the scriptwriters' subtle tweaks, an understanding of the capacities of one's software is incontestably beneficial. One needs to move past the happy accident to an engagement with the actions and reactions of a piece of software. But this need not preclude discovery. Instead of discoveries one can't explain, the more desirable discovery is one informed by previous engagements and dependent on a given set of information. It's a matter of establishing one's own constraints, of dictating the determining factors of a design process. A matter of having a project and sticking to it. Whereas early adopters were dependent upon the happy accident, unable to explain the actions of the codes they appropriated, the scriptwriters of today have an intimate relationship with their self-authored software.

Is scriptwriter exiting their area of expertise, becoming an amateur programmer rather than an expert designer? If one plugs numbers into a script in order to see what happens, the agency of the designer is disabled temporarily in order to provide surprise. These surprises are fleeting, don't build on pre-established machinery, and aren't useful outside the immediacy of the project at hand. In other words, these discoveries are fleeting. In surrendering to the urge for unpredictability, one might ostensibly be constructing an index like those in the work of Peter Eisenman, but in his case, the index is often an explanatory machine rather than a generative one. One could argue that parametric software

enables a closer alignment between process and explanation, setting aside the need for post-facto rationalizations like those of Eisenman or more recently Alejandro Zaera-Polo and his “Hokusai Wave.”

But with parametric design, the ruleset is meant to yield a variety of possibilities within a tightly circumscribed horizon instead of providing unforeseen or surprising results. One might therefore describe parametric design as a medium of choice, a generator of manifold possibilities from which one chooses. Scripting is a means by which the medium can be controlled, a justification mechanism like any other. It provides choice but not discovery.

Browsing is different from choice because the relationship between options is not always discernible. Parametric designs are either overdetermined or unpredictable, their surprises either too specific or not specific enough. Moreover, it is misleading to think that generative or parametric software does all the boring work. In the end it does the interesting work as well, leaving the designer to act as arbiter, deciding when and where its machinations leave the bounds of acceptable form. This role is a common one in practices where the “happy accident” predominates and software is used at an amateur level, often to fill the *horror vacui* at the beginning of projects. In a way, parametric software has become the means and the end. Instead of using it to demonstrate, it is the thing to be demonstrated. But if one is too concerned with demonstrating viability can one work on utopia?

To quote Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, “[T]he more powerful the model constructed, the less possibility will be foreseen in it for any form of human resistance, any chance of structural transformation.”[v] The more a utopian theorist succeeds in creating a true alternative, the more she fails in effecting change. It was precisely this overambition that led architects to propose the megastructure, ultimately leading to utopia’s forceful ejection from discourse embodied by the events of May ’68. The megastructure was proposed by a range of practitioners as a means to transform contemporary metropoli, but their visions proved illusory. Neither the Japanese Metabolists nor the Europeans of Team X—the only groups to believe in their proposals’ feasibility—ever came close to realizing their phantasms. Reyner Banham tolled the official death knoll with his book *Urban Futures of the Recent Past* in 1976, but by then the fate of these utopian dreams was already known. Critique of such holistic plans has dominated discourse since that time.

With ambitions rising and optimism recently returning, the question of utopia has returned from its postmodern hiatus. The reasoning for this reemergence is twofold, though perhaps two sides of the same coin. In recent years the architect seems simultaneously growing in scale of vision and losing that vision. Whole cities are being designed from scratch, but there is a parallel shift away from speculation and towards service, especially among the older generation of globetrotting stars. Given this state of affairs and the onset of economic recession, a knee-jerk return to utopia seems almost inevitable.

But this type of ambition is far from a recent development. As long as urban settlements have existed, designers have no doubt considered it the ultimate expression of their visions, the largest scale at which aesthetic judgment can act. Since the Renaissance, the question of the ideal city has often been geometric one. The forging of ideal part-to-whole relationships that concerned architects at the time almost inevitably expanded to encompass the city plan.

A recent engagement with utopian geometry is *New City*, a collaboration between Greg Lynn, Peter Frankfurt and Alex McDowell in which the Internet is presented as a constantly morphing tubular structure (but still not a “series of tubes”) which reorganizes in relation to current work between physical locations. This strategy is in response to banal virtual worlds like that of the online “world” in Second Life, which represent reality with an underwhelming accuracy. In a sense, *New City* constitutes a new genre of utopian thought, a second shift paralleling the famous one from dislocations of space to dislocations of time. Whereas Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* was geographically distinct and Jules Verne’s fantasies temporally so, *New City* is utterly separate by both criteria. Ungoverned even by gravity, the most basic of physical constraints, it represents a parallel world as well as a distinctly different one.

