

Rumor

Keller Easterling

“Gossip is perhaps the most familiar and elementary form of disguised popular aggression... Gossip might be seen as the linguistic equivalent and forerunner of witchcraft... Rumor is the second cousin of gossip and magical aggression.” James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990)



“[There is] no great idea that stupidity could not put to its own uses; it can move in all directions, and put on all the guises of truth. The truth, by comparison, has only one appearance and only one path, and is always at a disadvantage.” Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities* (1995)

“And because these daft and dewy-eyed dopes keep building up impossible hopes, impossible things are happening eve-ry-day!” Lyrics to Rogers and Hammersteins “Impossible,” from the musical *Cinderella*

“Certain American fireflies have become specialized in mimicking the mating signals of others for the purpose of preying on them. These aggressive mimics are a major factor in the survival and reproduction of the prey and vice versa and certainly are the prime movers of the extraordinary system of deceptive and counterdeceptive behaviors that characterize this group.”

James E. Lloyd, “Firefly Communication and Deception: ‘Oh, What a Tangled Web,’” in *Deception: perspective on human and nonhuman deceit* (1986)

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James C. Scott identifies gossip and rumor as one of the chief forms of aggression among the powerless.¹ The servant gossips about the master. The underlings can, with anonymity, stir public opinion about the boss. Gossip never started anywhere. It cannot be attributed to anyone. Scott writes about the way in which it is invisibly multiplied and about the apparent magic of this viral movement. Rumor is perhaps considered to be witchcraft because it can be invisible, venomously destructive and impossible to contain. Moreover, gossip and rumor are universal tools. While they are available to the powerless, they are also used by the most powerful. Rumor fuels the mischief of micro-salons while also being a practical technique of markets and governments: special interest groups, for instance, created a hoax that global warming was a hoax to delay support for green policies. Hoax and spin are the raw material of politics. Mixtures of fact and fantasy are very ordinary ingredients in any confidence game to popularize and capitalize change. The most official communiqué and the most hard-boiled business plan marshal “facts” in a pliable reality suited to the success of specific intentions and profits.

Design also vividly anticipates and materializes change, using tools found in many forms of cultural persuasion. Yet a strange instinct within the profession sometimes veers away from hoax and rumor—the dirtier forms of projection—in favor of the visionary or utopian. Here, in what is somehow regarded as a more elevated form, the future is closer to a perfect afterlife where dimensional



Amazona
Carol Ruiz & Santiago del Hierro

worlds are reconciled into a single compatible format. The always-unattainable vision may also be tragic, producing what Jacques Rancière has called “the pleasure of declaring it insoluble.”² These worlds can remain perfect and intact—the story that ought to unfold or the remedy that should, but never does, occur.

While the utopian and visionary might be associated with the rationalizing consensus or reasonable, even righteous, reform, less resolute but rumored news might be more contagious. Moreover, the powers of the often nasty and pernicious rumor may be turned towards more productive intent.

Illogics

While we often expect political stories to follow familiar epic or tragic plot lines, no really good rumor attempts to communicate logical plans and outcomes. The rumor mongers know very well most of what happens in the world might be considered to be part of the wrong story—the things that are not supposed to happen. Rumors, on the one hand, are best when they appear unreasonable. Yet perhaps we are also attracted to them because we know they are somehow more representative of the naturally-occurring and unpredictable phenomena of our lives. They represent the common occurrence made magic because it is side-lined in relation to more dominant logics. We train ourselves to understand and

anticipate the “right story” even when the real turn of events rarely follows our accustomed logics—even when it is rumor, hoax, unreasonable innovations and hyperbolic situations that actually rule the world. Many political events exist as outlying evidence and category leftovers—the butterflies that do not get pinned to the board because they do not reinforce expectations. They exceed prevailing logics or conventional wisdom and reset our accustomed narratives. If they inspire incredulity, perhaps it is because the instrumentality and logic of these non-stories is simply underexplored. Many such phantom turning points and fulcrums are not easily taxonomized or moralized by the left or the right. Yet however invisible to our political orthodoxies, such events may be the real cause of shifts in sentiment, changes in economic fortune, the escalation or suspension of violence and swift epidemic or watershed to change. The wrong story may not be sanctioned by a recognized form of polity, but rather presides over a more extensive parallel polity with fickle or unexpressed logics. Everyday we work within a large field of seemingly illogical, rumor-worthy and yet common occurrences. As examples, we could cite the following:

- » The politically conservative and seemingly immovable “red states” in the US, have suddenly and quickly shifted their economy. Although they are supporters of big-oil politicians, they grow ethanol. Their megachurches sign the Kyoto protocol, and their oil pirates have begun to steal old cooking oil from US fast-food



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restaurants to fuel cars.

