

# Projective Geometries, Projective Fictions: Reading Robin Evans

The key realization in the development of projective geometry was that while figures deform according to point of view, lines of sight do not deform. So rigidity was transferred from the object to the medium of their transmission...<sup>1</sup>

...humankind actively constructs its own perception of the world, and, thereby, actively participates in the fabrication of the world.<sup>2</sup>

In his posthumous work, *The Projective Cast*, Robin Evans conceives of projection as a strategy for coupling architecture and geometry. Acknowledging the long history between the two, Evans emphasizes their tumultuous relationship as they alternate in producing and consuming the other. In order to do so Evans affords both geometry and architecture disciplinary autonomy, as neither is reduced to a sub-discipline, a result of or a substitute for the other.

Projection, then, becomes a shared process for both geometry and architecture. While the initiating quote refers to the emergence of projective geometry, it serves as a model for both: a model that prioritizes, or at least integrates, the viewer. For Evans, the inclusion of the viewer within geometry precipitated questions of the haptic and metric, the sensed and the seen, and the intrinsic and contingent. It did not, however, undermine geometry's disciplinary requirement to produce internally consistent laws and parameters to describe the relation between viewer and space.

In Evans' argument, projection initially tied the architectural drawing to the building and allowed the architect to speculate about the effects of the putative building on the viewer. For example, Evans describes the role of projectors for Palladio in his development of the facades at San Giorgio Maggiore and San Petronio:

The effects were obtained by drawing the lines on a flat sheet that looked as if they represented something with considerable depth, then building it with limited depth... The similarity between wall and paper was emphasized, moreover, by the common practice of using a close-textured, monochrome facing material such as marble or stucco for monumental buildings, the very color of which resembled paper. Under these conditions, projectors need not extend very far from the picture to reach the thing pictured, and the imagination of the designer need travel no further than the projectors to envisage what has been designed. Thus limited, architects can cope with space because of a safety factor built into their drawing that protects them from the unimaginable.<sup>3</sup>

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Here, the role of projectors was to aid in the speculative effect of depth through a two-dimensional representation. The security of such speculation was bound to the resonance of the representation and actual space or surface. Although the quote above is taken from *The Projective Cast*, Evans initially made this argument through this example in “Translations from Drawing to Building.” In this article, however, he is less celebratory in his assessment. “I feel as uncomfortable discussing implied depth, which has become one of architecture’s most hallowed shibboleths, as I do when wearing someone else’s suit.”<sup>4</sup> Although the example effectively illustrates the drawing’s employment as a speculative device, these specific elicited effects are not those which most concerned Evans. In fact, he saw the affinity between the drawing and architecture as potentially “too close a likeness, too cautious a liaison, too much bound up in the elaboration of frontalities.”<sup>5</sup>

Evans is quite clear in his regard that architecture and geometry are separate fields, though historically and practically contingent. He surmises that “geometry does not always stabilize architecture; that the geometry in architecture was not always dead at the time of its employment, although it may have died later; and that in architecture expired geometry sometimes gained a new life.”<sup>6</sup> This interplay of drawing, geometry, and architecture is not simply a game of form making, but of implicating ourselves in the ways in which we experience the world. Evans argues, “humankind actively constructs its own perception of the world, and, thereby, actively participates in the fabrication of the world.”<sup>7</sup>

To explore how we actively construct our own perception of the world, Evans could not stay simply within architectural nor geometrical forms of representation. Although drawing is certainly an indispensable form of this exploration, it is not the only or primary form. And, while geometry provided a useful profession for Evans to tether his account, his reluctance to circumscribe architecture’s potential effects to those it could exclusively project through drawing is explicit.

