Piles and Parlor Games

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Many children's games and toys involve the piling of objects, all of which enhance spatial acuity, design thinking, and tectonic aptitude. Beyond the toys that simulate building components, other games of architectural intelligence involve unique objects distributed into seemingly random piles. The cultural relevance of these games may be more playfully productive in building contemporary architectural design and discourse.

Pick-Up Sticks and its contemporary equivalent Boom Blast Stix are games of skill that involve carefully removing or vigilantly stacking brightly colored objects. The organization and orientation of these elements are seemingly untidy, but have a logic that is not immediately apparent. These parlor games come in multiple materials, from carved ivory to formed plastic, and formal variations include peculiar shaped blocks as well as sticks thematically related to barnyard objects. The enigmatic nature of these games and rules of unspecified of play, where each game is different, have inherent architectural value and require alternative modes of inquiry. Rather than geometric legibility and rectitude, an architectural game of piles demonstrates an inclination towards the eccentric and indeterminate. First, the goals of this game will be first framed historically and theoretically. Next, the terms and rules will be defined culturally and aesthetically. Finally, the formal-spatial consequences will be examined as several architectural scenarios are played out.

ANCIENT ARTIFACTS

Emerging in response to the invention of perspective during the Renaissance, there was an extreme and violent break with the compressed space and flat floating arrangements in medieval representations and artifacts.[1] Emphasizing the representational moved away from the description of things to the description of relations between things. More accurately, a universal haptic approach prevalent before the Renaissance was concealed by a universal optic relationship.[2] This metaphysical shift is relevant again today as current philosophies and aesthetic discourse call for a return to the domain of real things. Expressing this recent shift as a reversal or reversion would be an oversimplification. This condition today, instead, has become inverted or involutedly. The speculative nature of our contemporary cultural perceptions is symptomatic of this inside-out condition. Investigating the ancient artifacts surrounding these historical circumstances might help to elucidate the ideas and aesthetics of contemporary architectural production.

Since the diagrammatic opposition between figure and ground has dominated the fundamental configuration of aesthetic experience since the Renaissance, comparing Giambattista Nolli's *Plan of Rome* (1748) and Pietro Bertelli's *Plan of Ancient Rome* (1599) is a good place to start. Nolli's plan assigns equal or greater value to the spaces between things than to the built elements themselves. Figure-ground reduces architecture to a simplified set of spatial relations (solid-void, interior-exterior, and public-private), where all other architectural characteristics are dissolved into the poché. Bertelli's plan, on the other hand, is more like a collection of treasures displayed on a table, cataloging the major churches and monuments from antiquity. Primacy is assigned to the buildings themselves, including all of their architectural peculiarities. Where figure-ground drawing implies a neutral spatial condition, the medieval constellation of objects creates spatial tension and variation.

> "In the early middle ages, figure and ground had not yet emerged into their diagrammatic opposition. Everything… was rolled into moving bundles or tossed into heaps."[3]
> —Christopher Wood, *Riegl's Mache*

The Renaissance perspective demonstrates its preference for the space between buildings as well as the implied space between the viewer and the depicted scene. It is constructed using a strict set of geometric rules to describe space scenographically, which allows the naïve and narrative understanding of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface.[4] Conversely, the medieval description of buildings in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *City by the Sea* (c. 1335) is deceptively primitive. There is simply too much stuff in too little space. Buildings are tightly bundled together, then nestled within other buildings, and enclosed within yet other walls. Where perspective drawing implies spatial continuity and extension beyond the frame, the oblique packaging of contents creates spatial compression and deferral between the interior and exterior.

Scale is another convenient measuring device that simplifies real difference among things. In Annibale Carraci's *Assumption of the Virgin* (1600-01), the unified scale, gazes, and postures of figures affirm formal-spatial continuity, where difference can only be expressed through exaggerated three-dimensionally and continuous variation of one figure to the next as they are woven together by the fold and pleats of the Virgin's gown. In Duccio di Buoninsegna's *Maesta* (1308-11),

