

The Middle: On Freedom, Autonomy, and Pleasure

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A brief yet critical perspective on how the (broader) geographic “middle” of America can provide a fruitful space for architectural experimentation as demonstrated by a renewed interest in historical typologies, crafted traditions, and post-industrial landscapes found in recent design work by emerging practices.

In 2016, the divided views surrounding the presidential election made apparent a major disconnect in values between large coastal cities and the middle of America. In the months following, several waves of protests with clever and contemplative signs swept across a divided nation. There was one recurring sign in particular that succinctly articulated the surreality of this national moment: it was a photoshop of the president’s head on the end of René Magritte’s pipe in *The Treachery of Images*, declaring “Ceci n’est pas un président.” After the initial humor of how ridiculous the image itself appeared—a smirking man with a continuous chin tapering into a sperm-like body that hovers in pictorial space—the message of the medium sank in.

Magritte’s infamous 1929 painting is a commentary on semiotics in the age of mechanical reproduction. For architects, the briar pipe represents a call to arms—for “Architecture ou révolution”—as Le Corbusier declares in *Vers une architecture* (1923). A bread-and-butter staple for all architects, Corbusier’s seminal text includes an abundance of black-and-white photographs that use the comparative method to match architecturally significant sites with industrial references. Yet it is the briar pipe, or the image of a pipe, that stands alone as the last image in the book. With this last look, the intersection of these three visually similar yet distinctly different images of “pipe”—from Corbusier, Magritte, and the Internet—each venerate questions of revolution and of representation.

Where cities have historically been the centers of revolution—including architectural revolutions—the 21st-century city has become burdened by bureaucracy, leaving the center of the country as fertile ground for untapped potential in experimentation. If there is a ‘perceived oppression’ occurring within the country, in which the middle is often ignored for the luster of cities that thrive with developer-driven economies and hyper-capitalist ventures, then how might designers (re)consider the

middle in fresh ways to bring attention to places and practices in America’s interior region? Working in the middle is not about recolonizing the country as a modernist tabula-rasa condition, or role-playing pastoral fantasies, nor is it to establish the possibility of (yet another) utopia. Instead, it has the potential to unpack and celebrate the quotidian of middle-America.¹ I would argue that the middle can even provide the necessary space for architectural experimentation and contextual fodder to further explore typology, methodology, and ideology relevant to current issues in architecture, or topics previously provided to young practices by cities before they were priced out.

One recent example might be the Possible Mediums conference and subsequent publication. In the book’s Preface—aptly titled, “Notes from the Middle”—the editors disclose that they were all educated in a major coastal city, then respectively dispersed after graduation to the middle for their first teaching positions, where other like-minded, emerging educators and practitioners were already experimenting with fresh materials and methods.² Within this observation is the subtext that many emerging architects can no longer afford to jumpstart their careers as academics and practitioners within major cities, but rather opt for the fellowships, teaching positions, and design briefs situated in the middle, permitting architectural freedom, autonomy and pleasure—a poetically loose reprise in the Vitruvian values of “Firmness, Commodity and Delight” or the American Dream of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Reflecting on the cultural climate of the middle lead to questions about what might be at stake in the architecture in this territory of outliers and experimentation. The recent surge of architectural festivities, such as Exhibit Columbus or the Chicago Architecture Biennale have brought coastal architects to the middle, sometimes for the first time, and have provided a platform proving that design does, in fact, happen outside of major cities.³ Even the big city is going country, as the Guggenheim announced their forthcoming 2020 exhibition, “Countryside, The Future.” Curated by AMO / Rem Koolhaas, the exhibit “will present speculations about tomorrow through insights into the countryside today.” One can only hope that there might be another Koolhaas manifesto—*Dexterous Nebraska*, perhaps?



Figure 1. "Ceci n'est pas un president," 2016. Source: Know Your Meme

My hope is that the architectural explorations of the middle continue to present interesting and sincere work, and not regurgitate the empty big box store phenomenon-cum-post-capitalist commentary of recent years, nor the ironic neo-postmodern aesthetic that has been rippling across the social media feeds—no doubt attempting to chime in on what's happening in the "big" cities through representational doppelganging.⁴ As contemporary architecture appears to be in an ouroboros of reposts and recycled schemes, there are emerging practices actively pursuing architectural freedoms through their designs in the middle. Here are three such "young" firms.⁵

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Each of the following three practices are comprised of designers who engage disciplinary rigor in various ways, but always with a sophistication and a mastery of digital tools. In the work of Endemic Architecture, Clark Thenhaus' interest in form-finding and generation appears to make him the most autonomous of the three practices. Through his explorations in disciplinary histories of form-making and typology, he creates delightfully foreign yet intimately familiar architectures. Norman Kelley, led by Carrie Norman and Thomas Kelley, weave the narrative and material threads of traditional craft and local making throughout their various projects. Their designs attempt to "slow down the digital and speed up the analog" simultaneously and often carry a latent "American" quality to the work. Whereas Jennifer Newsom Carruthers and Tom Carruthers of Dream the Combine, explore America's in its present state: the remediation of post-capitalist architecture and its remnant industrial landscape. Unlike other images of ruin-porn from the middle, they propose an alternative built environment for the future of these infrastructural relics.