#### EVANS AND LITERATURE

It is enlightening, then, to look to other moments of his research where he employs a different complementary discipline: literature. Although a frequent source for Evans’ writing, nowhere is its use more explicit than in “Figures, Doors and Passages”

Take the portrayal of human figures and take house plans for a given time and place: look at them together as evidence of a way of life, and the coupling between everyday conduct and architectural organization may become more lucid.<sup>8</sup>

Just as his enjoining of architecture and geometry opportunistically engages their disciplinary affinities and antagonisms, so too was his enlistment of literature equally astute. Leveraging his audience’s ability to read circulation, scale, and view through house plans, he asks literature and painting to furnish the disposition of bodies in space to evidence a way of life. Significantly, although Evans considers this evidence, he in no way assumes a positivist or causal relationship:

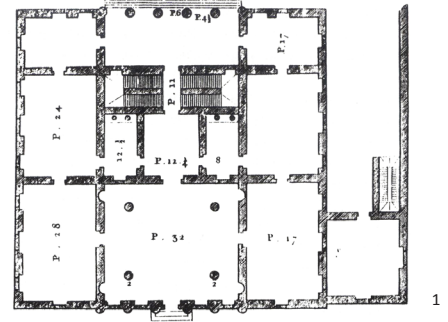
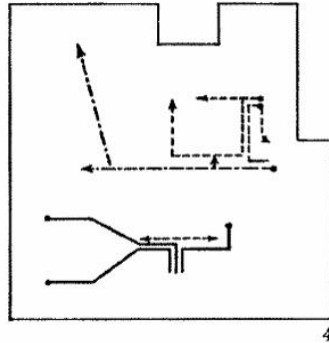
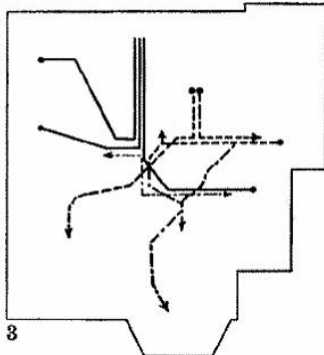
....plans have been scrutinized for the characteristics that could provide the preconditions for the way people occupy space, on the assumption that buildings accommodate what pictures illustrate and what words describe in the field of human relationships... This may not be the only way of reading plans but, even so, such an approach may offer something more than commentary and symbolism by clarifying architecture’s instrumental role in the formation of everyday events. It hardly needs to be said that giving architecture this kind of consequentiality would not entail the reinstating of functionalism or behavioral determinism.<sup>9</sup>

The instrumental role that architecture plays in the everyday lives of those who inhabit it is not demonstrated through architecture alone, but through its correspondence with disciplines that depict their lives and bodies. To evidence these claims, Evans compares house



A. Bad Example

B. Good Example



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plans and literature from 16th century Italy to house plans and literature from 19th century England. His purpose is to confront the assumption that the house is universally concerned with privacy, comfort, and convenience and that these terms are historically intransigent.

His use of literature is strikingly similar here to the use of geometry in *The Projective Cast*. He solicits a knowledge base outside of, but tangential to, architecture and refracts architecture through its lens. However, while geometry provided an appropriate complement for a study of perception and form, literature provides an appropriate complement for a study of gathering and configuration. Careful to avoid the Modernist presupposition of causality (and its attendant literature, the manifesto), Evans uses literature to which he affords only provisional legitimacy. He cites a courtesy book and autobiography, not to prove that actual events happened in actual places, but to describe how people tend to move, gather, and confront each other in the domestic space of the 16th century villa.

Given the consistency of the type, the underlying configuration of rooms allows Evans to see the plan as the precondition for the forms of gathering particular to that culture. The matrix of interconnected rooms presumes a culture being comfortable with intrusion as it is most convenient to move through one room to get to the other, and where privacy is constructed through the distancing of oneself from those preferred routes of circulation.

This version of privacy, comfort, and convenience is juxtaposed to its English descendant articulated through an evolution of house plans and concomitant literature. Tracing the evolution of the corridor, initially for the invisibility and expediency of servants, through the modification of villa type to its integral role in the wings of the manor house, Evans describes the evolution of privacy. Through the fable of Cotton Mather's hanging a sign reading "BE SHORT" above his door to warn against intrusion and Samuel Butler's iconoclastic novel, *The Way of all Flesh*, the privileging of privacy is satirically and caustically examined. Evans in no way argues that the emergence of the corridor produced this

Figure 1: Andrea Palladio, *Palazzo Antonini*.