But this kind of imagination might be, in Fredric Jameson’s assessment, unable to induce structural change. In his recent book *Archaeologies of the*

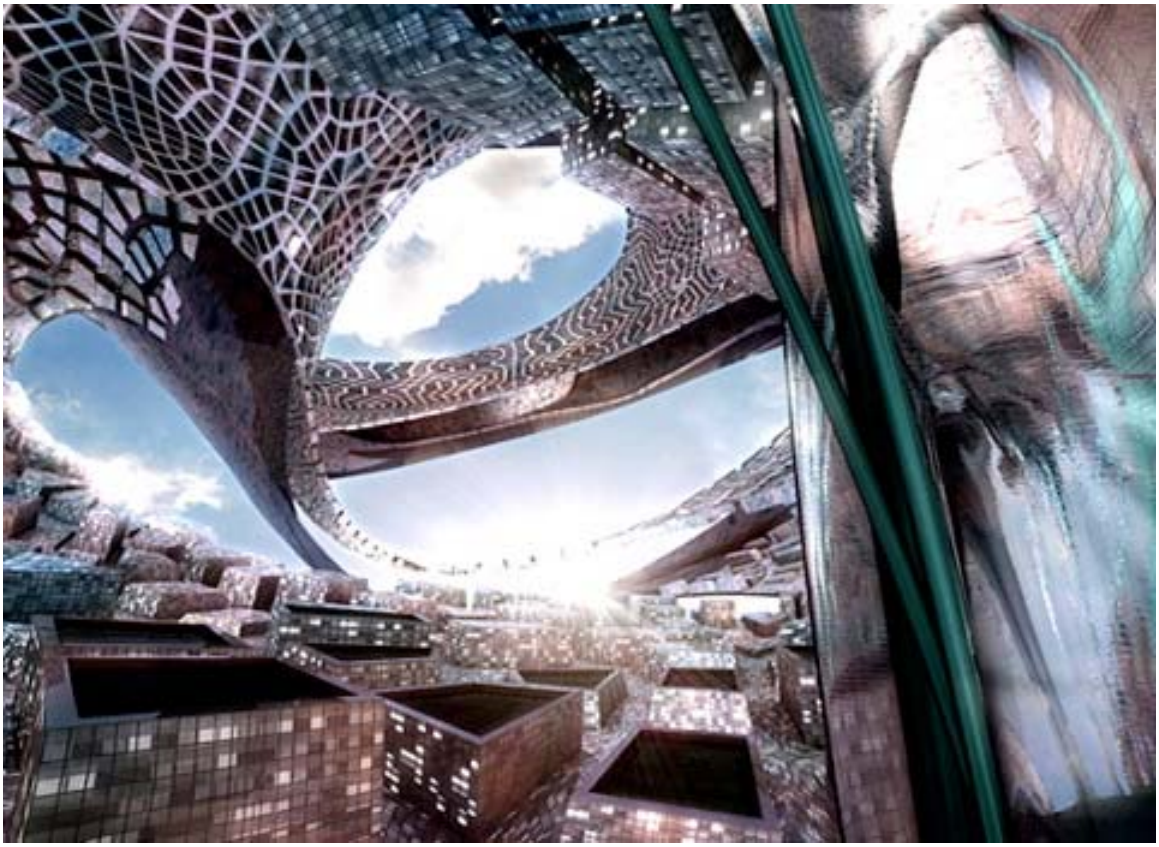

Figure 1.1: ***New City.*** **Greg Lynn, Peter G. Frankfurt & Alex McDowell (2008)**

Future Jameson posits that utopias, in order to avoid becoming totalizing models, must remain focused on overturning rather straightforward aspects of the status quo.[vi] By this logic, megastructure failed because it aimed to solve all problems at once, forever abolishing urban blight, bringing light and air to the inner city and making all citizens equal in one broad gesture. In the megastructure era, the problem was a combination of blighted cities and an ever-increasing population. Today an exponentially larger population must address their position within ecologies of various scales in the face of global climate change.

With the rise of such predicaments come ever-more ambitious plans to address them. Recent years have found a new generation reconsidering the question of utopia in relation to this predominant contemporary problematic. From walled cities to floating artificial islands, these projects also constitute a new phylum, a new genre, the eco-utopia. It appears urbanists have found new capital for proposing social change through design. By Jameson's equation, the utopian is a problem-solver, but their solutions are never demonstrable.[vii] Because utopia has't been constructed, taking up the question always already means one is making propositions that have no demonstrative capacity. There are no criteria with which to judge, and therefore projects are always propositional. What constitutes a utopian project, in this formulation, is a fully-formed alternative, a proposition of solution. Utopias are therefore a perfect example of the dialectic constructed by Somol and Whiting between critical and

projective in “Notes Around the Doppler Effect.” In arguing for a projective practice, they might simultaneously effect a return to utopianism.