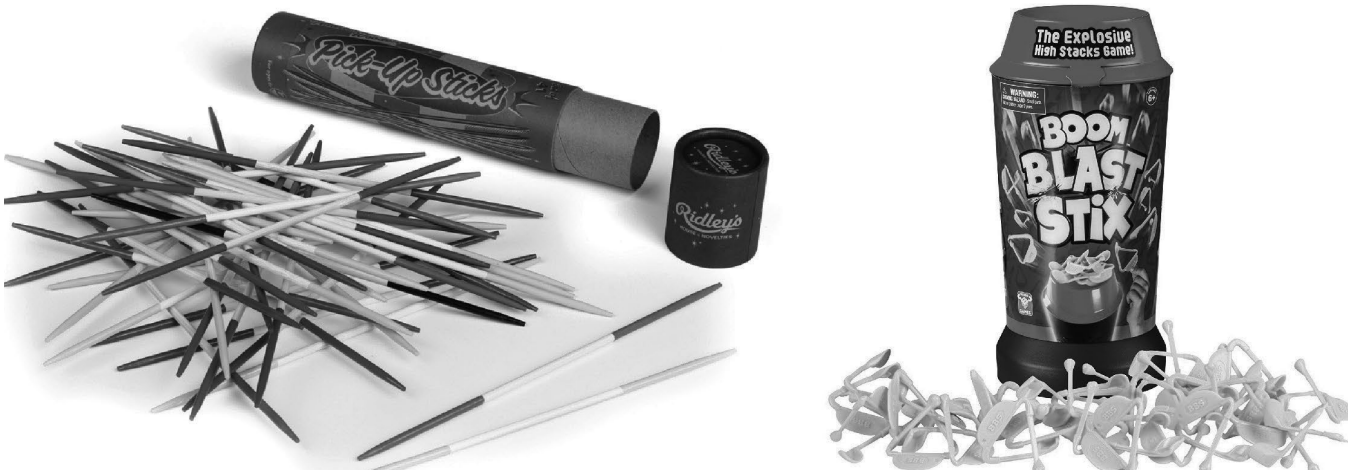

Figure 1: Pick-Up Sticks, Ridley's Games. Source: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/415597871840591889/ (left). Boom Blast Stix, Moose Toys. http://nymag.com/strategist/article/the-32-best-gifts-for-every-type-of-kid.html (right).

tight spatial layering of compressed figures is confound by multiple compositional incongruities, most notably the dramatic shift in scale, which subverts anthropocentric perception and confuses spatial depth. Figures do not assimilate one another; rather, distinctiveness is apparent in multiple facial expressions, postures, and garment articulations. In other words, differences exist within the things themselves. These comparisons propose that architecture is intrinsically more diverse in the absence of subjective representational illusions, instead relying on collecting, bundling, or packaging of multiple distinct objects. A more current analogy might help to clarify these presumptions.

Every time you visit a big box store like Ikea, you are confronted with the metaphysical shift between the illusion of subjective experience and the reality of commodity culture. The store architecture creates the illusion that you are going to simply your life. As you approach the checkout with your overstuffed shopping cart, you are confronted with the reality that you have literally compounded the problem. This feeling of anxiety is symptomatic of moving between these two worlds. The store architecture organizes all things in the same way, through systemic repetition and uniform classification, ignoring all difference among the immense variety of things that populate the shelves. The shopping cart, which is piled high with these same things, cannot help but calls attention to those differences. Similar to the medieval packaging of contents, the items in the cart have entered into a more diverse and less apprehensible set of relations, which might have to do with something more elusive, like a particular lifestyle, and will be different for every cart in the store.

Ikea has even acknowledged the incongruity of these two worlds in a recent advertising campaign, which makes it impossible not to speculate about architecture. In *Bookbeast* (2009) by DDB Düsseldorf for Ikea, architecture-as-representation is depicted as big hovering grid, able to reduce the complexity of everything to a simple diagram or geometry. Architecture-as-object, depicted as an animated pile of books, resists simplification by exhibiting its vast array of shapes, colors, and textures. In one reality, architecture hovers inconspicuously, but is obviously the result of belabored subjective intervention – you can even see the hoisting apparatus. In another reality, architecture is more cunning, animated by its own autonomous agency – no strings attached.

Initial engagements with digital production similarly accepted these terms by validating architecture with a unifying and predictable geometric logic, while conveniently organizing its representations in multiple viewports on the same digital interface. Representational devices and digital tools will continue to be a valuable and effective means of communication; however, for architecture to continue to be productive, these philosophical underpinning prevalent throughout most of its history should be reconsidered.