Found alongside the briar pipe within the pages of *Toward a New Architecture*, the Corbusian image of the grain silo is conjured in Endemic's early work. Titled Star Gardens, Thenhaus repurposes the familiar bundle of banal cylinders scattered across the country—including Kansas—to produce spectacular

microcosms.⁶ Each tube boasting its own constellation, these with celestial interiors are accomplished by perforating the informal dome atop each silo. The result remains a territorial architecture, but one with an interior of intimacy and elevated self-awareness. To stargaze, one simply climbs the metal ladder to an observation deck and sinks into the upholstered silo.

During this particular phase of Endemic's work, we see other delightful follies appear, including a Belvedere and a Bell Tower. These fantastical architectures unearth the hidden history of 200 decommissioned missile sites in Southern Wyoming. Gilded with a gold interior, the smooth white form of the Belvedere reads as a genetic mutation of those bell towers that rise above the heart of small towns, as the Bell Tower hides complex geometries within its monolithic form. Here, the remnant geopolitical infrastructure of the Cold War has become pastoral, further exacerbating the rural as the terrain for typological and military experimentation, but also creating a certain loftiness to an otherwise heavy history.

In Norman Kelley's Wrong Chairs and Young Americans, the designers look to traditional American furniture—often produced by rural craftsmen (including the Amish)—to reimagine the object's function while calling into order methods of production in local economies. There is a raw and controlled beauty in these two collections.⁷ For Wrong Chairs, the design duo experimented with the precision of Dr. John Kassay's Windsor chair drawings, "disrupting" the lines and silhouettes ever so slightly to produce a new kind of reading, one of error, calling attention to the multiplicities latent in a simple, singular object.

Norman Kelley demonstrates their "favor for anachronism over invention, and craftiness over craft" through their interpretation of a Federal-style desk and a Chippendale tilt-top table in Young Americans. You would more likely come across these historical objects in Colonial Williamsburg than scrolling the feeds of hip design blogs. The designers reconceptualize these seemingly antiquated objects and confront the notion of novelty through idiosyncratic gestures: the tilt top table elongates, its horizontal surface functioning as a vertical, Jeff Koons-like mirror, and the roll-top desk opens up to announce itself as an upholstered armchair. Norman Kelley's work activates an otherwise dormant potential of Americana's yesteryear, reminding architecture to its past in order to look forward.

Dream the Combine's kinetic installations in Minnesota situate architectural effects among the forgotten spaces of empty fields, grain silos and empty train cars. Their work simultaneously conjures images of the skywalks of middle cities and the farm equipment working outside of them. In their outdoor installation, Clearing, the designers orchestrate an expansive grassy field and reflect it back onto itself, punctuating the landscape with mirrors hung in portrait orientation on black poles—conjuring yet another familiar trope of Magritte in which



Figure 2. Star Gardens. Endemic Architecture.



Figure 3. Comb-Back Side Chair, 2013 (maple, 36-3/8 x 21-3/16 x 22-1/4 inches). Norman Kelley, photo courtesy of Volume Gallery, Chicago.

the environment dissolves into itself. In *Longing*, the designers repurposed a Minneapolis’s skyway into an ad hoc infinity room. And here, in a twist of irony, the Minnesotan skywalk finds its way back into a city: the glamorous and coveted environment of MoMA’s PS1 courtyard.⁸

Yet the middle of American is not just rural, there are Tier-2 or even Tier-3 cities and towns dispersed within the verdant patchwork; these areas remain commonly disassociated from contemporary architecture, despite there being *something* happening in the vein of experimentation and pleasure.

As these dense cities continue to evolve—becoming smarter, faster, and more efficient based on an overabundance of data—catering to its inhabitants specific wants and desires, which ultimately look like the wants and desires of other cities, and so on. The city itself becomes less inviting (perhaps even less aesthetically appealing in its global sameness) to experimental practices that require the (meta)physical space for exploration. Ironically enough, now that major tech-companies place their server farms and other large-scale technological infrastructures within the sprawling acres unobtainable in most coastal cities, it would seem that an abundance of our pleasure—or at least its data—physically thrives in the country’s middle space. In reality,

this is a new and somewhat bizarre landscape in which the ruins of outmoded industrial and agricultural infrastructures exist in juxtaposition with the architecture of ever-developing digital economies.