Figure 2: Alexander Klein, *Functional House for Frictionless Living*.

privilege, but it would be difficult not to implicate the hallway for the conditions it affords. In fact, he remarks, "There was a commonplace analogy in seventeenth-century literature that compared a man's soul to a privy chamber, but it is hard to tell which became private first, the room or the soul. Certainly their histories are intertwined."<sup>10</sup>

The literature Evans uses neither undermines nor circumvents the agenda of the plan's author, but vitalizes it. It extends and elaborates the architectural conditions evident in the plan, without confusing the type of information the plan might provide and what the literature might extend. Evans is intensely conscientious in this regard. Writing at a time when architecture was actively misconstrued as literature, he explicitly brackets his methodology and intentions, identifying how his use of literature is fundamentally external to architecture.

In reaching these conclusions architectural plans have been compared with paintings and various sorts of literature. There is a lot to be said for making architecture once more into art; rescuing it from the semiology and methodology under which it has largely disappeared... This is sometimes done in a rather guileless way, by equating architecture with literature or painting so that it becomes an echo of words and shapes; sometimes in a more sophisticated way, by adopting the vocabulary and procedures of the literary critic or art historian and applying them to architecture. The result is the same: like novels, like portraiture, architecture is made into a vehicle for reflection. Overloaded with meaning and symbolism, its direct intervention in human affairs is spuriously reduced to a question of practicality.<sup>11</sup>

The guileless and sophisticated versions of equating architecture and literature refer to two of Evans' contemporaries, Hedjuk's poetics and Eisenman's semiotics, respectively. Evans saw these as conflating architecture with literature and dismissed them as obfuscating architecture's direct intervention in human affairs. By enlisting narratives constructed by non-architects, Evans gives a formative, social consequence to architecture rather than see it as either a symbol or reflection of preexisting social conditions. In this way, the pairing of architecture and literature is speculative; imagining their potential complicity. Given the prominence and popularity of these two figures and approaches examining architecture and literature, Evans' incursion seems a wildly dangerous gambit. However, he insulates his work from misapprehension by being nearly didactic in his insistence that architecture and literature are separate but may be enjoined for projective use.

The current resurgence of literature, fiction, and narrative in architectural discourse deserve equally nuanced and compelling parameters.

The remainder of this paper will examine the contemporary appropriation of literature, fiction, and writing as complementary modes of architectural speculation. Using Jill Stoner's *Toward a Minor Architecture*, Lindsay Bremner's *Writing the City into Being*, and Jimenez Lai's "Sociopaths" to identify three similar yet divergent strategies, it will argue for the construction of conditions, expectations, and qualifications that enjoin the projective to the real through architecture's disciplinary approach to drawing and representation. This comparison will be organized by classifying authors' inclusion of writing as either being internal or external to the discipline, and whether they see writing as being critical or projective.

#### **STONER AND LITERATURE: EXTERNAL AND CRITICAL**

Similarly to Robin Evans, Jill Stoner employs literature outside of architecture's purview in her book *Towards a Minor Architecture*. However, while Evans enlists literature to its projective ends, Stoner explicitly uses literature to critique architecture. Likening minor architecture to literature, she suggests writings of space countermand the disciplinary myths (of the interior, the object, nature, the subject) of major architecture. Here, literature is an

instrument of critique, where the major or dominant roles of architectural production are cleared, condemned, or superseded by the stories she employs.

Initially, Stoner partitions her book each into four sections focusing on particular myths and employing literature inimical to these canons, the foundation of a major architecture. The protagonists of these stories are confronted by the putative reality of the fictional space respective of their particular myth. For example, Kafka looms large in her section on the myth of the interior, as his work provides an unending series of interiors, frequently constructed without an outside. Here, literary subjects must circumvent, subvert, or escape their imposed spaces and circumstances.

Similarly, in her description of John Cheever's *The Swimmer*, the myth of nature recreated in the suburbs is one the protagonist can only combat.