If utopias must solve a specific problem perceived by the creator, for Foster + Partners’ Masdar City, that problem is the emission of carbon associated with fossil fuels. Located in the desert just outside Abu Dhabi, its combination of energy generation, moderate density, and transportation options will reportedly have zero waste and zero carbon emissions. Six kilometers square, the city will house fifty thousand and run predominantly on solar energy. Critiques of this claim largely center around the treatment and distribution of potable water, something that is curiously omitted from descriptions of the city’s systems. What is perhaps most compelling about Masdar is that it’s quite literally a walled city. These walls are multi-functioning elements meant to isolate the researchers within from the bustle of the city outside, and also to create windblocks from the desert sand.

Foster’s solution is quite different from Arup’s Dongtan City, a parallel eco-city currently under construction on a small island off the eastern coast of the Chinese mainland. Dongtan uses planning methods descended more from Ville Radieuse than the local vernacular. Its low blocks are reminiscent of Brasilia’s superquadras, only without the broad avenues dividing one from another. Looking at the bird’s eye renderings of this serene urbanized landscape, one can’t help but imagine what it will look like with week-old trees instead of the mature arbors placed there in Arup’s drawings. Probably like a wasteland, like

Figure 1.2: *Masdar Development*. Foster + Partners (2007)

Figure 1.3: *Dongtan City*. Arup (2008)

those grainy black-and-white photos of Brasilia when it was a government center minus the population. Far from what one might imagine utopia to be. But perhaps this highlights a central issue within designs of this type: the capacity for invention.

Masdar, by contrast, is a proto-desert city with a structure reminiscent of medieval quarters throughout the Mediterranean. Streets are narrow and winding, buildings are of three to four stories, and natural elements (a forested corridor and river) are integrated to contribute to passive cooling in the unforgiving desert climate. Aside from carbon-free electricity, the primary formal innovation of Masdar seems to be its system of sunshades—presumably containing photovoltaics—that stretch between buildings and over the narrow corridors and courts Foster + Partners show in their presentation.

What's best about sustainability as an idiom is that it dictates a problem. Instead of leaving the designer with the typical *horror vacui*, it enables the type of play at which designers are so adept. Is it possible that this operates somewhat like the search engine's indexes, limiting the field of play? This becomes a problem when it devolves into cut-and-paste, a selection of already existing objects to construct a new thing. It can't be a kit of parts. In selecting a kit of parts, the sustainability "pioneer" brackets their own possibilities in a way different from the browser's field. In the browser's field, a given level of demonstrability does not prevent the designer from doing their thing, as would happen when a group of very tangentially related things are used to construct the

