

In Defence of Soft Pragmatism: Embracing the Myriad Modalities of Theory

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Abstract

Diminished rewards arise from attempts to establish hierarchies within the healthily variegated scope of contemporary theory. A re-emerging instrumentalism is present in current architectural theories, which frames certain modalities as indulgences. To appraise theory – if possible – it is necessary to ask what criteria exist for sorting out theory. Exploring the edges of discourse can accomplish this: to paint a simplified antipodal dialogue between differing perspectives to better understand the scope of theory. This essay uses a dialectic between existential theorists (those addressing contemporary issues focusing on human survival) and esoteric theorists (those addressing a myriad of topics that are specialised and not as clearly relevant to contemporary topics). Following this analysis, the boundaries between these two modalities are deconstructed to cast into doubt the methods of appraisal. This is bolstered by a brief reminder of the lessons of

functionalism in the last hundred years and follows with the stubborn residue of post-structuralism. William Blake, who revealed a path towards radical subjectivity, is treated as a proto-post-structuralist. All of this is in service to a deep scepticism of appraisal and a plea for a 'softer pragmatism', one that softens the hard boundaries between differing modalities of theory.

Keywords:

Post-structuralism, William Blake, pragmatism, standardisation, theoretical modalities, ambiguity

One Sentence Summary

This essay employs a dialectical framework to interrogate the parameters informing the appraisal of theory, utilising concepts of the individual as explored by William Blake, along with several architectural examples.

'Where are his Works That he did in the Wilderness.'

– William Blake, 'The Laocoön'

Fuzzy Shapes

On a recent prize jury of senior architecture student projects at my university, I discussed a crisis with one of the jurors: how would they award a lone prize to such a broad range of student work? Among the presentations, there was a small hospital studying healing proxemics and strict hospital code; an anti-monumental museum set in Washington, D.C. addressing political rhetoric in architecture and the inclusion of historically marginalised artists; a speculative futurist utopia set in Puerto Rico where the effects of colonisation are pervasive; and an art installation in a disused grain bin that experimented

with expanded definitions of drawing and the residues of corporate agriculture. The jury's search for standard criteria was sidestepped, and the prize was awarded at a reduced amount to each team.

This situation encapsulates the dizzying yet healthily expanded scope of architecture and theory in the twenty-first century and the diminished rewards that arise from attempts to establish hierarchies within these variegated approaches. The treatment of myriad complex topics unfolding in our time flitters between an inclusionary accumulation of new and refreshing lines of inquiry and an exclusionary rejection of inherited knowledge, one that sloughs off whole fields of study as irrelevant dalliances. Re-emergent instrumentalism, which bases merit solely on its practical usefulness, is present in much of contemporary architectural theory. This neo-instrumentality frames certain modalities as indulgences that ignore immediate existential emergencies.

Current historians and theorists are asking how they can absorb all this expanded knowledge into their studies. Conversely, they are asking what past theories to cover over – to discard the vestiges of (perceived) dead discourses. This curation is not unique to our moment: ideas throughout history are adopted, adapted and discarded, but the present moment is challenging to grasp as the profession is atomising into silos of specialisation while also striving to move the design community towards collectivist goals that address human survival.

To appraise the value of theory – if possible – and to make sense of this drawing and quartering of contemporary knowledge, it is necessary to ask what criteria are used for sorting out theory. Exploring the edges of discourse is one way to accomplish this: to paint a simplified antipodal dialogue between differing perspectives to understand the scope of theory better. Studying wide-ranging examples from other disciplines is another way to help interrogate architectural theory's hardened boundaries. In this essay I will discuss Northrop Frye's literary theory (as explored in his books *Anatomy of Criticism* and his study on William Blake in *Fearful Symmetry*), historical examples of functionalism, and some stubborn reminders adopted from post-structuralist philosophy. This exploration may help to clarify architectural theory's role within the discipline, or it may cast a clear appraisal of architectural theory into clear doubt.

The dialectic between existential and esoteric theory

In a time when multi-pronged emergencies beseech the world – from the global retreat of liberal democracies, the ever-growing threat of climate change, the rise of global inequity, the re-alignment of neo-Axis powers, and the spectre of another world war – architecture theory

sits in a strange place, in search of its specific agency. Existential theorists who directly engage with these most dire topical concerns are compelling and persuasive. (The word existential does not refer to the philosophical school of thought but to the term as it relates to our continued existence on this planet.) Theorists grappling with topics such as the environment, systemic inequality, political revolution or war have a claim of instrumentality within their discourse: they contend that these are the topics most worth discussing. These contemporary thinkers often frame theoretical topics outside these parameters as esoteric excess, lacking substance in a dark age, appropriate only in a time of plenty and thriving. Existential theorists often call for a new project for society, a collective refocus, where all eggs are put into one basket. For example, eco-political policy, such as the Green New Deal – at its most extreme – suggests a collective global effort where individual passions are to be deferred and sacrificed for the sake of a better future. Politically revolutionary theorists frame their topics in terms of toppling embedded systems of inequality, such as the colonial patriarchy, again, a request for destruction in service to renewal.

Many current branches of history and theory explore topics outside this tenuous definition of existential theory, which I will call esoteric theory. Esoteric theory addresses all things outside the scope of what is perceived as immediately applicable to contemporary topics relating to human survival and well-being. The word 'esoteric' historically describes the specialised topics of knowledge only understood by certain in-groups, but in using this word, I also want to enfold theories by dilettantes, poets, and other outsider experimental theorists whose work reaches beyond visceral instrumentality. These topics are, therefore, self-reflexive and rarely externalise into praxis. They are limitless in their diversity, such as, for example, a researcher studying the history of wallpaper in nineteenth-century New York tenements. Many esoteric theorists are experiencing their own existential crises; how can they work on their research when academic institutions that foster them risk being caught in a whirlpool of historical, political, neoliberal and environmental upheaval? How can they focus on their specialised topic when a collective project may be necessary for survival? How does their theory contribute to the conversations of the moment? Do certain topics within theory take precedence over others? Are some branches of theory mere vanity, or worse, complicit in continuing systems of oppression and environmental calamity?