In terms of production, the beauty of shared isolation in the middle permits many designers liberation from certain institutional pressures, demonstrated by the pure pleasure expressed in the work itself.⁹ This joy not only shows in their designs, but also in the name of their practices, which elicit familiar images such as an endemic landscape, giant farm combines, or even a local handyman.¹⁰ It isn’t about being clever or “on brand,” but rather expressing a the humility and sincerity that exemplifies the middle. A fresh perspective in our overly saturated visual feeds of basic beige sameness and flat one-liners, the architecture of the middle provides fertile ground for movement, and hopefully, (r)evolution.



Figure 4. *Clearing*, 2017 (steel, glass mirror, concrete, enamel paint, 36 x 89 x 32 feet). *Dream the Combine*, photo by Caylon Hackwith.

ENDNOTES

1. On pastoral fantasies, see Meredith Martin, *Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture from Catherine de' Medici to Marie-Antoinette* (2011), in which she not only demonstrates an interest in the rural as the petit bourgeoisie came to predominance in the eighteenth century, on the brink of the French Revolution, but also how the pastoral landscape and its architecture became a site and place controlled by women. On establishing utopias, see Chris Jennings, *Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism* (2016), in which Jennings highlights how American settlers designed utopia through the grass-roots construction of communities, their subsequent architecture and objects, such as the Shakers and the Oneida Community in the nineteenth century.
2. See Kelly Bair, Kristy Balliet, Adam Fure, and Kyle Miller, "Notes from the Middle," in *Possible Mediums*, ed. Kelly Bair, Kristy Balliet, Adam Fure, and Kyle Miller (Barcelona: Actar, 2018), 16–20.
3. Historically, places like Chicago and Columbus (Indiana), along with Taliesin (Wisconsin) and Cranbrook Academy of Art (Michigan), have been architectural pilgrimage sites in the middle. And institutions like the multidisciplinary Walker Art Center or the newly minted Crystal Bridges Museum (funded by the philanthropic heir of Walmart) have established that the middle still has cultural weight in contemporary discourse. I also think about the funny juxtaposition of Grant Wood's retrospective at the Whitney—how that cornhusk chandelier hung within a Renzo Piano building...
4. In fact, this later part perhaps bothers me more than any other architecture because of its self-referential nature to fodder a community perhaps existing outside the middle, but more so because does deadpan "stick" when the context is already quotidian? (Isn't the point of deadpan humor in post-critical architecture to be in juxtaposition or friction with its context, mainly that of a super-customizable digital world in which highly curated content ad infinitum is cheapened and being generic is more exclusive.)
5. I would be remiss if I didn't mention feedback received from one particular ACSA peer reviewer, in which they suggested that "the selection of the three said practices" may be one of the weakest decisions in this essay due to their profiles being "extremely young and off-the-beaten-trail." This comment has served as fodder and points to precisely why these three practices were selected. Not only is this flourishing moment of "the middle" somewhat generational—given the disgruntled yet optimistic state young practices currently exist in—but if these practices were already trailblazers, then they likely would be interested in very different disciplinary issues. And by "extremely young," we are talking about designers in their forties. My sincere thanks to the reviewer for this moment of clarity; it truly drew the metaphorical line in the sand.
6. Though he does not state it in the project description, much of the preliminary research on grain silos and the photos paired with Star Gardens are located in Kansas.
7. In fact, Virgil Abloh recently attempted a similar type product—a riff on the Windsor chair design—but his version lacked soul.
8. Dream the Combine won the Young Architects Pavilion for MoMA PS1 in 2018.
9. I recommend reading the following on the 2019 Whitney Biennale and how, despite the best efforts of the curators to make an inclusive "American" exhibition, left out many artists and creatives from the middle (with the exception of a select few Chicagoans) or, more broadly, teased questions of what it means to identify as "American." See <https://hyperallergic.com/503928/how-do-artists-get-into-the-whitney-biennial/>.
10. There is something about the name "Norman Kelley" that feels, admittedly, American—as if you could flip open the yellow pages in any town and find that one person who does it all. Perhaps this is the charm of Chicago-natives Erin and Ian Besler's own practice name, Besler & Sons—it's trustworthy, or at least, feels familiar in the way a family business can and a corporation cannot.