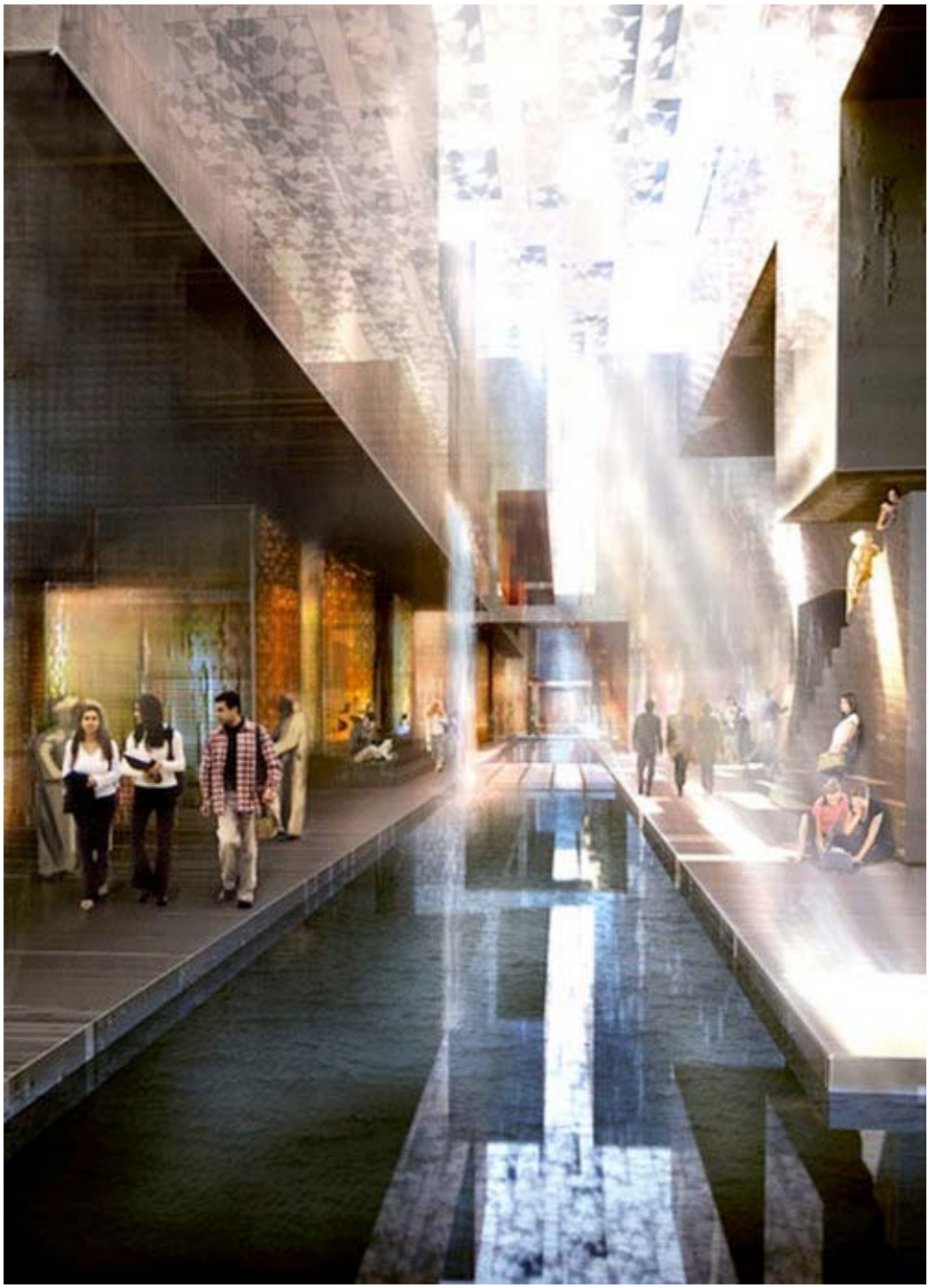

Figure 1.4: *Masdar Development*. Foster + Partners (2008)

new. Like curation, a browsing model has faith that the end product may exceed the sum of its parts through resonance and juxtaposition.

In contrast to the unilaterally designed eco-cities just discussed, an alternate model of utopia is currently being surveyed at Ordos in Inner Mongolia. There Chinese artist and designer Ai Wei Wei and his FAKE Design office have curated a field of one hundred villas, each designed by a different young architect selected by Herzog & de Meuron. Within the masterplan developed by FAKE, these architects were given a plot and a simple assignment. Program and budget were inflexible, but aside from these necessary borders the designers were given free reign. With essentially no client, many chose to either design for themselves or appropriate from aspects of Chinese culture. Some tried harder than others to extract specificity from the generic sites, but as a whole the villas will create a kind of field effect, especially given their proximity.

After phase one designs were submitted, photographs of the site model had the appearance of an “architectural zoo,” and was treated as such in the media. Critiques abounded viewing the project as representative of capital’s almost nihilistic frivolity. But after the site has been filled, these denouncements seem unfounded. Because of the field effect and the fact that all were given an identical program, Ordos is different not just in degree but in kind from Modernist experiments like the Vienna and Stuttgart building expositions of the thirties. These exhibitions were concerned with presenting a holistic vision of modernism rather than a diversity of ideas, and their architects were bounded by this vision.

Figure 1.5: Masterplan, *Ordos 100 Villas*. FAKE Design & Ai Wei Wei (2008)

But perhaps the difference is deeper in that at that time a consensus had been reached (at least among the designers represented therein) about what the future looked like. No such consensus exists today. The current lack of consensus underlines the fact that Ordos is within a democratizing and diversifying China. In contrast to the architecture of the recent Olympic Games in Beijing, it is outspoken in its political critique, unafraid to present an alternative vision of community. The overwhelming scale is essential to this critique, as is density. At such a large scale, the part-to-whole relationship reverses, making diversity essential to achieve a vision.

The nearness of these villas to one another also makes it very different from the Houses at Sagaponac of a few years ago, to which it has been compared by some of the American participants in interviews. At Sagaponac, each site has a specificity that is lacking at Ordos, and there only one may be viewed at a time. In short, Ordos is a profoundly social endeavor meant to serve not necessarily as a development model but a conceptual one for the future of Chinese urbanism. Its immediate neighbors—part of a larger city plan comprising habitation for half a million—will be unable to avoid confronting the diversity of its vision, and it will perhaps serve as a democratizing influence.

Each of the villas contains the entirety of the conceptual structure; is complete in itself, but also requires its colleagues in order to actualize to its full potential. The part does not equal the whole. It seems strange, therefore, that so many of the designers chose to represent their villas as lonely objects in a empty

desert, lest we be reminded that their visions will be given constant visual competition. One could imagine a potential buyer browsing the one hundred villas, and their proximity enables, even encourages it. In doing so, one would be presented with a variety of visions, but constantly be reminded of the presence of the developments inherent similarity. This is different from something like Levittown because it's diversity is inherent rather than additive. In other words, Ordos is not dependent upon customization. The one hundred villas construct a liberal utopia, a diversified field within which given parameters of normative behavior are stretched to their breaking point, but not broken.