COLLECT, CURATE, AND EXHIBIT

An architectural game of piles facilitates a fundamental repositioning of architecture's formal, material, and aesthetic affiliations. Piles are things heaped together. Aesthetically, they resist fragmentations and fusions. Architecturally, they question customary arrangements of mass and space. Culturally, our urge to accumulate surfaces when we are faced with the perceived inevitability of loss. In extreme situations, this desire manifests as the compulsive disorder, hoarding.[5] Additionally, faced with increasing reliance on technology, it might also be tied to our latent urge to hunt and gather. In any case, the problem for design research is not to identify a geometry intrinsic to architecture, but rather to curate, collect, and exhibit the immense constellation of things that constitute building.

Figure 2: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, City by the Sea, c. 1335, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena. Source: Art Resource, NY.

The unlikely comparison between Mies Van der Rohe's Farnsworth House interior and the Music Room at Elvis Presley's Graceland illustrates this distinction. Both spaces are glass vitrines. However, one disappears to expose the everyday activities of its occupation, while the other enshrines is collection of everyday treasures. At the Farnsworth House, all components are disposed according to abstract coordinate system, where space is organized in overlapping rectangular fields. Space at Graceland is dramatically reshaped by its content, which are carefully curated and snugly packed like treasures in a jewelry box.

Elvis Presley was continually adding to his collection and curating the rooms at Graceland - not to mention the number of major renovations and additions that were undertaken. Draperies, upholstery, carpet, and paint colors as well as other furnishing and accessories throughout the house were continuously swapped. The Story & Clark baby grand piano that occupies the Music Room today is the third that has been displayed. The previous two pianos were a nine foot gold-leafed Kimball and a Knabe baby grand.[6] Now that the house is a museum, it is ironic that most of the curating has stopped; however, the staff still honors the tradition of swapping the draperies with a festive red during the holiday season.[7]

Other examples that illustrate the seductive impulse to collect and the allure of accumulation are Sir John Soane's Museum and the installation spaces of Marjan Teeuwen. Both involve the careful curation of vast collections of things. Soane's collection of ancient artifacts are encrusted into the surfaces of the walls. Teeuwen's piling of construction debris is literally reconstituted as structure. These are not decorative or ornamental strategies, in which element are simply additive or continuously diffused. In each of these cases, architecture is defined by enhancing or intensifying all qualities and properties of the wall.

This is why studio space is so alluring - creativity is a messy endeavor. Architecture studios are packed with piles of chipboard, wads of trace paper, mound of study models, and technological gadgets of all kinds. We exhibit our work, collect things that provoke inspiration, and the wild curation of these things incubates innovation and creativity. A photograph of the messy studio space in Deborah Berke's Yale University School of Art building was aptly published on the cover of Architecture Magazine in 2001, suggesting that space is not empty and neutral, but rather reveres all the things that foster our creative impulses.

SHUFFLING THE DECK

In terms of spatial arrangement, piles do not imply disorder, rather the possibility of creating multiple and diverse spatial adjacencies in their conception of the plan. Rather than the abstract composition of partitions or systematic repetition of spaces, uniformity and variation can exist simultaneously. The proposed floorplan for the Lithuanian National Science and Innovation Center by Mark Gage registers as a cluster of walled shapes. Uniformity is restricted to the components where it can be immediately apprehended, but the building still maintains diversity as a whole.

Piles can also manifest as aggregations of local symmetries or pairings, which may produce multiple spatial configurations within the same mass. For example, the pairings in Young and Ayata's Bauhaus Museum project create both a series of adjacent spatial enclosures and a meandering pathway, which is particularly useful for a museum building. Other times spatial volumes can be eccentric and nest together within the same mass as in Tom Wiscombe's project for the Griffith Park House. Rather than ideal geometries, piling, paring, nesting, and aggregating can respond more readily to the inherent pressures that buildings and spaces have upon one another as well as acknowledge the variety of other relations, including topography, social hierarchies, and contextual considerations that influence the plan.

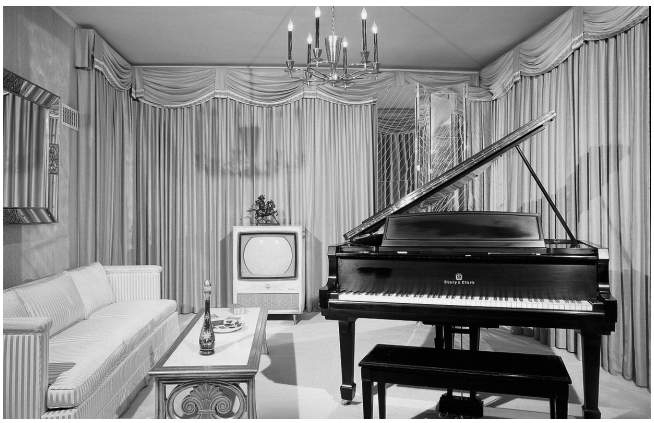

Figure 3: "Music Room at Graceland," Elvis Presley Enterprises, Inc. Source: https://www.wsj.com/articles/elviss-style-is-king-again-anatomy-lesson-1403222714.

