

Friendly Characters: Narrative Practice & New Subjectivity

If critical architecture is invested in what architecture means, and if projective architecture buoys what architecture *does*, narrative architecture leverages an additional third possibility—that what it means is what it does and that how a building looks is intimately linked to how it operates in the world.

Architecture is an object. Its capacity to exist as a discipline and act in the world depends on the production of objects, but not just any objects. Architecture can produce objects with a story, spaces with quirks, and buildings with vitality. It is specially equipped to produce objects that have their own subjectivity. Architecture's objecthood undermines the laws of grammar: its objects may be acted upon, but they are equally subjects that enact their own agency. Architecture is a subject.

The notion that architecture can operate like a subject or a character in a story grants its practitioners an expanded arsenal of disciplinary techniques with which to construct new worlds and audiences. Beyond precision in form and program, subjectivity implies that architecture exhibits a specific way of being in the world—a modality of existence that is endowed with character, animated with attitude, and poised with personality. In turn, all of these qualities broadcast a specific tone of voice that enhances how humans identify and interact with, and even love their built environment.

Previous generations of architects interested in subjectivity often adopted radical stances to impart agency into the tone of their work. For example, critically "hot" architecture instantiated radical autonomy to resist the status quo¹, and projectively "cool" architecture leveraged radical contingency to opportunistically embed design expertise within the cultural fabric.² In the work that follows, this paper proposes *narrative* as a third possible mode to create and cultivate subjectivity. Rather than being radical, this modality aims to be approachable and friendly—and maybe even funny. It speculates that a terrific tone of serious fun and cheeky sincerity provides architects with the greatest efficacy to operate politically in the world. If critical architecture is invested in what architecture *means*, and if projective architecture buoys what architecture *does*, narrative architecture leverages an additional third possibility—that what it means *is* what it does and that how a building looks is intimately linked to how it operates in the world.

As a case study, we'll look at Friendly Characters, a project for a civic complex in Houston, Texas that aims to enact a narrative practice. The project consists of five small public

JOSEPH ALTSHULER
Rice University



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buildings that take on the likeness of animate creatures to enable its component departments to communicate a dynamic identity to variegated audiences.

This paper employs a rubric of three basic disciplinary tropes (form, context, and program) to elaborate on the project’s particulars and to speculate upon how a friendly modality and a deployment of characters augment the understanding of each.