Sites boundaries are maintained, but building bulk and levels of enclosure vary widely along with form. From compound plans to monolithic vertical insertions, the villas will run the gamut of massing strategies and material articulations. Architecturally, Ordos shows that there are as many approaches to a typology—even one as historically charged as the villa—as there are architects. As many schools of thought as there are schools. Perhaps more. This unfortunately means the villas have lots of breadth, but not much depth. The variety of technique is broad, but because of this, there isn't much overlap, and the field does little to build consensus. If in fact is evenly distributed, it will suffice to survey a set of symptomatic examples to sample their variety. The six selected below aren't necessarily judged best, but most symptomatic in that the strategies they deploy are common.

JohnstonMarkLee's villa, titled "HouseHouse" has all the solidity required by local construction methods, but with a wink to the playfulness of eighties LA. Their pitched-roof composition literally bows to its neighbors in a gesture lifted from Eric Owen Moss' Petal House of 1982. It's oversized and habitable window openings more obliquely reference Morphosis' 2-4-6-8 House in Venice Beach, a project to which JML recently appended an addition. The monolithic treatment of roof and wall in concert with these large punched openings effects a scalelessness that recalls a several of Herzog & de Meuron's private commissions, including the House in Leymen, France of 1997 and the unbuilt Fröhlich House of 1995. These two projects in particular also make use of the prototypical house profile, something JML doubles and facets, giving their villa a jewel-like appearance in excess of H&deM's more subtle subversions. HouseHouse embodies a tendency toward the monolith at Ordos, as several other designers chose to produce singular forms for their villas.

Similarly monolithic and scaleless is the proposal from Derek Dellekamp, an architect based in Mexico City. He proposes a roughly oval shaped extrusion reminiscent of Peter Zumthor's chapel at Sogn Benedegt, Switzerland (1989) but at a much larger scale. The design retains the gravity of Zumthor's building, though not it's solidity. This brick monolith is perforated and hollowed out to create semi-private balconies on its flanks. But perhaps the most dramatic element of Dellekamp's villa is that a large basement story will be hidden from view by the sand of the desert around it, enabling the monolith to stand apart