Neddy's swim is a denial set against and within a matrix of capture: the risk of revealing oneself, the loss of suburban social graces, the possibility of bankruptcy and foreclosure, and the breakdown of his seemingly ideal family structure. He wants to sublimate the private pools into a flowing river, to have these private enclosures take into full account what has happened to him, to remove from these objects their boundaries. Swimming through—that is to say, entering into—a series of private properties, Neddy attempts to draw a fluid line of force, but finds himself blocked by a sequence of ossified, fortified interiors.<sup>12</sup>

Minor architectures are constructed as a means of escape, like those of Kafka's *K*. and Cheever's *Neddy*. Neddy doesn't simply leave the suburbs, he sublimates a flowing river through the segmented pools. Minor architectures, as the minor/major literatures she extends from Deleuze and Guattari, do not supplant major architecture, nor do they ignore them. They are fashioned from within major architectures. Minor architecture is dependent on major architecture while not being contained by it.

This however, leaves Stoner at an impasse. To suggest remedying major architecture would make her complicit in perpetuating, in a modified form, major architecture. Yet minor architectures are built within major architectures and the literature she has chosen to employ positions all protagonists outside of architecture. While Evans' use of characters supplied by an external literary source provide him the ability to speculate about the consequences of architecture, Stoner's critical vantage point yields no similar insights. In fact, the conclusion of her book seems to confer upon minor architecture a kind of inevitability when she declares, "So we return to the premise with which we began: minor architectures will emerge through (and as) the substance of architecture. This is their nature."<sup>13</sup>

#### **BREMNER AND LITERATURE: INTERNAL AND CRITICAL**

Where Stoner turns to the external characters and actions supplied by novelists and short story authors, Lindsay Bremner turns to architecture's own writings to provide them. In her book, *Writing the City into Being*, particularly early essays such as "Architects Write the Johannesburg 1933–2007" and "Writing the City", writing is presented as a fundamentally disciplinary practice. Moving from the positivist rhetoric of the manifesto to the more contemporary architectural journalist, Bremner argues writing is formative to shaping the agenda and form of architecture and the city. Her work is similar to Stoner's in the attempt to use writing to expose the inconsistencies, contradictions, and ultimately the distance between architecture's imagined and actual consequences.

However, unlike Stoner, Bremner's work is populated by architectural characters; authors and subjects constituted by our own discipline. The character is part of the work, as bodies and identities are produced in space. In "Listening to the City," she begins with an illustrative example:

Jane Rendell, in her study of rambling in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London describes her work similarly:

‘Like a Rambler, I ‘went about’ in search of pleasure, but my pursuit involved knowing the urban past. Through the labyrinths of the British Library I pursued the Rambler as he pursued the pleasure of nineteenth-century London. Between historical evidence and critical theory, between past and present, city and self...’

Rendell here speaks about the pursuit of historical knowledge as a form of exchange—between the theoretical and the historical, between past and present, between city and self.<sup>14</sup>

What is striking here is that rather than simply quote Rendell’s scholarship, she includes Rendell’s narrative about constructing that scholarship. As Rendell uses the practice of the Rambler to frame her research, Bremner also acknowledges that she is equally constructing her own character of author as she writes. This position allows her to reflect on the roles of gender and race at play in Johannesburg in her later essays, such as “Border/Skin.”

Similarly, Bremner acknowledges the critical role that representations of space play within the actual world, particularly in imagining the future of the city. “The imaginary potential of representation is highly productive and highly subversive. Through the selfsame deceit of transparency, which Lefebvre called a ‘quasi-logical presupposition of an identity between mental space... and real space’ we can cause an upside-down (imagined) city be brought to bear on and intervene in the real city.”<sup>15</sup>

From this position, she analyzes Johannesburg’s attempt to imagine itself post-apartheid. Returning to the idea of the architectural subject, she describes how city managers intended to re-imagine their future city through the global subject. “Frequent use of the phrase ‘world-class city’ described how the city manager and others at the time imagined Johannesburg’s future.”<sup>16</sup> This notional subject exists outside of Johannesburg’s local history and therefore absolves the city from considering the local subject, with all its racial and historical encumbrances.