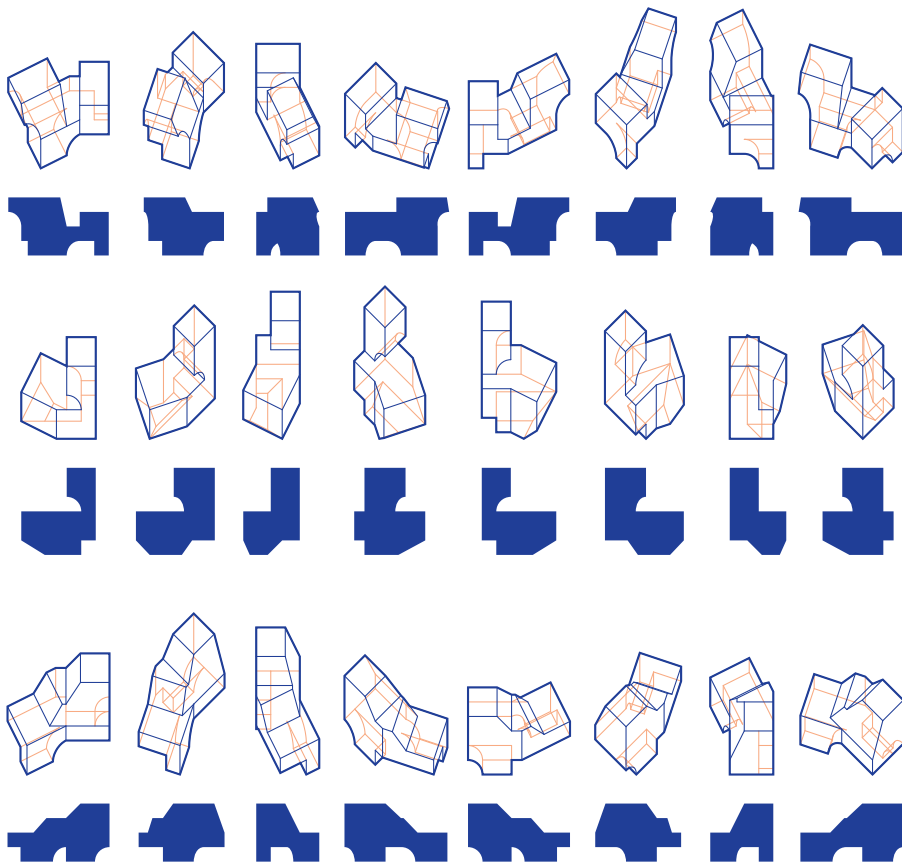
FAMILIAR FORMS

Narrative architecture unabashedly crafts forms that “look like” something outside the domain of the discipline. Stopping short of pure literalism or reenactment, such strange but familiar forms invite people to project multiple myths and metaphors upon built matter.

Friendly Characters is five small buildings that look like animate creatures. While varying in physique and pose, the cast maintains genetic resemblance. Like reconfigured puzzle pieces from a finite set of tangrams, each Character’s exterior massing conforms to consistent geometric modules, radial inflections, and angles of incidence. The module at play involves only simple geometry: straight lines and a quarter-circle arc. Like tangrams, this module is combined and reconfigured to generate a family of profiles that conjure images of animate creatures—that is: profiles that may solicit interpretations as exhibiting limbs, appendages, snouts, and other features that are familiar as animate but not indicative of any specific animal.