- » Running counter to the automobile and aeronautic research conducted and deployed in the major superpowers, post WWII Japan pursued high-speed trains and now lends that technology to countries in the Middle East, at the epicenter of oil. Transportation rivals like airlines and trains that used to be pitted against each other in a war of obsolescence and replacement are now absorbing and mimicking each other.
- » While the US gun and tobacco lobbies might seem equally matched in power, it is quite easy to buy a gun one day and kill someone the next while it is now impossible to smoke a cigarette after dinner in a restaurant.
- » Contrary to all the avowed necessities of the US Department of Defense, interrogators like Deuce Martinez in US offsite prisons extract more information with long empathetic conversations rather than coercive aggression.³
- » In the middle of a fuel crisis, the US Department of Transportation experienced a shortfall due to decreased driving and gas tax revenues. Thinking that this probably meant increased revenues for public transit, the department's first plan for remedying the situation was to borrow the money from the public transit fund.⁴
- » The current US mortgage fiasco was initially lubricated with rhetoric about making homeownership more available to those in a lower income bracket. Many of the lending products were targeted at minorities and others who had not yet become part of the national banking system. While this population may have meant greater volumes of banking customers, it has also meant

greater volumes of loss and a flood of housing product. In an inverted version of the American dream as initially expressed, some economic analysts are advocating the demolition of many unwanted homes in foreclosure to prevent them souring the larger housing market.⁵

- » Wal-Mart, a fabled offender with regard to health care, is getting into the health care business. The possibility that a service might be marketed to a large population entices the retailers.⁶
- » Oil money in Abu Dhabi is investing in Daimler Chrysler with a view to developing electric cars and new automotive materials.⁷

Surely architecture should be considered within a list of rumored events that are not supposed to happen. We have developed a fatigue for expressing incredulity at the booms of building in China and the Middle East. We are often ready with another swaggering tale of hyperbolic building in Dubai, Qatar, Kuwait Chongqing, Astana or Moscow. Architecture is accustomed to telling itself that it is not invited to weigh in on official policy and so cannot bear any real responsibility for it. But within the parameters of the wrong story, the less official political field seems more vast and consequential.

Multipliers

For rumor, the world is a penetrable place, a vast soft underbelly. Far from being deterred by verifiable facts or unreasonable expectations, the confidence game thrives on these apparent obstacles. Since it is very easy to



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demonstrate that Barack Obama is Christian, for instance, saying that he is Muslim is a very effective rumor—the rumor can be kept alive even longer and repeated twice as much, in fact, first to spread the falsehood and then to refute it.

If one wants to spread a rumor, it is crucial to find an agent that will virally multiply the tale. Entrepreneurs understand the power of multipliers—how to play market networks with the viral dissemination of both objects and aesthetic regimes. Rumor relies on the relational population thinking and ‘unreasonable’ solutions common in most entrepreneurial formulations. More than just a customer base for sales or a management style, multipliers build the network environment within which companies reside and the global populations with which they communicate. While it may seem unreasonable to attempt to influence a hermetic and isometric corporation like Wal-mart, the company’s sheer size multiplies any detail that is introduced into the organization. For instance, however perverse it may seem, selling green consciousness to Wal-mart (compact fluorescents, marketing products in daylighting, etc.) is powerful because it is multiplied by millions of SKUs and square feet.

A multiplier is a contagion or germ in the market that compounds exponentially. Inventors and entrepreneurs are often considered to be ‘unreasonable’ just as practical

and theoretical are often considered to be opposing concepts. For the entrepreneur, the theoretical must feed the practical. The entrepreneur will be most successful if their innovations renovate what is considered to be practical. They are so practical that they understand and anticipate the successes of as yet un-theorized events—the stories that are not supposed to happen. Entrepreneurs, unlike architects, do not value or author the enduring masterpiece; they author change and reactivity. They do not wish to stabilize, but rather to send more and more innovations and products into a market. Consequently, they often find fertile territory in an inversion. As in the case of Barack Obama’s religion, denials and nay-saying may make the trend more contagious. Social entrepreneurs like Muhammad Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank and inventor of micro-credit, ironically expanded capital by investing in a much larger population who were considered to be in poverty. Recognizing that the world builds bubbles of confidence on its most recent fictions, rumor is an essential tool of production. An emerging market prematurely signals to the world that it is ready to trade to support that eventuality.