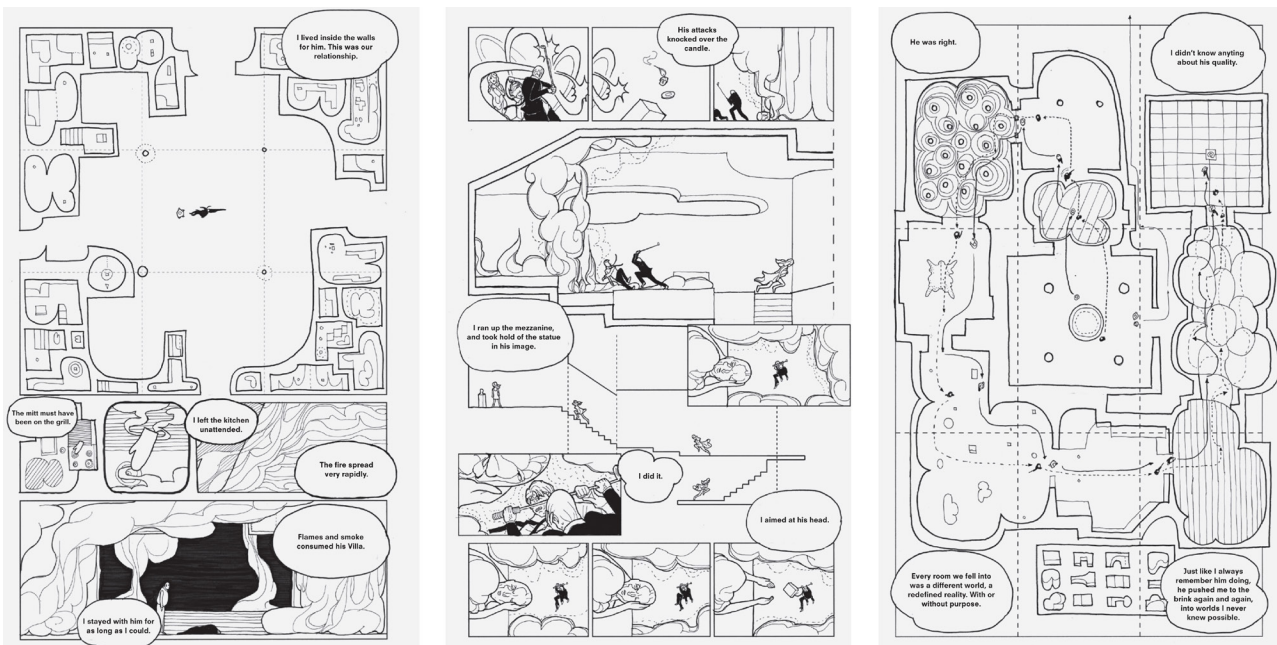
Much like Stoner’s work, Bremner uses literature to challenge the presumed narratives and mythologies of our practice. However, Bremner’s work allows us to confront, on our own representational terms, how architects’ imagined worlds deviate from their actual counterparts. While this seems minor, rather than escaping architecture as Stoner does, this allows Bremner to incite architecture’s instrumentality.

In her photo essay, which appears a standalone section of the book, Bremner describes the issue of terror and the proliferation of bounded enclaves and security booths in Johannesburg. Her argument is simple. The propagation of these types of spaces and objects presumes a territory as one of danger, producing the sense that more of them are necessary to secure the space. This becomes a positive feedback loop of terror. Instrumental here is both imagined narrative and material space.

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Figure 3: Lindsay Bremner, *Terror*.



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### LAI AND LITERATURE: INTERNAL AND PROJECTIVE

While Bremner uses the writings and characters of architects to critique their own practices, Jimenez Lai enlists writing to speculate about the link between space and action in his own work. Collapsing architectural drawings (plans, sections, diagrams, details) with narratively directed vignettes and conversations, Lai supposes stories about people and the spaces they inhabit, frequently through a hyperbolic relation to fantasy or science fiction. While this strategy is present in many of his works, *Sociopaths* most explicitly investigates how spaces render certain potentials for action and people project themselves onto space.

“*Sociopaths*” is a story about two detectives attempting to solve a murder. There is one victim and three suspects. Each character confesses to the same murder. Each character includes the other characters in their story. Each produces his or her own version of the house in which they committed the murder. Space for each of the individual narratives is integral to action, setting up lines of sight, routes of retreat, and opportunities to attack. Each story is told by its respective suspect as part of a confession. As each of these confessions is different, each of the houses described are different, although all the houses are destroyed by a fire at the end, negating the possibility that architecture is the final arbiter.