Each extruded profile is split along a central seam, hinged, and partially rotated. This technique produces a dynamic figure that is graphic and immediately recognizable, but also

Figure 1: *Friendly Characters*, Joseph Altshuler, 2015



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temporal and modulating from multiple vantage points. It renders the object neither purely frontal nor in-the-round. The simple act of slightly rotating the elevation condenses both pictorial and sculptural perception into a single architectural gesture.

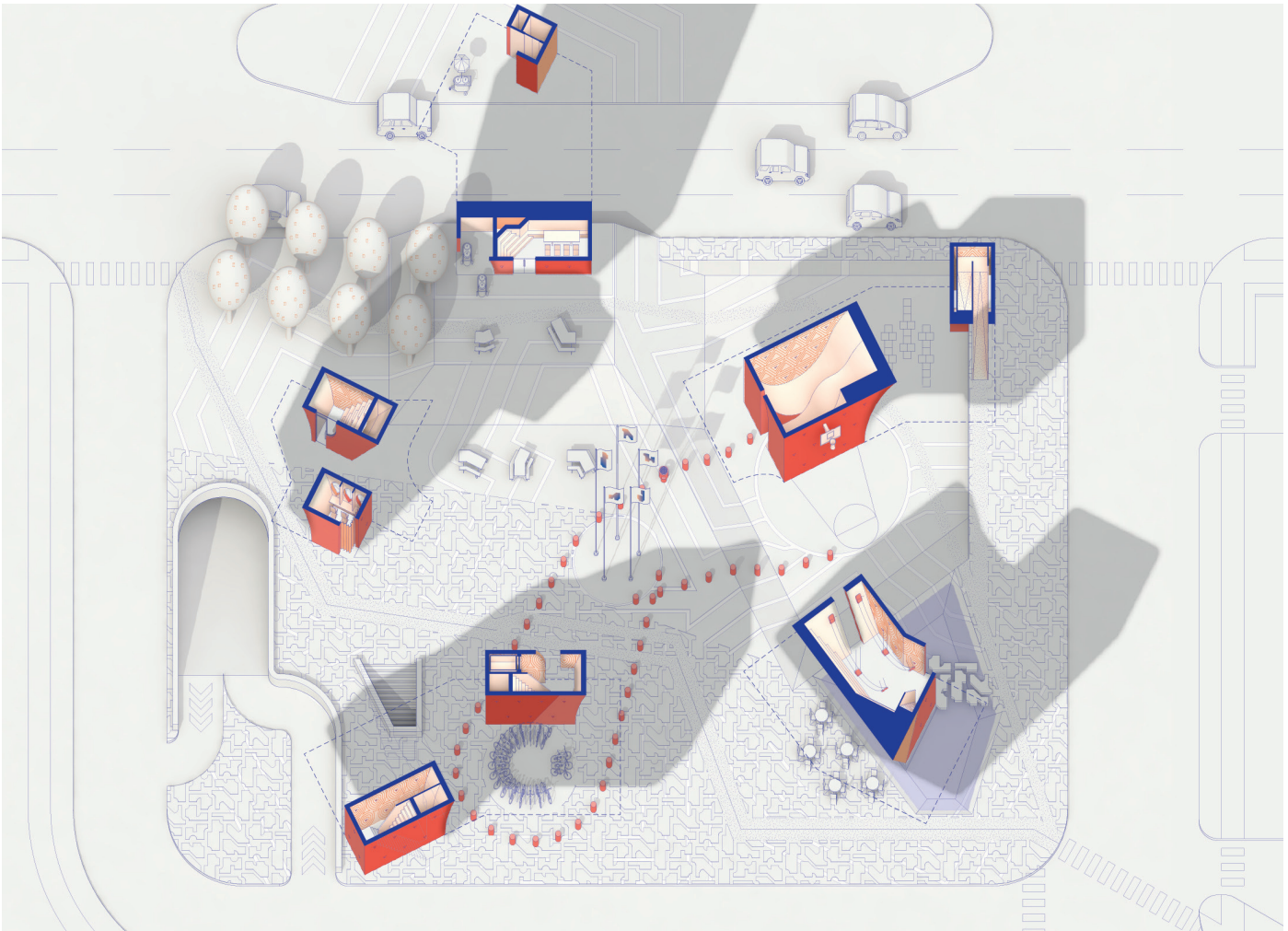
Beyond this formal intrigue, though, the hinged extrusion also produces particular perceptual and organizational effects. It beckons people to circulate around and within the Characters. It's fun to discover how the profile, posture, and perch of individual Characters and their relation to other Characters changes as you circle around them. From one vantage point, a Character might seem to be precariously balancing on a single limb, while from another, that same Character might appear strolling on two.