Figure 4: Marjan Teeuwen, Archief Sheddak SM's 2, 2010. Source: http://www.marjanteeuwen.nl/

PILE DRIVER

Piles also challenge conventional ideas of massing and sectional configuration. This is because they rely on the misfit or obliqueness between things - similarities and differences exist simultaneously. Sou Fujimoto Architects' Tokyo Apartment and Peter Trummer's Pile City projects are literal bundles of similar building typologies piled on top of one another. These misfit masses challenge conventional domestic or urban arrangements as well as the ability to fully comprehend their interior organizations.

Piles also resist total fusion and maintain discrete boundaries between things. The Caixa Forum by Herzog & de Meuron and Jean Nouvel's Lyon Opera House are examples where one building is stacked on top of another. At the Caixa Forum, the eaves and rakes of the existing roofline define the top of one building and the bottom of the other – the most three-dimensional quality of the existing building (the roof), becomes a two-dimensional boundary and ground for the new addition. The spring point of the Lyon Opera House addition is slightly above the existing walls creating the dual impression of a lofted vault and a floating cylinder. In both projects, the misfit between top and bottom is more subtle or contiguous, but adept in maintaining the distinction of each. In this way, piles preference shape and figuration, but do not necessarily reject their context. When figuration is desired, there are other ways to create partial coherence. In the case of Tom Wiscombe's Lima Art Museum, an oblique building mass is cut away by a regulated site boundary. The misfit

Figure 5: Stuart Craig, Harry Potter's Room of Requirement, 2011, Warner Bros. Pictures. Source: https://www.architecturaldigest.com/gallery/harry-potter-set-design-slideshow/all.

between the massing and the cutting plane begins to unify disparate components and partially reveals the building's interior organization.

Piles suggest that architecture holds something in reserve. A façade is not simply floor plates expressed on the exterior of the building. Instead, piles are somewhat more mysterious, preventing any obvious understanding or over simplification of a building's interior and exterior expression.

CONCLUSION

The aesthetic and cultural implications of an architectural game of piles are aligned with the fundamental perceptual changes occurring due to unconditional acceptance of computer-assisted observation. A new metaphysical model, in this case, looks something like Stuart Craig's production image for *Harry Potter's Room of Requirement* (2011), thoroughly illustrating the strange reciprocity between the medieval conception of space involving the piling of contents and the perception of space dictated by the terms of the digital interface.

This enigmatic image combines two architectures – one of geometry, vectors, and forces and another of piles, bundles, and heaps. One has to do with the technological (realm of the virtual) and the other has to do with the ontological (domain of real things). If one speaks to our desire to accumulate in its inherent disposition toward simulation or repetition, the other speak to the spirituality or mystical agency of the things that surround us. If one is the locus of commodity culture where our desire for things play out on a virtual plane, then the other speak to the vast and complex depth of real things that cannot fully be consumed or comprehended. Returning architecture to the domain of real things does not suggest a revival of medieval forms of expression, but rather evokes a latent theoretical perspective from which alternative architectural ideas might materialize.

Piles resonate with a disciple whose nature is to amass and manipulate matter. An architectural game of piles is untidy, spontaneous, and stimulated by informal arrangements and loose associations, requiring enhanced skill, spirited risk-taking, and creative discovery. In response to an increasing cultural urge to accumulate, architecture may find new disciplinary relevance through creative strategic accretion, allowing participants and spectators to design and evaluate architecture with new disciplinary significance.

ENDNOTES

1. Siegfried Giedion. *Space, Time and Architecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 31.
2. Christopher Wood. "Riegl's Mache." Res. 46 (2004): 168.
3. Ibid., 163.
4. Peter Eisenman. *Feints* (Milan: Skira, 2006), 50.
5. Jane Bennett, "Powers of the Hoard: Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter" (presentation, Vera List Center for Art and Politics at The New School, New York, NY, September 24, 2011).
6. *Elvis Presley's Graceland: The Official Guidebook* (Graceland/Elvispresley Enterprises, 2009), 34.
7. Ibid., 34.