However, the narratives are not constructed to confuse the detectives: they are not obfuscations. They are constructed alongside the space of the murder to describe each suspect’s relation to the victim and so clarify his or her participation in the event. In summarizing the investigation, one detective quips to the other, “At least two—if not all three—are sociopaths, are liars.”<sup>17</sup> Not only has each suspect invented stories that figure themselves centrally in the action, but they also produced the respective houses.

While Lai’s excursion into the format of the graphic novel or manga-esque style storyboarding might be seen as an attempt to evade architecture, his writing illustrates the reflective nature of this study. His concluding quote references Bernard Tschumi’s *Advertisements for Architecture*, “To really appreciate architecture, you may even need to commit a murder (or three).”<sup>18</sup> Taking Tschumi’s proposition and exploring it through a form of representation that binds space, narrative, and action unfolding in time, he returns to a fundamentally disciplinary question.

Figure 4: Jimenez Lai, “Sociopaths”.

## ENDNOTES

1. Robin Evans, *The Projective Cast: Architecture and Its Three Geometries* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1995), xxxii–xxxiii.
2. *Ibid.*, 354.
3. *Ibid.*, 117.
4. Robin Evans, “Translations from Drawing to Building”, in *Translations from Drawing to Building* (Craft Print: Singapore, 2011 ) 171.
5. *Ibid.*, 172.
6. Evans, *The Projective Cast*, xxx.
7. *Ibid.*, 354.
8. Robin Evans, “Figures, Doors and Passages”, in *Translations from Drawing to Building* (Craft Print: Singapore, 2011 ) 56-57.
9. *Ibid.*, 89.
10. *Ibid.*, 75.
11. *Ibid.*, 88-89.
12. Jill Stoner, *Toward a Minor Architecture* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2012), 59.
13. *Ibid.*, 107.
14. Lindsay Bremner, “Listening to the City,” in *Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998–2008* (Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books, 2010), 33.
15. Lindsay Bremner, “Writing the City,” in *Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg 1998–2008* (Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books, 2010), 49.
16. *Ibid.*, 51.
17. Jimenez Lai, “Sociopaths,” in *Thresholds 40* (SA+P Press, 2012), 285.
18. *Ibid.*, 285.

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Finally, although Lai is interested in the relationship between space, character, and action, there is no causality here (as all stories and spaces are fabricated). Space and action abet each other, neither powerful enough to resist each other, but also incapable of overcoming the other. Here, they are capable of at least co-conspiracy or, at best, productive interference.

In other works, Lai’s graphic novels direct specific lines of inquiry for built work. In the collection of stories published in *Citizens of No Place*, an aimless protagonist explores the vast space. In the absence of routine, community, or even gravity he tries to position himself, contorting his body to spaces in order to orient himself. This line is an explicit precursor to the built work, “White Elephant,” a rotating object too large to be furniture, yet too small to be a room. To acknowledge this genealogy Lai places images of the short story on the walls surrounding the tumbling object.

### PROJECTIVE

*The Projective Cast* allowed Robin Evans to refract architecture through the lens of the abetting discipline of geometry. The role of projection was to provisionally tether architecture to another discipline and allow the emergent tension between them to render each anew. This strategy was similarly at work with his conscription of literature. In both of these studies, his aim was to reinvigorate architecture by speculating about its modes of production and assumed effects, hence the central role that projection played in his work. His attempts to include literature were a calculated gambit as he was keenly aware and critical of his contemporaries Eisenman and Hedjuk. In order to differentiate his work, his explicit method of employing architecture and literature separately but comparatively provides a useful framework for examining contemporary versions of this coupling. The goal of this paper has not been to defend any particular approach, nor to argue that individual authors proved their point. Rather, the intent has been to analyze the various ways that architecture may be enjoined to literature in an attempt to enlarge the scope of architectural speculation and projection.

Figure 5: Jimenez Lai, *White Elephant*.