Caroline Levine, a literary theorist, dwells on these questions in her book *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis*. She grapples with how the

humanities participate in existential conversations and where, specifically, literary theory can situate itself in this context. Levine rejects anti-instrumentality (a common trope used in critical contemporary humanities) as a default stance against the status quo and suggests that its norm-breaking patterns (such as theorists who imagine utopian futures) can only take humanity so far, keeping theory in a vacuum of intention but without a concrete vision.¹ Her solution seeks to reframe current trends toward an 'affirmative instrumentality', and to focus on 'collective continuance', which focuses on the immediate needs of survival, such as reliable food sources and dependable shelter, 'to plan and build conditions for intergenerational flourishing in the face of inevitable change'.² The focus on the mundane and repetitive tasks of collective continuance, Levine argues, is the unglamorous direction the humanities should move towards. Levine's book is a call towards mass collective action. This framework implies that existential theory is the most vital approach to current theory and should, therefore, be appraised highly. However, there are complications to this approach.

Before considering these complications, it is necessary to explain how I formulated this dialectic. The dialogue between existential and esoteric theory emerged after long considering my colleagues' many approaches to architecture. The diversity of the senior prize jury mentioned above stemmed directly from the faculty's lack of homogenisation. This is a positive sign of a healthy environment, not overtaken by a few elites' strong-willed pedagogical biases. However, heterogeneous viewpoints result in sometimes collegial and sometimes heated exchanges between professors. These individuals have sorted out architecture to suit their passionate interests, and most discussions are rooted in a defence of their specific hierarchical ordering of architectural priorities. Some colleagues are classifiable as existential theorists. These include, for example, those involved with: Marxist critiques of neoliberalism; decolonised and de-instrumentalised imagined futures; black identities' naked wounds in contemporary America; and with those seeking ways that architecture addresses the climate crisis (through energy performance and construction research). Other colleagues could be considered esoteric theorists and include those with specific focuses ranging from the histories of panel construction in post-war Czech socialist housing to the novel ways wind-powered instruments infuse magical realism into architectural craft. This produces a student body without an overarching design personality. It also exposes students to diverse design approaches. Critics say (including some in my department) that this indicates the university lacks a clear

progressive vision, which is why it is essential to dwell further on with the established dialectic discussed above.

Existential subjectivities

When appraising theory, there are many issues that arise when framing existential theory as more critical than esoteric theory. First, this dialectical binary is fraught with contingencies and other affordances that confuse what constitutes an existential threat and what teeters over the edge into esotericism. Therefore, the criteria demarcating theory's importance are blurry, gradated and hard to define. Second, the diverse approaches to existential theory contain myriad nested hierarchies that compete for high ground. The complex interconnections between topics obfuscate what methodologies are most effective for 'collective continuance'. Therefore, some existential theorists propose collective efforts that prioritise political action over environmental action or techno-positivist solutions over other approaches. Part of this stems from some theorists' inability to synthesise their methods with other modalities. Therefore, both existential and esoteric theorists are subject to 'narrowness in the selection of evidence'.³ As summarised by Alfred North Whitehead:

The narrowness arises from the idiosyncrasies and timidities of particular authors, of particular social groups, of particular schools of thought, of particular epochs ... The evidence relied upon is arbitrarily biased by the temperaments of individuals, by provincialities of groups, and by the limitations of the scheme of thought.⁴

Third, existential theories focus on a spectrum between regional and global scales: the issues of collective continuance are often nested within their specific regionalist circumstances, and some areas are experiencing more immediate threats than others (Ukraine, Palestine). A 'hyperobject' like climate change is at a much different scale in time and scope than a failing crop that sustains a small collective.⁵ Scalarities of time and space can, therefore, temper perceived hierarchies within a theory, complicating its clear appraisal. Fourth, theorists addressing the possibilities of the future are inherently speculative. Future speculation is an often specious estimate filled with unforeseen alternate outcomes, data that may be exaggerated or understated, or narratives that skew data and public sentiment toward its goals. The myopic present moment often makes current circumstances appear more permanent than they are. For example, in 2007, when the e-reader tablet deluged the market, a flood of articles proclaimed the end of physical books. With the subsequent ascent of young adult fiction, among other factors, this prediction has proven false.⁶ This is a humbling check on

the efficacy some existential theorists assert when making confident claims about future conditions.

Fifth, presentism – an application of current epistemic thinking to the analysis of the past – can create biases that obscure why certain topics lumped in as esoteric theory may hold instrumental value or be relevant for understanding current conditions. Medieval studies scholars endured a gruelling confrontation when American far-right media figures in the late 2010s weaponised their seemingly esoteric and historically distant topic. The subsequent debate on contemporary engagement, patriarchal bias and neutrality uncovered prickly complexities that present discourse brings to history.⁷ Contemporary interests, desires and available resources therefore delimit precise analyses of history (historiography), and affirm that history has always been a collaboration between past events and the curatorial biases of the present. Paradoxically, one often touted tool of objectivity used in historical research, hindsight – a bird's eye view that presumably sorts out the past – can be clarifying, but it too is manipulable by presentism.

Sixth, the writing style of architectural theory can bias its reception. Whether using scientific jargon, mathematical formulae, philosophical language, journalistic aloofness, personalised narrative, whether the writing is overly formal or informal, or whether it engages with wit, irony or symbolism, all can manipulate the subsequent appraisal of that theory.