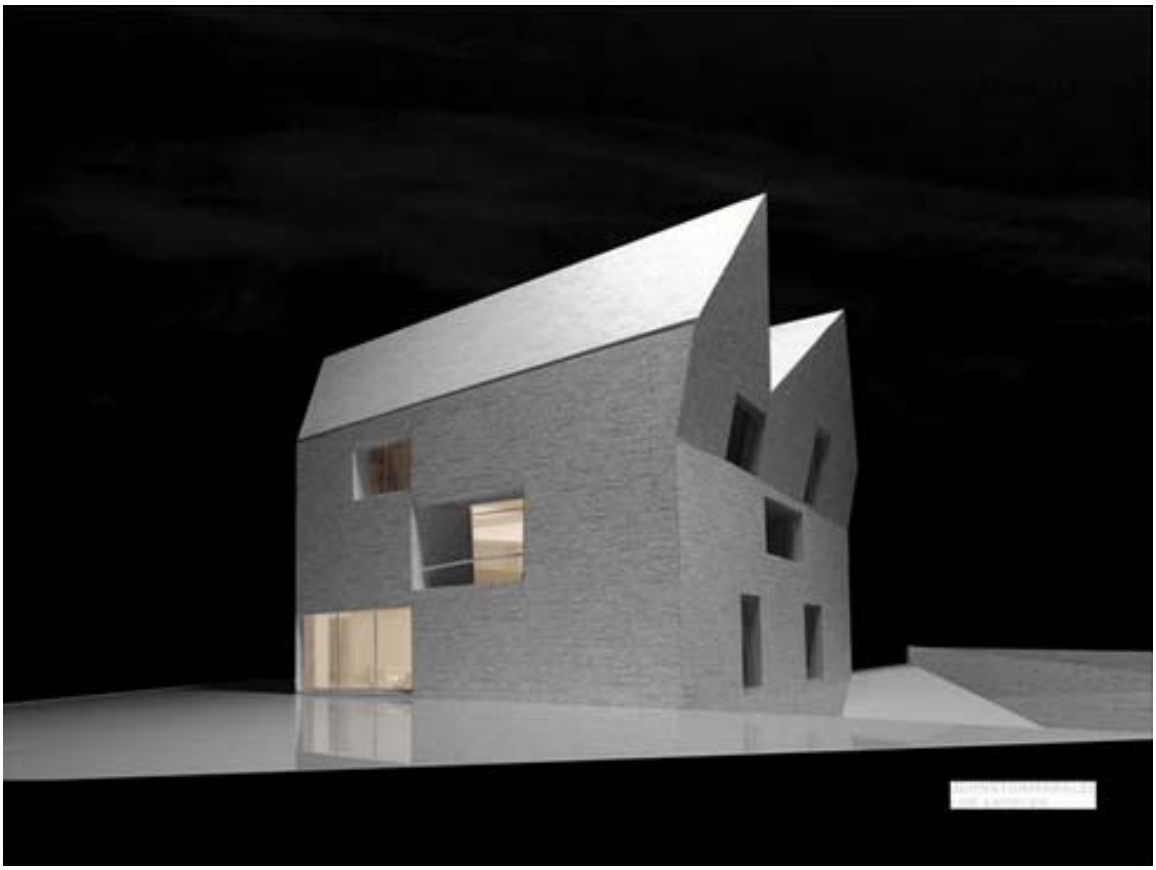

Figure 1.6: *HouseHouse, Ordos Villa #43*. Johnston Mark Lee (2008)

Figure 1.7: *Ordos Villa #18*. Derek Dellekamp (2008)

from its neighbors more than would have been possible had the basement floor area remained above ground. This tower-and-podium type was common in the proposals. Some brought both parts above ground and others (including Dellekamp) to hide their podia.

Alejandro Aravena also chose to bury his villa's service spaces, but carves a light well from its center. In this hollow center, several soft extrusions weave light to the inner reaches of each lower story. Some resemble Le Corbusier's *canons a lumiere* at La Tourette (1960), while others are at a larger scale and function as more significant formal devices. Aravena's *canons a lumiere* appear almost rubbery, malleable and stretching their brick skins. A periscope-like tower is accessed through a similarly scaled "*canon d'escalier*" reaching to the floor below. This highly articulated central portion of the villa contains the public functions. Aravena striates the villa's program, constructing a hierarchy of public to private from front to rear. A transversely oriented forecourt and pool bracket the more public spaces of the villa in the center, with private spaces to the rear. This central public space can be thought of as a courtyard house of its own, carved spaces and deep light well. This light well contradicts itself in that it is in fact the most private space of all, bordered on three sides by brick. The courtyard house was also a common theme among the one hundred, though Aravena's entry and that of Julien de Smedt were most transgressive.

de Smedt's "Big Brother House" is meant through its courtyard to condone the voyeurism and exhibitionism associated with its reality TV namesake. JDS

Figure 1.8: *Ordos Villa #2*. Alejandro Aravena (2008)