CONSTRUCTING CONTEXT

Narrative architecture constructs its own context, diffusing the dialectic between disciplinary autonomy and engagement with the contingencies of the "real world." Friendly Characters neither "fit in" to their surroundings nor do they ignore them. They set their own terms, implicate each other in spheres of influence that are greater than their individual performances, and welcome each other and their human companions onto an inclusive new playing field. Offset emanating turf lines, paver patterns, small changes in ground level, and constantly shifting and looming shadows amplify the contingent ground plan and render it a kind of gameboard for otherwise autonomous figures to play and engage. Athletic court lines emerge from one Character's footing while a radiating lasso of bollard-benches couples two opposite Characters into a provisional alliance.

Friendly Characters is located in Houston, Texas, a city notorious for its conspicuous lack of zoning. It's not uncommon to encounter a strip mall, single-family homes, and a towering high-rise commingled on a single city block. To accentuate this scalar disparity while creating

Figure 2: The simple act of slightly rotating the elevation condenses both pictorial and sculptural perception into a single architectural gesture.



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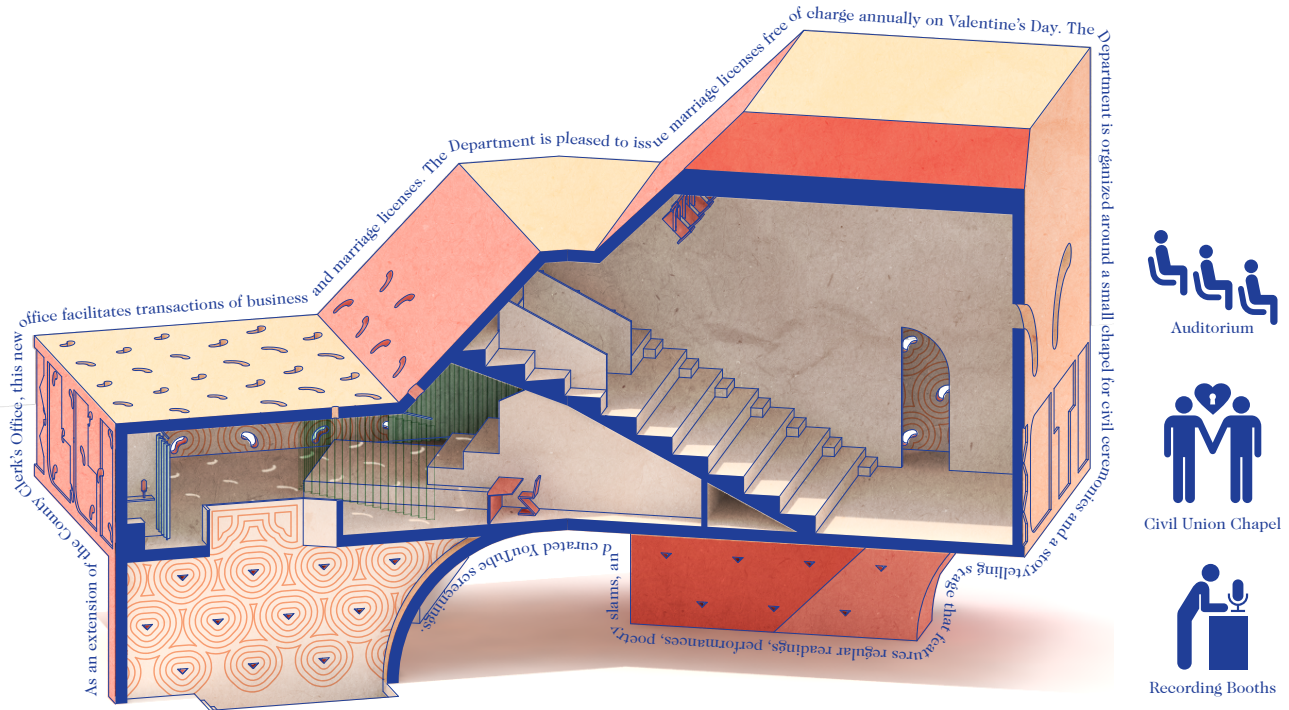
Figure 3: Offset emanating turf lines, paver patterns, small changes in ground level, and constantly shifting and looming shadows amplify the contingent ground plan and render it a kind of gameboard for otherwise autonomous figures to play and engage.

their own contextual intrigue, the Characters' posture and scale are calibrated to be a little too big to be detached houses but a little too small to be mid- or high-rises. The resulting "in-between" scale engages their immediate setting while resisting neat typological categorization. It instigates passersby to take a second look to understand how these strange objects relate to their built surroundings and even their own bodies.

PROGRAMMATIC PLOTS

Narrative architecture stages activities and conjures attitudes that invite its human constituents to suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in pocket worlds of interaction. Each of the five Friendly Characters plays host to a new municipal office: the Departments of Communal Fitness, Collective Storytelling, Public Provisions, Crowdsourcing, and Social Leisure respectively. Each department combines a transactional clerk's office (i.e. counters issuing official permits, licenses, and registrations) with pleasurable social amenities (e.g. sport court, stage, pub, wishing well, and wading pool), aiming to induce a state of play within the realm of routine obligation and to instigate mischief among its new cohort of civically engaged participants.

For example, the Department of Collective Storytelling brings together Houston's historical and contemporary narratives into an accessible public forum and archive. As an extension of the County Clerk's Office, this new department facilitates transactions of business and marriage licenses. The Department is physically organized around a small chapel for civil union ceremonies and a storytelling stage that features regular readings, poetry slams, and



curated YouTube screenings. Recording booths invite citizens to share personal stories that are broadcast on a weekly radio show, *This Houstonian Life*.