Pitfalls of the pragmatic

Another way to tackle this dialectical loggerhead between existential theory and esoteric theory (particularly regarding the concept of competing nested hierarchies) is by examining historical lessons of functionalist practice within architecture. Various practitioners of functionalism sought to instrumentalise social, material, programmatic and construction techniques in architecture to codify a repeatable scientific standard, uninterested in the repetitions of outmoded historical practice. These methods created a sheen of efficacy, a bias of illusory objective realism that led down many misleading paths.

The multiple modalities of functionalism practised by the various architects espousing it in the early twentieth century ironically undermined their declarations of objectivity. Instead, the debates over functionalism's correct approach reified its state of hierarchical indeterminacy. Whether it was Adolf Loos's abolishment of ornament, Hugo Häring's exacting organic biomimetic approach, Mies van der Rohe's structural and material-focused spatial clearing, Alvar Aalto's ergonomic material sensitivity (Paimio Sanatorium), or the Eastern European's focus on mass production, prefabrication and ideal housing for the socialist masses – each vied for instrumental

supremacy in the functionalist debate. The Czech architect Karel Tiege clarified these conflicts of dominance in his critique of Le Corbusier's unbuilt 1929 Mundaneum. Tiege harangued the encyclopaedic museum design as indulging in historicised academicism, lumping Le Corbusier together with the anti-modernist bourgeois establishment. As Pete A. Zusi summarises: 'Le Corbusier could only interpret this charge as the implementation of utilitarian "police measures" against his own "quest for harmony" and aesthetic efficacy.'⁸

Another priority dispute that illustrates functionalist relativism is encapsulated in a debate over the 1927 Weissenhofsiedlung housing block in Stuttgart between the participating communist cohorts and Mies van der Rohe, who spearheaded the urban proposal. Mies prescribed an organic form for each project in the urban ensemble that grew out of the needs of dwelling – an approach to architecture that shunned past obsessions with style, echoed in his dictum: 'Form is not the goal but the result of our work.'⁹ However, these ideological axioms didn't interest the communist participants, who rejected the entire project and proposed instead 'one hundred twenty dwelling units at a cost of ten thousand each, and that these dwellings be placed on the housing market without delay. This would be an answer to the needs of the overwhelming majority of those in Stuttgart who are seeking homes.'¹⁰ Their proposal eschewed 'building villas for the affluent and banishing the underprivileged to a separate neighbourhood.'¹¹

Post-war functionalism persisted in pockets throughout the rest of the century. Colin Rowe's famous critique of second-generation modern architecture's turn towards a neoclassical parti echoed Tiege's critiques of the 1930s, as if the return to symmetry and geometric purity in contemporary work during the 1950s suggested a mannerist retreat from the heroic practicality of the International Style.¹² Alison and Peter Smithson adopted new brutalism in England as an anti-aesthetic position that focused on context, no-nonsense materiality, and sociologically informed programming, which they termed 'an ethic, not an aesthetic.'¹³ The same argument can be made for the precise programme fetishisation of the new pragmatists in turn-of-the-century Dutch practice and their problematic interpretation of a perceived 'realism' and an information 'datascape'. Roemer van Toorn described the method:

The touchstone here is not subjective vision but an addiction to extreme realism, a realism that is intended to show no theoretical or political mediation, a kind of degree zero of the political, without thought about the consequences of the social construction it would lead to in reality.¹⁴

The tendency to over-instrumentalise persists with the existential theoretical turn, which positions theory as solely the producer of the answer to problems, intended to set standardised frameworks for implementation. Whether theory manifests as the poetic narrative speculations of the dilettante, the archivist's dive into a specific historical topic, or the interpretation of a scientist's detailed data analysis, all of these methods – existential, esoteric, and all in between – are by default blinded by the subjective choices of their writer, the curators who whittle down content, peer reviewers who shape that content, and the public it engages with. The persistence of this pragmatic approach reveals the amnesiac cyclical nature of already rehearsed debates. Outside of specific mandated regulations and standard practices (which vary regionally), architecture is a loose profession with many affordances; it contains too many epiphenomenal externalities to grant it an autonomous discernible shape. Function in the building arts is, therefore, complex and contingent; through trial and error and non-universality, certain construction techniques, performance criteria or programmatic strategies can approach efficacious methods that improve upon what came before. The problem is not found in the methods but in the puritanical and near metaphysical absolutist leaps that many theorists take in a field with so many moving parts.

A contemporary example: heavily touted techno-positivist construction techniques were announced in 2022 via ten 3D-printed homes proposed in the small town of Muscatine, Iowa. Using little human labour, a large robotic arm would print the main walls of the homes. They were 'hailed as cheaper to produce than traditionally built houses, ... [would] take as little as 22 hours apiece to print and would be less costly to heat and cool'.¹⁵ Yet, problems with programming the new technology, the extruding process, concrete cracking, and the volatile hot and cold seasons in Iowa combined to force the developers to abandon their plans. The partially built first house was torn down. Investments at the city, federal and university levels poured in for this new technology, but plans for 3D printed construction in Iowa were indefinitely halted. Innovation through experimentation is noble, and mistakes can lead to piecemeal refinements in building technology; however, the narrative sheen of blind hope in technology just as often leads toward visions of a future before it has arrived.

Post-structural spectres

The extended dialectical dissection above and the brief overview of functionalism in architecture inevitably lead to post-structuralism – emergent in literary theory (but extended into all the humanities) in the last half of the last

century as a reaction to the persistent systematic, exclusionary and scientific aspirations of the structuralists and the New Critics, among others. Many twenty-first century theorists have forgotten or ignored the post-structuralist moment, one that reified the blinding veils of subjectivity and the complex implications this has for theory.

