



The Anti-Library or iDeath: Pamphlets & Architecture

Roger Connah

I. The Pamphlet: of Disputatious & Dubious Origin

This is a wilfully edited history of the pamphlet that goes back some centuries. Usually an unbound booklet, even a single page, but folded in half or further, it was sometimes called a leaflet. Then a few pages folded, even saddle stapled, it became a simple unbound and unbounded pamphlet/book. UNESCO defines a pamphlet as a 'non-periodical publication of at least five but not more than 49 pages.' The latter number for purposes of production statistics not for any content. The word 'pamphlet' for small book, pamphilet or panflet without covers, came into Middle English c.1387. This is about the time and date of the building, this Hotel Architecture, in which this is now being written and where, mostly, the anti-library has been written.

Generalized from 12th century amatory comic poems, these pamphlets were popular and widely copied, circulated on their own, forming what sources tell us was a 'slim codex.' Eventually the word 'pamphlet' suggested a disputed and disputable tract of dubious origin. A pamphlet today can contain anything from technical information, insurrectionary recipes for street parties, urban vengeance or vegan menus; they should be cheap, distributed easily, with an air of immediacy. They are ignored at the peril of losing life's untold secrets, unwanted commentaries. They are tools for debate and potential protest.

When my daughter, Nadezna, was old enough to use scissors, after folding, she would continually make small leaflets, pamphlets. Her own unbound or bound version of what might be called the 'first book'. Eventually she realized her papa, whom she fictionalized as Captain James Vertigo, an explorer, was a writer of sorts and produced something like that, something close to a book. James Vertigo is not only a child's image of a sea captain, but is a character from a novel that is not yet written. This novel might never be. For it has no script, no narrative and perhaps can only exist in a film, which might also



never be made. Vertigo Press is the name given to the publisher of the set of pamphlets called the Anti-Library.

II. The Anti-Library

There are 10 Vertigo Pamphlets making up what became The Anti-Library. The first pamphlet began after the 40th Anniversary lecture delivered for the Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism. Invited by the director Dr Marco Frascari in 2008, it celebrated 40 years of architecture at Carleton University in Ottawa. The title was 'Architecture Degree Zero'; tritely unoriginal perhaps but it had over 200 students hanging from the bars and balconies of the school overlooking a space known as The Pit. Bad-ass, buzzing, sweet and the bomb were words used to describe the atmosphere. One student, René Boulet, from the Middle Earth Studio suggested the presentation should be expanded and turned into a pamphlet; immediately! This was achieved within two weeks of the event. A name for the collaborative online production/press needed to be invented. This was easy.

Decisions were made about the pamphlet on the 18th floor of a building overlooking the canal and downtown Ottawa. By then Professor James Vertigo had been fictionalized as the real 'faux' professor and was no longer a sea captain (or then that was in his

earlier life, no one really ever knew). One of the students leaned a little too close to the balcony and looked down with horror. Vertigo Press was the obvious choice. On design, editing, online publication and distribution of that first slim volume called Architecture Degree Zero, a deal was struck with other graduate students from Middle Earth. 10 pamphlets would be attempted in the time Professor Vertigo spent in the Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism. A period of five or so years was suggested. There was no other program for titles and or content; material would come in whatever form, in whatever way when exploring critical writing about architecture. Architecture Degree Zero was the first pamphlet in 2008, and iDeath was the tenth pamphlet in 2013. The following is a synopsis of each pamphlet to appear.

III. Architecture Degree Zero (2008)

The first volume, white writing/white architecture; it was the cliché of clichés, the terrible venture into the non-representational and the art of neutering all ideology. As if students could still dream of that state of the grand interregnum where architecture pauses before once more becoming a debate about itself and its grand egos. This is the year of passion and perversion, the dreams of the Stucturalists as they passed on and over to the slipperiness of those floating signifiers. Oh Grand Semiotioca, troping the trope, the story falsely narrativized, with architecture fairy tailed on steroids ending up in the Comédie Francaise where a performance of En Attendant Godot is acted out whilst a laundry van crashes into Roland Barthes and Les Halles in Paris is demolished. We abuse and are abused, language attacks architecture for not serving up the goods, whilst architecture attacks language for not quite arresting the intended meanings in everything it attempts. Pedagogy and architecture can only go downhill from this moment, unless we do something about it. Meanwhile Professor Vertigo learns how to dismantle an AK47 in less that 90 seconds. It's no good. His memory is shot!