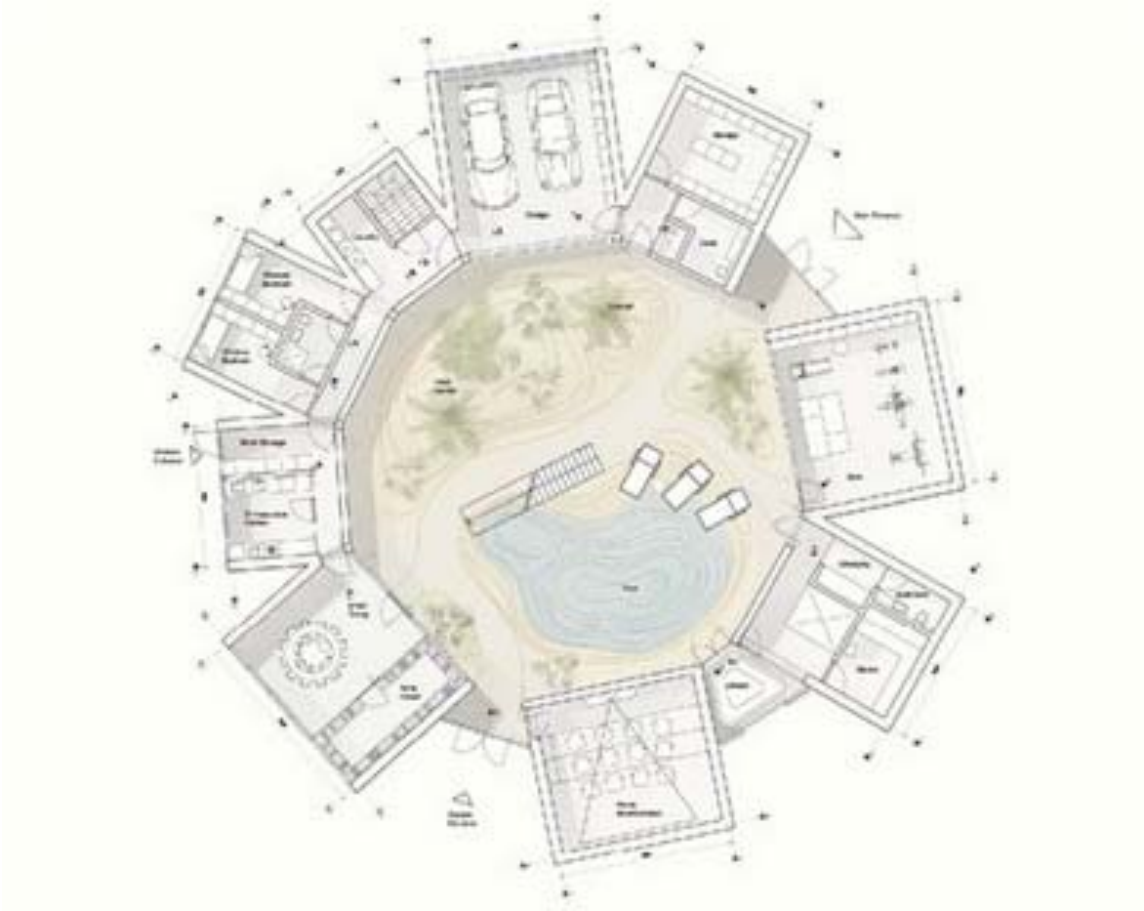

Figure 1.9: *Big Brother House, Ordos Villa #35*. JDS Architects (2008)

Figure 1.10: *Big Brother House, Ordos Villa #35*. JDS Architects (2008)

deploy what might be called their “asterisk” type in which all rooms fan out from a single court. The asterisk is not new to JDS’ oeuvre, but this iteration has a categorical looseness, inviting the desert sands to enter its court. By isolating each room as a form in itself, JDS embody another common tendency, that of individuation.

Testbedstudio of Sweden use similarly literal graphics to propose a “house of one hundred rooms,” a literal microcosm of the one hundred villas as a group, but a drawing of these rooms shows questionable translation. Each of their rooms is of a different size and with a different level of enclosure, giving more a sense of pure diversity than difference in service of a collective. There is no standard deviation within testbed’s one hundred rooms.

A better microcosm might be the villa designed by Michael Meredith and Hilary Sample (MOS) of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Their microcosm isn’t literal, in that there are not one hundred pavilions, but in the concept of a manifold with internal variety. MOS propose what appears a haphazardly arranged group of pyramidal-roofed pavilions. These pavilions explode from the bounds of a rectangular frame articulated by two aligned pieces in the initial schematic design, one of which was later removed. This jack-in-the-box quality underlines both the villa’s informality and its wit. It seems the pieces could be rearranged to form a foursquare shape, but no index as to this possibility is registered.

The pitched-roof forms MOS uses for their pavilions simultaneously function as thermal chimneys and take a shape that has historical and vernacular

Figure 1.11: ***House of One Hundred Rooms, Ordos Villa #91*****. testbedstudio (2008)**

Figure 1.12: ***House of One Hundred Rooms, Ordos Villa #91*****. testbedstudio (2008)**

Figure 1.13: Schematic Design*, Ordos Villa #53*. MOS (2008)

resonance. These pavilions have a familial relationship to one another, are all of what one might call a type. Each of their formations is informed by negotiation with a fixed set of forces.

MOS also take an interesting approach to the issue of sustainability, using passive cooling and thermal mass to drive the form of their pavilions. Each pyramidal roof serves as a cooling chimney, drawing desert heat from the space below. They use a loose parameter—passive cooling—to provide direction, but within said parameter play can occur. To this author MOS have an exemplary relationship to parametric design, using it not as determinant

Parametric design can yield directed improvisation, one informed by limitations or by problematics. In the same way an Internet search engine takes a somewhat generic input and curates a field, the loose parameters of MOS' pavilions define a zone of action within which free play occurs. The varying scales of rectangle, their haphazard intersection and the heights of pyramidal extrusion all function within the given parameter, but are not an index of it. Deviation from an ideal is not recorded because no ideal exists. No part of the MOS villa stakes a claim to optimization.

Formal exercises like those of MOS are made more feasible given their grounding in things like passive cooling. While it's still formal above all else, the architects bring in demonstrative reinforcements to rationalize their play. A parameter carves out such space, within which one is free to decide the terminus of an investigation. These parameters are formative, but not definitive. They are

Figure 1.14: *Ordos Villa #53*. MOS (2008)

a loose-fitting index, one meant not to progressively limit possibility but provide a minimal base condition toward which optimization is not necessary. The action upon these parameters is neither additive nor subtractive but merely transformative. It is not a diversity model, but one in which a set of relationships is common to all parts. One might say with parametric design retroactive theorizations have run their course. But these demonstrations need not explain all aspects of a piece of design, just provide an arena for action within which the capacities of the designer take hold. The designer is adept at dealing with things, and sidestepping that capacity to become a mere observer and arbiter is a questionable motive.