Multi-pronged, simultaneous, fragmentary and overlapping modalities of thought are ever present in post-structuralism. Theorists acknowledging this multi-planarity enrich their work by disrupting assumed hierarchies and narratives. The architectural theorist Catherine Ingraham states that 'an analysis [of any building] in this vein would not be a history of various individuals, or political regimes, but an analysis of the sedimentations of discourse – architectural, political, cultural, propagandistic...'¹⁶

These 'sedimentations of discourse' need acknowledgement for theory to be effective. The isolated vacuums of ultra-specialised topics are enriched when situated alongside the multi-planar cultural, historical, philosophical and ethical modalities beyond their immediate domain. This process helps contextualise a theory's positionality. Catherine Ingraham, furthermore, discusses architecture's unique place in post-structuralist thought as, in part, epiphenomenal:

The founding of the discipline on the ground of something else ... is complicated by the almost ubiquitous condition of architecture as a discipline that is a collection of many bodies of knowledge. The architect is a generalist, a collector of disciplines.¹⁷

This lack of definition in the field has led theory down a well-worn path that seeks to clarify these fuzzy edges. Attempts to autonomise architecture from other embedded fields of thought rebut many expansive and rich ways that current architectural theorists are discussing architecture. Colonialism, patriarchy, gender norms, materialist archaeology, neo-liberalism and many other topics are newer forms of inquiry brought into the architectural fold. Most of these approaches came about in the scopious environment opened by post-structuralist thought.

Lessons from the *Laocoön*

Another example that grapples with this multi-planar way of thinking reaches back to the nineteenth century. The quote from William Blake at the start of this essay is taken from the poem/engraving, *The Laocoön*, etched by Blake in 1826. [Fig. 1] This piece subverts nearly every structural convention of neo-classical poetry, eschewing the linearity of the text, the unity of typeface, the uniformity of size, and the language used. It celebrates text as pure form – the materialist words are coiled and stuffed

between the spaces of his etched rendition of the famous ancient sculpture (discovered during the Renaissance – a source of robust art world debates in Blake's time). Julia Wright describes the poem as an attack on the conventional neo-classical status quo. She states that the poem is akin to a hypertext: 'In a challenge to the conventional constructions of the properties (and proprieties) of the arts, Blake removes the reader from the tyrannies of causality and sequence.'¹⁸

This effect liberates the reader from conventional and instinctive ways of interacting with the text. Attempts to transcribe and organise the lines of the poem in the countless anthologies of Blake's poetry reveal the inadequacy of traditional linear formatting: 'Each of these interventions is a reading, and the plurality of the editorial interventions indicates the degree to which Blake has challenged the most basic rules'.¹⁹

This arbitrary ordering also burdens the reader, requiring a multiple simultaneous absorption of the text to approach an understanding of the whole. The words surrounding the sculpture are akin to the body of theory surrounding a topic: they approach a subject from many different vantage points, unordered, without hierarchical guidance or an understanding of overall unity. Perhaps one of the most perplexing takeaways of this proto-post-structuralist tact is the impossibility of complete comprehension, simply because the human mind cannot process everything simultaneously. This unsatiated, fragmentary understanding is, therefore, all that may be available to comprehension.

Anatomy of appraisal

Valid theory within this Blakean post-structural understanding is, therefore, appraised not on its placement within a hierarchical order but based on its engagement with the vast multi-planarity of a given topic. No small journal essay can contain the multitudes that any topic engenders in a complex world; however, simply acknowledging that these multiplicities exist is necessary and often forgotten, especially when obscured by the urgent charge of existential theory. Theory is better appraised if it recognises – by default – biases, flaws in logic, blind spots, narrative oversimplifications, and the unique mixture of the writer's privilege and disadvantage. A strictly Marxist reading, a mathematical set of conclusions, or a well-contextualised and keenly observed formalist reading are all limited in their range. The author's unique hierarchies of focus determine whether a theory is formal, scientific, feminist or political. Yet, the ordering systems themselves do not mean that the constellation of all other modes of inquiry are absent from any given theory; these modalities are present to some degree in every conceivable theory, whether apparent or not. Northrop Frye's book about William Blake, *Anatomy*

of Criticism, analyses a similar idea in literature, but it is instructive here: 'while one mode constitutes the underlying tonality of a work ... any or all [others] may be simultaneously present.'²⁰ A topic, therefore, is complexly understood as the aggregation of all who have and will study the subject from many vantages.

Within these tangled brambles there are useful affordances to tease out. Theory deftly simplifies and curates information; this is one of its most common uses (and one of its most frustrating limitations) – to isolate and consider something within the vast network of its conceptual possibilities. Otherwise, any given theoretical inquiry would require an exhaustive book-length tome to examine the topic from every conceivable angle while leaving room for the expansion of future modalities. Frye clarifies that theory, 'which translates the implicit into the explicit, can only isolate the aspect of meaning, large or small, which is appropriate or interesting for certain readers to grasp at a certain time.'²¹ The goals of a valid theory shouldn't attempt to eliminate or minimise subjectivities in order to establish new grounded objectivities. Instead, and as much as possible, the subjectivities of curation must simply be mapped, acknowledged and understood by its author and viewers. Theory is a living document subject to deconstruction, reassessment, dismissal or promotion. This constant unfolding hinders a clear understanding of what is valuable or forgettable in the theoretical arena.

Ethical frameworks for appraising theory are equally subjectivised within the present moment and within tribalistic bubbles; however, this does not negate the efforts of many theorists to tackle topics from the perspective of helping humanity survive, thrive and give a voice to the voiceless. But, as Frye states:

Value-judgements are subjective in the sense that they can be indirectly but not directly communicated. When they are fashionable or generally accepted, they look objective, but that is all ... this always turns out to be an illusion of the history of taste.²²

The effort of ethicists can be a valid form of appraising theory, but it is still inescapably a product of all the subjectivities described above.