POST SCRIPT: TOWARD A SERIOUSLY FRIENDLY FUTURE

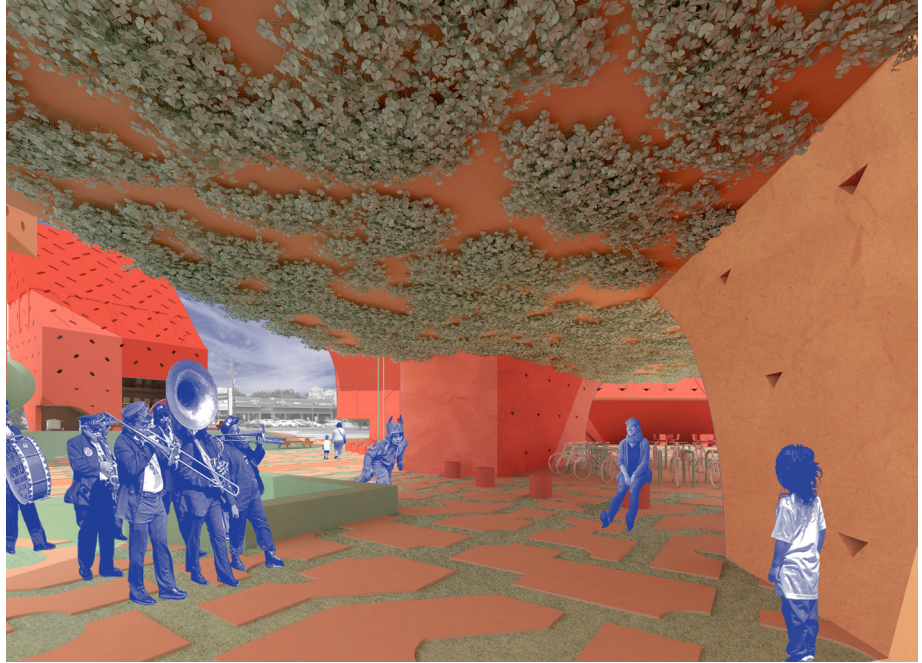
In a short critique of Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate in Chicago’s Millennium Park and in one of the very few instances of the term “friendly” to appear in theoretical writing on architecture, Doug Garofalo casts the sculpture as a “friendly” object that is uncritical of its surroundings.³ Garofalo is skeptical of the sculpture’s “naïve associations, like lima beans and circus mirrors” that for him preclude Kapoor’s “Bean” from forging a rigorous contribution to the discipline. However, Garofalo stops short at dismissing agency enacted by this shiny artifact:

“Yet, a curious, *magical* inversion occurs under the belly of this behemoth, where one is enfolded by the inward curvature culminating in an elliptical dimple in the ceiling that variously multiplies and scales our collective reflections. The city is conspicuously absent, replaced by a human swarm. The same effect that produces the mirrored, mute representation of urban surroundings on the exterior is seamlessly inverted to suggest the public as mobile and diverse. Everyone is engulfed in a hive that is focused and, dare we say it, *communal*.” [first emphasis mine, second emphasis Doug’s]

Like the Bean’s capacity to shift and amplify our focus from the city (i.e. the worldly aloof) to the body (i.e. the intimately personal), friendly architecture re-energizes the discipline’s people-directed gaze and humanist underpinnings. But unlike a historical notion of humanism in which the harmony of the human body is manifest in buildings, friendly architecture yearns for new subjectivity⁴ that commingles and mixes up the identities of buildings and people. It leverages the very qualities that make us love our human comrades in seducing affection for our buildings: it provides unsolicited companionship, it cites familiarity, it prompts storytelling, it cracks off-color jokes, and it proffers emotional empathy. Friendliness pushed to its literal conclusion suggests that objects occupying the built environment might become our friends—fictional companions to human subjects that might prod us to feel, characterize, and envisage the world(s) anew.

Figure 4: The Department of Collective Storytelling is organized around a small chapel for civil union ceremonies and a storytelling stage that features regular readings, poetry slams, and curated YouTube screenings.

The Bean stands as a centerpiece within a swath of lakefront parkland master-planned by Daniel Burnham, an architect famously quoted as proclaiming, “Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men’s blood and probably will not themselves be realized.” Garofalo’s observations suggest that architecture must invoke the seemingly magical in order to engage the humanly emotional. Only by indulging in *seriously friendly* form and behavior might architecture stir blood, conjure surprise and delight, and initiate unexpected pleasures among its skittering “swarm” of new subjects.



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Figure 5: Friendly architecture yearns for new subjectivity that commingles and mixes up the identities of buildings and people.

ENDNOTES

1. K. Michael Hays, “Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form,” *Perspecta*, vol. 21 (Boston: MIT Press, 1984).
2. Sarah Whiting and Robert Somol, “Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism,” *Perspecta*, vol. 33 (Boston: MIT Press, 2002).
3. Doug Garofalo, “Observations on Sculpture,” *Log*, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 64.
4. Fred Scharmen & Julia Sedlock, “Surveying the New Subjectivity,” (Working paper, 2015).