IV. A House for De Kooning's Friend (2009)

Vertigo was to meet an octogenarian, a Jean Cocteau look alike, who had commissioned a house high up in Guidecca (Venice) from a colleague, an architect from London and Los Angeles, known as The Armenian. The problem was that Vertigo did not know what the octogenarian looked like, the only clue being the French director. He

espied a man with careful facial details, neat presentation and suit, breast pocket kerchief, and a tan complete with gaunt cultural looks. It had to be him. They were in the Grand Hotel in Stockholm to take breakfast together and discuss a book on the house. Vertigo had been sent there by The Armenian. There was no foreplay. "You can write about the house, the architect, our Armenian. You can call it Casa Wagner, but I don't want my name mentioned. Anywhere." He paused to spread the Frank Cooper marmalade (Vintage Course Cut) on over-elegantly prepared pieces of toast. That seemed a good deal. "By the way, I need to tell you about my meeting with de Kooning, my life in New York, and how I had to buy and re-buy one of his works." Vertigo had his title. He just had to work up this story of a hermit crab architecture inserted into the old Dreher brewery next to Molino Stucky (now the Venice Hilton). He is still not entirely sure there is a house up there but in the book there are instructions how to get there and discover what may lie behind the tall black bamboo, shielding as it does, the house from Dorsoduro and the monstrous ferries that dwarf the Guidecca Channel.

V. Pulp Architecture (2009)

In 2002 whilst living above the BMW garage complete with basketball hoop in Fort Worth Texas, an invitation came to deliver the Brandon Gill Lecture at Yale School of Architecture. As usual with such a prestigious invitation and the desire to promote the event well before time, a title had to be invented. Immediately! Vertigo had just returned from an Electronic Art conference in Nagoya Japan where he mixed with artists, electronic inventors, software geeks, graffiti artists, scripters, gaming nerds and soft-porn photographers. The title Pulp Architecture offered itself. It had no program, it had no meaning in advance, and it definitely had no structure. From this seed the lecture was born. Slowly, to conform to some sort of presentation at Yale, the notion of what Pulp Architecture might be was invented and re-invented. It was a stand-up lecture with some comedy. Not Tarantino, Thompson or Todorov, this was the gonzo of lectures written out in the backyard garage apartment in Texas. The event took place, Vertigo was wined and dined in The Union and he forgot all about New Haven. The text was published in *Perspecta* (Yale Journal for Architecture) and the expanded pamphlet emerged with one or two previously published texts. Later Pulp Architecture attempted suicide. But that's another story.

VI. Aalto Ego (2010)

This began from two moments or impulses: Bruno Zevi and Aaltomania. The Italian critic, professor, educator and publisher Bruno Zevi, after a taxi ride in Helsinki to the Palace Hotel, popped the question to Vertigo: "Could you write me a short text on Aalto. I have to be frank though. I mean anti-readings. I am not keen on his architecture." Vertigo said he'd think about it but eventually he didn't write that book for Zevi, though he did write another one for his Masterpieces of Modern Architecture series (on Dipoli Students' Union by the Finnish architect Reima Pietila. The second impulse: whilst living in Stockholm in the late 1990s, an editor from Dagens Nyheter asked Vertigo for some short texts on architecture, especially Aalto. He had recently produced a chess gallery installation in London using all variations of Aalto's glass vases produced by Iittala Glass and was thinking of a play on Alvar Aalto. In a way then, Vertigo did write the book Zevi requested but after his death. It was published in Finland as *Aaltomania – Readings against Aalto*. Aalto Ego combined these two impulses when the idea for a play emerged out of the Swedish newspaper texts. Aalto would be alone on stage, a mixture of Top Man and Chaplin, a forester and a comic. He would go through his life, loves and architecture. In two acts, it became a series of monologues delivered by an 'ageless' méchant Alvar Aalto well within his cups, demonstrating his penchant for 1950s early rock and roll, camembert and Vermouth. He is interrupted in each act by the Uliganos, cloned Marxist-Leninist hooligans and street thugs. They wreck the stage, his constructions and his thoughts. The play was due to be produced in Viiburg in Russia in 1999. The stars were sadly not aligned. The architect Alvar Aalto ends up in a karaoke bar called Heaven where critics go through the old favourites.