Many contemporary theorists dismiss the ideas of significant past thinkers because of their prejudices (by holding historical figures to the ethical standards of today) or by taking historical ideas seriously based only on their purposefulness. The complexity of a person or a theory can be oversimplified or reduced to one acceptable monolithic interpretation, which flattens discourse. An alternative to this is to acknowledge the complexities, contradictions, and moral shortcomings of past figures (such as Martin Heidegger or Ezra Pound, both Nazis) when citing them

to expand understanding rather than performing an all-out erasure. This is not an apologia for bigotry, nor a plea to continue the status quo power structures of oppression. Instead, this is a plea for a moment of reframing, turning precisions into soft precisions, and rejecting the weaponisation of the practical, the relevant, the moral and the didactic while striving for rigour and peer-to-peer engagement. The post-structural view celebrates the mess and seeks to struggle within it.

This uncentred and nominal path may not be as potently satisfying a conclusion to many regarding the appraisal of theory, but it is preferable to the alternatives of scientific or technological positivism, political absolutism, formalist dictates, didactic manifestos, or the hierarchical reproductions of class, race, sex and gender. This framework critiques the limiting and agenda-driven scope of right-wing ideologues seeking to simplify the world through convenient scapegoats. It critiques the Marxist polemic that paints many theorists as insufficiently focused on the project of labour equity. It critiques the climate change polemicists that cast any other theory as indulgent vestiges of a time before the burning world or the decolonialist or the feminist that frames theories outside of their immediate scope as distractions that are complicit in reifying the white imperialist patriarchy.

In many ways the points above are already implemented by theorists. Architectural theorists today often include historiographies of their topic and view it through many modal lenses. Problems arise when theorists do not acknowledge subjective bias in their work and instead evoke scientific positivism intended to obliterate outmoded esotericism in service to an existential cause. Therefore, in this essay I disrupt the possibility of universal criteria that organise, value and appraise the multitudes of theories.

A soft manifesto, a soft pragmatism

These reminders are not intended as a capricious judgment that frames all theories as irrevocably inadequate, lost in a vortex of relativity and non-referentiality. In the spirit of the juror's ambivalence towards the senior architectural prize mentioned above, this essay rejects the rigid boundaries between existential and esoteric theory. Instead, I propose a more diplomatic inclusivity, one that avoids reentering a neo-instrumentalised period that dictates what is or is not appropriate for discussion. This requires a softer pragmatism, a loosening of dogmatic thinking, an abandonment of orthodoxy, and a less hegemonic playing field that celebrates the unique contributions of all the rigorously curious.²³ Soft pragmatism paints all theories approached with good faith, passion and purpose (within their limits) as valid if they avoid absolutist certainties and grapple with their open-endedness. Soft pragmatism cushions hard conclusions and loosens inflexibility. This approach is resonant

with the work of expanding the field. Expansion through diverse accumulations of knowledge – enriching history rather than dismantling and replacing it – is one way the profession can avoid becoming a victim of the delusional bubbles that pragmatic didacticism can foster.²⁴

Soft pragmatism allows a theorist autonomy to follow any thread that passion, interest, duty, compulsion or a sincerely held sense of purpose leads them toward, rather than seeking out topics through a sense of peer pressure, guilt about relevance, or strategic calculation designed to please curators or the public. Instead of negating the possibility of any theory, this is a more humble and less ambitious reframing of theory, one that counters the historical tendency of totalising visions. In this context, appraisal still exists but is contingent upon softer grounds, such as: curation, opinion, desire, consensus, mood, topical milieu, and unconscious contemporary historiographic bias, among others.

What follows is an extended example of a soft pragmatic theory, one that is neither particularly existential nor esoteric, one that is self-reflexive of the topics discussed above, one that is both cheeky and serious, one that may or may not be 'true', and, therefore, one that acknowledges its fragmentary nature within the unknowability of the post-structuralist spectre.

From the archetype to the individual: towards a post-standard future

Many twenty-first century tensions in the design community stem from an uncomfortable mismatch between the drive for standardisation and the celebration of individuality. The twentieth-century age of scientific positivism and the tendency of the modern movement to obsessively look for a one-size-fits-all benchmark for everything led to an epistemic flood of standardised thinking, one that the functionalists embraced as a salve against chaos.²⁵ Standards were intended for everything from housing, lighting, furniture, the urban grid, prefabricated manufacturing systems, to Taylorised building construction practices, which in turn informed the decorum of 'mass-man,' social conformity, acceptable mores and so on.²⁶ In literature, psychology, science and philosophy, the focused framework of thought centred around the archetype, the typological, the allegorical and the abstract. Ernst Neufert pioneered graphic standards for all elements of the built world. In the first edition of his book *Architect's Data*, people were illustrated as naked, featureless factory dummies. [Fig. 2]

Standardised thinking remains the status quo for the mass production of commodities, and architecture has long tried to streamline itself with these smaller-scale processes. However, architectural mass standardisation hasn't progressed in the scope and scale envisioned by countless