Unlike Reinhold Martin's voting booth, in which a "moment of truth" occurs, the vague parameter doesn't preclude iteration, an important affordance of digital design methods.[viii] The browser isn't indecisive, their decisions are still final, but their process is one that leaves room for unexpected discoveries, for detours in unforeseen directions. In the voting booth one is never surprised by the choices offered, or only marginally so. The meaning of one's choice is always qualified. - Similarly, parametric design implies linearity, a one-to-one relationship between input and finished product, a fitness of form to function. But a more productive approach might be to think of the parameters one establishes as brackets for the imagination, within which a constellation of possibilities is nascent and virtual. Fredric Jameson compares the utopian mentality to that of the inventor, for whom cyclical proposition and testing yields discovery.[ix] These vague parameters work

similarly. They permit the iterative process to which design is so closely associated to remain in place because of their intensive differentiation.

These one hundred interventions yield a field effect when viewed together and the overall subsumes individual gestures. This consensus is provisional at best, something akin to Droog Design's *Chest of Drawers* (1991). The masterplan is pulled to its limits to hold these designs together, but that is the nature of the exercise. At best, Ordos presents a liberal, diversity model of utopia, in touch with the increasing materialism of a democratizing society like China's, but translatable to other contexts as well. The villas seem to each speak their own mind, but not at the expense of the plan, and not to the detriment of the collective. They provide a model of diversity different from the confrontational sense of the word, to which it often defaults in an American context. At Ordos, each is given a space in which to do as they please, but their doing participates in the construction of a collective. The plan has power because of difference, not in spite of it.

The villas' consensus isn't only that each is different; they are all within a given range their similarities outweigh their differences. Ordos is ultimately not about individuality. What matters aren't the individual juxtapositions one to another, but the desiring field induced by the overall. Ordos' villas come into provisional and short-lived alignment, only to dissolve once visually supplanted. If there is a proposition central to all of the villas, none of them encapsulate it entirely.

1.15: *Chest of Drawers*. Tejo Remy, Droog Design (1991)

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Browsing constitutes a new way of relating to cultural materials because of its capacity to surprise and its unpredictability. It is enabled by the unprecedented access to information and visual content provided by electronic media. But browsing isn't worthwhile if the selection is too broad, and the vague parameter, search engine and utopian problematic all curate a field for one to peruse. While these fields are dependent upon existing content, one must remain hopeful that the whole may exceed the parts.

Though parametric design makes claims to enabling the designer to browse choices, these choices are all within a tightly circumscribed manifold of expectation and fail to produce the discovery and unpredictability inherent in browsing. In using parameters, a designer controls the unpredictable nature of the digital design medium, programming out the happy accident but also losing the machine's capacity to surprise, throwing out the proverbial baby with the bath water. By selecting a parameter resistant to optimization, MOS show a way out of this trap.

Likewise, Utopian thought is by nature vaguely defined. Browsing merely offers an alternate model to the problem-solving described by Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future*. This author's conviction is that one can still think utopically without a specific aspect of the status quo to overturn. Even if one
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doesn't care to construct ecotopias, utopian thought and transformative action are still possible.

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[i] Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of the *New Republic*, uses the phrase "island paradises of idle time" in an editorial titled "Scratches" from August 27, 2008. Wieseltier also mourns what he perceives as the death of browsing because the power of the search engine disables the kind of wandering eye and discovery it enables. Retrieved from: http://www.tnr.com/story_print.html?id=06e305a5-5ea7-4e97-b283-fb2016460cfd August 14, 2008.

[ii] Lavin references the Pet Rock in her lecture "Practice Makes Perfect," published in *Hunch* 11 (2007): 106-113.

[iii] Wieseltier, "Scratches."

[iv] In their book *Situation Normal…*, Lewis, Tsurumaki and Lewis develop a similar hypothesis to the one here outlined, labeling their results "surrational." Their examples include everything from defunct military research (a ship made of ice, a bent-barrel rifle) to the spatial tactics of Buster Keaton, but one could describe the analogical results found on these pages the same way. While algorithms determine their organization, the sheer size and complexity of the Internet content they index enables what LTL might call "surrational" lists. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998).

[v] Jameson, Fredric. "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology," in *Architecture Theory Since 1968*, edited by K. Michael Hays (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998): 440-4XX.

[vi] Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2006): 11.

[vii] Ibid., 11.

[viii] Martin develops this thesis in "Moment of Truth," published in *Log* 7 (Winter/Spring 2006): 15-20. For Martin the moment of truth requires decisiveness and commitment. He uses it to critique the post-critical project of R.E. Somol, Sarah Whiting et. al, which he diagnoses as indecisive and *laissez faire*.

[ix] Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 11.

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