VII. Deschooling Architecture (2011)

This volume began with 15-year old Welsh and English schoolboys dropping French books from the giddy height of 3 meters as if they were dropping bombs. Or at least that's what they said. Lit matches were being flicked across a desolate classroom. Boredom was as high as the nausea for both students and supply teacher. Across the estuary to Liverpool education was struggling. Students played a game. They walked home over cars without touching the ground. The pedagogue had just returned from India at Jamia Millia Islamia, South Delhi where teaching film and scriptwriting in army huts or outside on the grass

was taken as an act of insurgency. Deschooling was a thesis put forward by Ivan Illich in the book *Deschooling Society* (1967). Moving Illich's main tenet to education was not difficult. It implied the need to decode the controls, deconstruct the constraints and deschool the repression used in schools and institutes; thus we learn to deschool at the same time as we are schooled. A school within a school is then formed. *Deschooling Architecture* is a journey through education and teaching in Finland, Sweden, India and ends with the detailed shenanigans at the school of architecture in the University of Texas at Zetaville. The conclusion in the form of a question: does an institute close itself when it is constantly undermining its own position and underperforming through more and more ego games, turf wars and pedagogical politics? Or does an institute merely change the type of sticking plaster used to stem the wound? There is, for instance, a new sticking tape available from the Dollar store that replaces the Disney one. It is called camo-tape.

VIII. The Irresponsible Self (2011)

Invited to deliver a lecture at Carleton School of Architecture & Urbanism for purposes of applying for a position as a professor at the school, and given rather short notice to do it, Professor Vertigo felt it appropriate to link this with the ethics of responsibility. Having been interested in the links between Reinhold Niebuhr's 'responsible self' and Paul Ricoeur's 'fallible man' for some years, the lecture naturally emerged to include the notion of irresponsibility, thus the 'irresponsible self'. The argument: might a work, lecture or book achieve a responsibility by taking a position of critical irresponsibility? In order to test the limits of what is often considered critical thinking, could the work, lecture or book do that without cancelling itself out? Might teaching and a critical pedagogy in architecture gain from taking a similar approach whereby irresponsibility tests the accepted conditions, framing, and unchanging attributes of a syllabus and professional program. *The Irresponsible Self* is about the failures and successes of miscommunication and consists of 2 essays: the lecture delivered to be considered for a 'professor's' tenure track appointment, and an essay outlining the irresponsible critical measures taken to complete a large, pre-digital text and image dance through the 20th century using the works of the Finnish architect Reima Pietilä. The latter called *Writing Architecture* was published in 1989 by MIT Press & *The Building Book Finland*. It was awarded the CICA (International

Critics of Architecture) Prize in 1991. The book was later described by a leading Finnish critic and poet (Juha Kemppinen) as 'irresponsibly fine.' The second essay tries to understand why and what that could possibly mean.

IX. The Brautigan (2012)

Richard Brautigan wrote a number of wonderful, we can say, quirky novels that turn back the pages in San Francisco where abortion, fishing, confederacy and suicide rarely last longer than a page and a half. Amongst the most well known of Brautigan's novels is *Trout Fishing In America* but, according to one reviewer after the publication of *In Watermelon Sugar*, we would all likely be writing a genre called brautigans at some stage later in our lives. It seemed appropriate then to attempt a brautigan, a genre all on its own. For this purpose, the travels of *Pulp Architecture* after its rapid birth in Yale offered an adventure not entirely unsuited to an imagined 'brautigan'. After a flurry of invitations to deliver the lecture in Stockholm, Toronto, Graz, Minneapolis, Zetaville, Houston *Pulp Architecture*, filled with nausea and replete with a grand indifference, exploring its own disinterest, decided after a series of execrable events to call it a day. Thus one evening after a Van Morrison concert on the rocky coast of North Wales in Llandudno, instead of returning home and back to another university guest appearance, *Pulp Architecture* decided to take the Virginia Woolf option and walk into the North Sea. Not waving, not drowning. Just dying. End of!