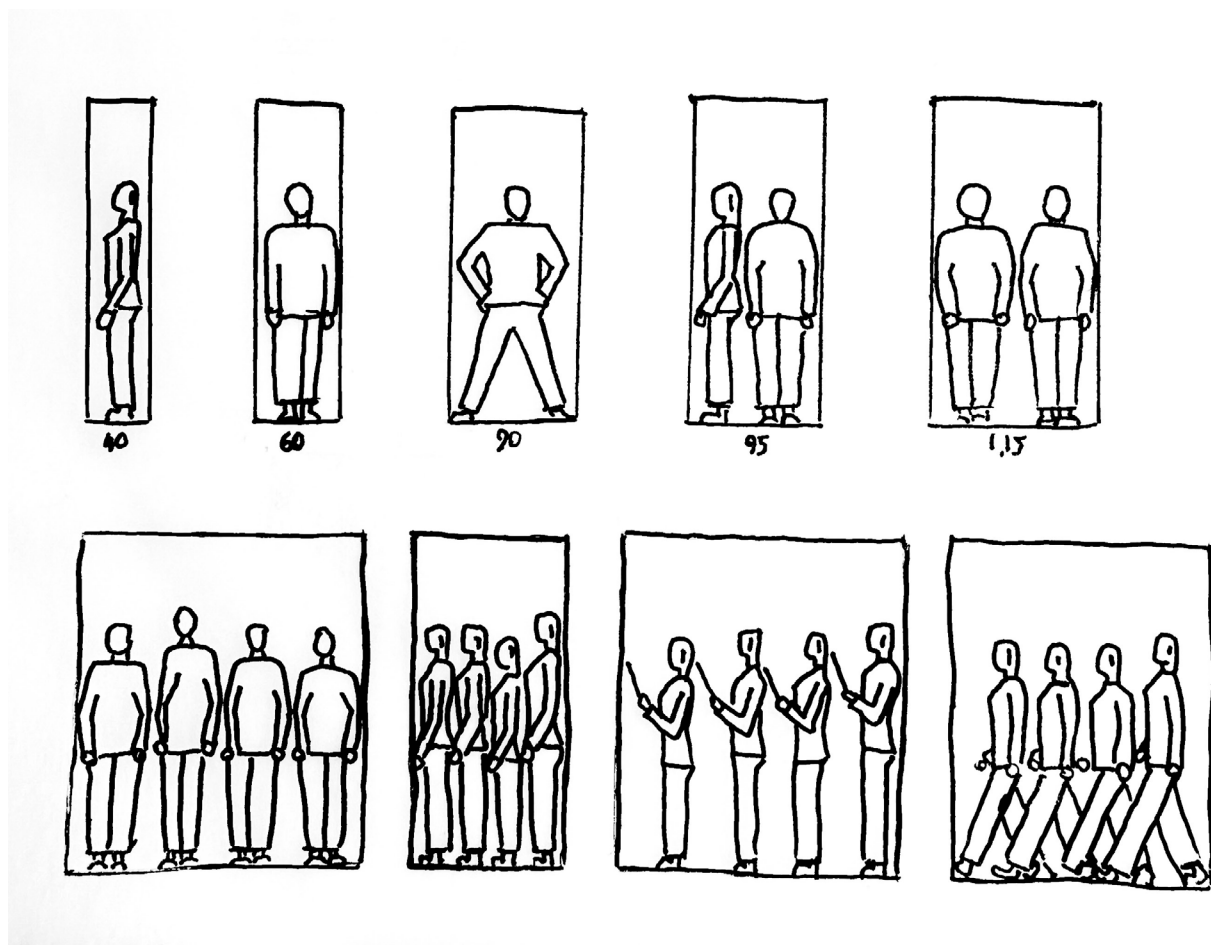


Fig. 2: Illustration from the first edition of Ernst Neufert's *Architect's Data*, 1936. This page shows 'universal' standard dimensions for the average human body, which determines the width of hallways, the height of desks, and the dimensions of chairs. Facsimile drawing: author.

designers. From the model tenement to socialist mass housing to the suburbs of Levittown to the adoption of the 'tower-in-the-park' projects in the United States, architectural standardisation has been flawed, symbolic and fragmentary in implementation. In the early twenty-first century, the emerging trend of 'mass customisation' suggested a new hybridity, a standardised non-standardisation of cladding elements using complex software like Grasshopper. These efforts never materialised on a large scale and were co-opted instead to serve the stylistic flights of parametricism and blobitecture.²⁷

Our inherited zeitgeist of the abstract archetype is being supplanted in the twenty-first century by a radical individualism that diffuses standard classifications such as class, race, size, gender and sexuality. This approach does not degenerate into the anonymity of 'mass man' or result in buildings considered abstract typologies ripe for mass production.²⁸ A few examples can deconceal this overall epistemic shift. A doctor's office waiting room in the twenty-first century encapsulates this emergent non-standardised milieu. In the previous century, a doctor's waiting room would have consisted of many chairs, all the same size, material, colour, and configuration. Today, the diversity of body types is visible in the variety of chairs available. In addition to chairs for the average-sized adult, there are smaller chairs for children, wider chairs for the obese, taller chairs for those with difficulty standing up, clustered chairs, and standalone chairs for a multitude of social configurations. The Americans with Disabilities Act has helped fuel this diversification in many previously standardised objects, such as drinking fountains and railings. The reluctance toward non-standardisation (primarily because of profit-motivated efficiencies) in, for example, airplane seating is a perennial topic of public complaint.

Airline seating uncovers a lagging tension between the epistemic shift from standard to post-standard thinking. Another clarifying example of this lag looks back to the waiting room chairs – although they may be many shapes and sizes, they are usually made of the same materials and clad in the same fabric, which indicates a sort of in-between confusion in the episteme. Some architectural elements may embrace the heterogeneous approach, yet they are still symbolically fixed in the habits of homogeneity.

This rejection of the standard can be understood, once again, by examining William Blake's philosophy as analysed in Northrop Frye's book *Fearful Symmetries*. Blake espoused a radical alternative to classifying individuals into types, as codified during the taxonomic revolution of the European Enlightenment. Frye demonstrates how Blake's philosophy, revealed in his poems, celebrated the atomised and un-abstractable nature of every individual's sense perception. As Frye clarifies: 'There is no "general nature,"

therefore nothing is real beyond the imaginary patterns men make of reality, and hence there are exactly as many kinds of reality as there are men.'²⁹

Blake loathed abstract concepts and saw them as lesser symbols of reality, meant for convenience and understanding, but without potency – a severe pale reduction of actual lived experience: 'The abstract reasoner attempts to give independent reality to the qualities of the things he sees, and in the same way he tries to abstract the quality of his perception.'³⁰ The flaws of typological classification are found in the ways that abstraction oversimplifies reality: 'A generalizing law permits of no exceptions, but everything that lives is an exception to it.'³¹ This line of thought concerns the useful but ultimately provisional quality of a standardised classification of all things.

These seemingly esoteric musings from Blake are elaborated further in late twentieth-century post-structuralism. Michel Foucault – a historian of ideas widely considered to be a post-structuralist philosopher – in his book *The Order of Things* convincingly cast doubt on the efficacy of the taxonomic classification of species concocted by their Enlightenment-era creators: 'Consequently, our divisions into species and classes "are purely nominal;" they represent no more than "means relative to our needs and to the limitations of our knowledge."³² Gilles Deleuze, in his difficult book *Difference and Repetition*, interrogates the concept of repetition and, thereby, the idea of the standard, using dialectics to disrupt inherited assumptions and to acclimate others toward a radical subjectivity: 'Does not the paradox of repetition lie in the fact that one can speak of repetition only by virtue of the change or difference that it introduces into the mind which contemplates it?'³³

This may be considered a semantic argument, but this modality of thinking can also help dislodge our assumptions of the standard, the archetype, the taxonomic and the typological (all popular topics in architectural theory). These categories and abstractions are a narrative tool useful for conceptual digestion, not reflections of objective reality.

Ironically, even though this twenty-first century epistemic shift embraces the unique qualities of each individual, the lobbying efforts of prefabricated façade panel manufacturers and other proprietary systems of construction have all but straitjacketed the construction industry in America and thus codified a new architectural vernacular aesthetic. Deviations from these systems are discouraged through financial and warranty penalties – punishment will follow if a product is not installed according to precise instructions. Zoning and building codes, intended for public well-being, are also shaped by the aggressive efforts of construction lobbies that embed these standards into practice and make non-standardised methods financially prohibitive or illegal. This has resulted in an aesthetic homogenisation across



Fig.3: Typical contemporary American vernacular building. Photo: author.

the United States. One can go to any city in the country and find the new vernacular of panelled buildings. [Fig. 3] Ironically, these standardised systems are camouflaged in a cloak of heterogeneity by applying a superficial mixture of textures, materials, and colours to their facades. The mass of these panelised buildings are broken down by popping their facades in and out and adding protruding bays, giving them the appearance of an improvised urban bricolage. The formal heterogeneity expresses the post-standard expectations of the twenty-first century, but this is a mask for the most inflexible construction industry in history, prioritising cheap construction over sustainability and fast fashion over resilience.

There are countercurrents to this paradoxical status quo: non-standard thinking challenges the necessity of precision. Precision in architecture reached its apex in the twentieth century through the idea of a perfected material craft (naturally an outcome of innovations developed during the Industrial Revolution). By default, this characterised imprecise architecture as clumsy and ugly. The Lo-T.E.K. (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) movement counters this thinking. It reaches back to well-worn construction strategies from all over the globe that use traditional indigenous methods to implement sustainable and non-specialised building practices. The movement seeks a future that abandons the extractive practices of colonisation and industrialisation. Julia Watson's book LO-TEK has popularised these global techniques for a Western audience. She states: 'Designers today understand the urgency of reducing humanity's negative environmental impact, yet perpetuate the same mythology that relies on exploiting nature.'³⁴

In this direction, Trillium Dell in Illinois, is a timber construction company founded by Rick Collins in 1995.³⁵ The practice is an excellent example of a post-standard ethos in construction. Their work touts rule-of-thumb wood construction techniques that reach back over four thousand years. Instead of hiring construction engineers to create complex calculations for loads, Trillium Dell uses ancient knowledge of wood's nominal load and performance tolerances. They eschew standardisation for specialisation based on context and the unique qualities of the timber used on each job. They combine old and new materials, soft and hardwood, common and uncommon species, hybrid and wood dowel-based systems, and pride themselves on non-proprietary assembly methods. Although their practice is currently bespoke and expensive in relation to typical construction, their ethos could revolutionise the construction industry and wrest it from the hands of specialised commodity and skill-hoarding industries that prioritise profits over collective continuance. This softening of standards and precisions is a harbinger of a softer pragmatic movement that challenges some of the hardened but

illusory hierarchies in the twenty-first century and destabilises our inherited generic classifications of the world.

Soft methods

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye says that his book 'attacks no method of criticism ... what it attacks are the barriers between the methods. These barriers ... make a critic confine himself to a single method of criticism, which is unnecessary'.³⁶ Soft pragmatism is an attempt to define this sentiment within architectural theory. It is not a philosophy or a clearly delineated methodology; it is more a change agent that, when added, may enrich the many diverse bodies of architectural theory and can liberate thinking from perennially emergent orthodoxies. It is a method of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, seeking the fuller shapes of the 'sedimentations of discourse.' It does not assume, offhand, a hierarchy of focus within a topic, and it does not try to establish new hierarchies. It benefits from the layered histories of literary theory and from its experimentation with style, structure, language, or typeface. Soft pragmatism also benefits from a multi-scalar analysis of a given topic, from the nanomaterial to its precedent scale to the celestial scales. It also benefits from a multi-modal approach – empirical, metaphysical, Marxist or phenomenological – and seeks linkages from other disciplines that add more texture and definition to a topic.