X. Life After Architecture (2012)

As the years rolled by, as *Pulp Architecture* de-configured itself, as an unlikely architectural duo called Heron-Mazy took revenge on the white house lawn and won first prize in the White House Redux competition, it was time for Vertigo to bring together all or at least some of the small texts and symposium papers that had been prepared over the years. Many graduate students of architecture expressed a desire, as they entered the school within a school, to learn just how to take a critical position when criticality was fading into the seduction of compelling imagery and iconic over-use. A carnival digitalism that only a few could ever achieve as three firm zeros: O O O. What positions could be taken and where was this profession called 'architecture' taking them, they asked themselves and their professors? Finally, in

what became the sea of holes where the black walrus reached the shores of the arctic in a town known as Tromso, the idea began to knit back any fissures, any ruptures made in that ice. It was the time of new environmental philosophies. The question posed by many of these small texts: was there not only life after google, was there life after architecture?

XI. Headless (2013)

Headless continued this life after architecture in other small texts from various publications, magazines and journals until they were taken to a cliff and, perched precariously, were literally thrown off. This anticipated the later Texts for Nothing which would appear under the imprint – a Phoney Island of the Mind. No one could learn to fly, the parachute was not that useful and the sky looked so imminently hostile that there was only one thing left – to be seduced by obscurity. Headless is the name given to TFWNKAH, the Twitter handle of The Former Writer Now Known as Headless. The clue was in the eponymous D W Harding book. Headless invited the reader to detach, to de-compress, to de-motivate and turn any vengeance back on itself before attempting this new art of flying. Thinking architecture to think the world was not dead but it did resemble smooth chocolate liquor drizzling down the dark skin of a stained and patterned sheet steel. A real professor might have just recognized this as the awards for Uncurious Architecture were rapidly becoming a social media red-carpet event. But luckily (for some) this radical undermining pulled it back from the edge. Headless, at last and triumphantly, was not a real professor in the real sense of the word and world. Architecture possessed too much irregularity and carnival in life to go the distance. Ecstasy was finally achieved elsewhere and untraceable. Which is why, the final volume of the Vertigo pamphlets is called:

iDeath (2013)

Dubiously and disputatiously framed and questionable to say the least, this pamphlet is not the work of any real professor. In iDeath, we return to the University of Texas at Zetaville. The school has not suffered the ignominy of closure as predicted in the Deschooling volume (though it was very close) but it has probably - for architecture at least as we thought we knew it – suffered a worse fate. Architecture is now a hybrid discipline, frozen and blended into a management course with municipal planning, business, public policy and speculative market investment. It's not difficult to imagine what happened. The



incoming Dean from Louisiana who entered the school at the turn of the millennium came up against students who seemed not to listen, care, study or conform to any instructions given. Zero tolerance was turned on its head. No one could be disturbed. Entrenched and uncommunicative, the Dean slowly found himself alienated. He began to train and equip himself for any eventuality. One uncontrollably miserable day in Big Sky country, when life spilled over into the fantasy game he now scripts from Death Row in Texas, the ex-Dean went postal. He literally lost it. 5 students were killed, sprayed from the Dean's 3D printed magazine-fed, self-loading, orange machine pistol known as Baby Dune Vulture. Now, on Death Row somewhere on IS 820 with the ex-Dean on a re-training prison workshop on Gaming, and the surviving students on an elective Scripting course, it is a race to see who can script the game iDeath and market it. Only one Cambodian student Nguyen survived the Dean's attack. He was out buying a frappuccino. He tells the story of iDeath.



Roger William Connah

Roger William Connah– b. Chester, lives in Ruthin, UK. Currently Associate Professor, Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada & Visiting Professor on Fashion, City and Architecture at the School of Art and Design, Guangdong University of Technology, Guangzhou. Responsible for a series of publications, exhibitions, films carried out over 4 decades in Finland, Sweden, India, Pakistan, Italy, USA, UK and Canada.

email: connahroger@gmail.com