In a soft pragmatic sense, the prize jury at the start of this essay could have chosen a winner based on the project that engaged with the most modalities, disciplines, historical backgrounds, scales, and the project whose creators were the most self-aware and self-reflexive of their limitations and the limitations of their project. Without a consistent criterion for appraising the content of the projects, this other method would analyse them from a multi-structural evaluation of the fullness of their exploration in an ever-expanding theoretical field, favouring a broad scope over a narrow one, exuberance over restraint.³⁷

The wilderness

In the end, soft pragmatism promotes self-consciousness, which is akin to doubt. It welcomes contradictions and complicates clear appraisals. As I am putting the finishing touches on this essay during the first months of Donald Trump's new term in the White House, while he is openly fighting with the Danish government about Greenland, while he is terrorising immigrants, while he is stripping protections from those that are non-white heterosexual males, while he is attempting to gut the checks and balances that would prevent an oligarchical takeover of a democracy, I am cast into doubt, wondering if my conclusions seem quaint, a relic of a privileged time that has already passed, where the existential theorists' charges of 'affirmative

instrumentality' and 'collective continuance' are no longer debatable, but are essential to prevent mass suffering in a world that is wobbling off its axis. In its service to deeper thinking, theory only exists within the stability afforded by civilisation; it does not exist in a state of barbarity. What are the works that we will do in this wilderness?

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Notes

Epigraph: William Blake, 'The Laocoön', in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1988.), 274.

1. Also common in architectural theory, i.e. 'architectural imaginaries,' which refer to contemporary paper projects designed to conjure a possible future that transcends neo-colonial patterns of extraction and exploitation. Caroline Levine, *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 6–7.
2. Ibid., 12.
3. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 337.
4. Ibid.
5. Timothy Morton, in the introduction to his book on the subject, states that a hyperobject, such as global warming, 'involve[s] profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to'. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.
6. 'If anything, the e-book market seems to be hurtling toward the demise many predicted for the printed book back in the fall of 2007.' Mallory Williamson, 'The Life and Death of the E-Reader', *Business Today*, 25 January 2019, <https://journal.businesstoday.org/bt-online/2019/the-life-and-death-of-the-e-reader>.
7. Nick Roll, 'A Schism in Medieval Studies, for All to See', *Inside Higher Ed.*, 19 September 2017, <https://insidehighered.com/news/2017/09/19/one-professors-critique-another-divides-medieval-studies>.
8. Peter A. Zusi, 'The Style of the Present: Karel Tiege on Constructivism and Poetism,' *Representations* 88 (Fall 2005): 102.
9. Vittorio Pizzigoni and Michelangelo Sabatino, eds., *Mies in His Own Words: Complete Writings, Speeches, and Interviews 1922–1969* (Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2024), 52.
10. Dietrich Neumann, *Mies van der Rohe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 110.
11. Ibid.
12. Rowe's essay is more complicated than this framing and serves as an early takedown of the International Style. Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 119–37.
13. As Colin Davies states: 'The whole point of it was that buildings should be direct functional and material adaptations of the human habitat. What they looked like was irrelevant.' Colin Davies, *A New History of Modern Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2017), 277.
14. Roemer Van Toorn, 'No More Dreams? The Passion for Reality in Recent Dutch Architecture and Its Limitations', in *The New Architectural Pragmatism*, ed. William S. Saunders (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 60.

15. Addison Lathers, 'Millions Spent, but No Homes Built. What Happened to Iowa's Big Plans for 3D-Printed Homes?', *The Des Moines Register*, 13 June 2024, <https://desmoinesregister.com/story/money/business/development/2024/06/12/climate-proves-a-major-challenge-for-building-3d-printed-homes-in-iowa-alquist-ieda/72869302007/>.
16. Catherine Ingraham, *Architecture's Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023), 21.
17. *Ibid.*, 77.
18. Julia Wright, 'The Medium, the Message and the Line in William Blake's *Laocoön*', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 33, no. 2 (2000): 102.
19. *Ibid.*, 118.
20. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 50.
21. *Ibid.*, 87.
22. *Ibid.*, 20.
23. Pragmatism is a word ripe with historical meaning and is loaded with its own philosophical frameworks. Here, I do not use the word in that context, but merely in terms of the dictionary definition of 'pragmatic': 'relating to matters of fact or practical affairs often to the exclusion of intellectual or artistic matters.' *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 'pragmatic', accessed 26 January 2025, <https://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pragmatic>.
24. Another practical way to strive for a more expanded scope of theory might be for more journals to publish open calls for papers, to counterbalance the tendency in journals today to choose prohibitively specific topics of inquiry.
25. For the standard of this standard way of thinking, see: Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, trans. John Goodman (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007 [1923]).
26. 'The mass [man] was fashioned according to the law of standardization, a law dictated by the functional nature of the machine.' Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1998), 59.
27. This movement was also conceptually fuelled by Deleuze's post-structuralist book *The Fold*. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
28. It would be difficult to abandon useful generic categories completely, but this takes that concept of the standard human and expands the definition by absorbing many contingencies previously ignored. In other words, the phrase 'one size fits all' is transformed into 'many sizes fit many.'
29. Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 19.
30. There isn't space in this essay to relate how Blake uses this perspective to ironically cultivate a whole new set of mythical archetypes. Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 20.
31. *Ibid.*, 64.
32. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: The Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 147.
33. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 70.
34. Julia Watson, *LO-TEK: Design by Radical Indigenism* (Cologne: Taschen, 2020), 397.
35. Trillium Dell website, <https://trilliumdell.com/>, accessed 31 August 2024.
36. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 341.
37. To quote Blake: 'Exuberance is Beauty'. 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.' Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 38.

Biography

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