Design is Rumor

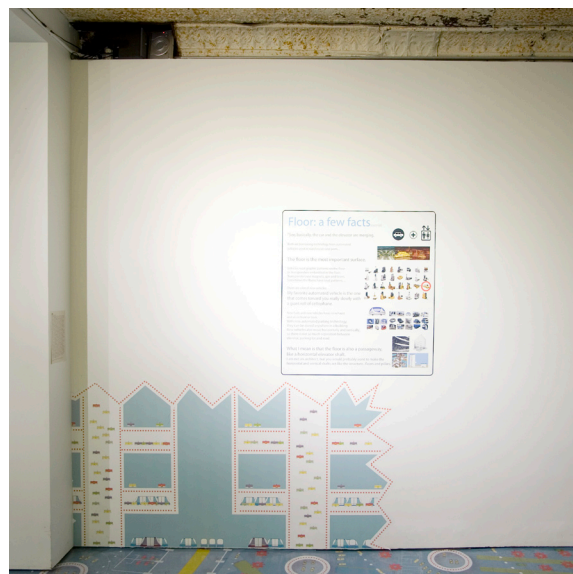
When design is manipulated within the palette of rumor and hoax, the magic of its techniques might be tuned to empower other intentions and political goals. Within this craft, unlikely political events excite feelings of



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resourcefulness. The most obdurate urban problems that continually manage to resist intelligence may be especially attractive and inspiring. In research that is reset to allow non-conforming information, improbability becomes the raw material, and when it does, the territory of operations is expanded.

Relational aesthetics and active population thinking are under-rehearsed, techniques in architecture repertoires. Population thinking has influenced sophisticated techniques with regard to *objective* form. Still architecture is less comfortable with relational or *active forms* that distribute spatial changes within heterogeneous populations—that do not create a singularly authored



Cable
Keller Easterling & Mwangi Gathinji

the profession is often structured to support singular creations as enclosures or master plans. An architect of rumor might understand the power of these components to alter localized or globally disseminated environments.

Rumor is more powerful than it is pure. For instance, architectural components may find economies of scale in response to luxurious desires so that they might later be transposed and made available for more urgent needs. Most inventions travel a very unlikely path through market expectations. Learning to surf these twists and turns is essential to effective intervention. These tools may be the only ones powerful enough to address the truly unsavory challenges that the most powerful global forces

“Change rarely follows sanctioned plot lines. Rather it often pivots around hoax, hyperbole and stray details. These phantom turning points are not easily taxonomized or moralized within orthodox political logics. We expect the right story—an epic binary tale of enemies and innocents—when it is often the wrong story—a little epidemic of rumor and duplicity—that rules the world.”

object form. The arts now more readily experiment with networked practices, performance and relational aesthetics rather than exclusively tutoring an appreciation of the singularly authored object. While architecture is composed of repeatable components and recipes,

introduce as they look for means to expand that power. New objects of practice and entrepreneurialism, redefined in a relational register, potentially reflect the network’s ability to amplify structural shifts or smaller moves in the back channels of global infrastructure.



Floor
Keller Easterling

Crucial to the success of the architectural rumor is an apparent hyperbole and implausibility. Hoax is design. Trends do not proceed logically, but rather snag or accelerate on stray desires and obstacles that make their own peculiar sense. While our researches train us to anticipate echoes of precedent within our own society it does not train an imagination that participates in global changes and innovations. The world's impure uncertainties are better things to study. Its backstage, behind-the-hand fictions and fake displays will contain the material necessary for ingenuity. In this larger field of operations, it is easier to see what the world will believe and what it can be taken for.

Architects can happily swim in the dirty waters occupied by all the shills, butlers and go-betweens, looking for new points of leverage within the fictions and persuasions that expel utopian prescriptions in favor of agility, ricochet, “faction” and cultural contagion. We can be attracted to spatial entrepreneurialism, unreasonable innovation, impure ethical struggles and obdurate problems that continually resist intelligence. We can hope to spread rumors that the world has changed—operating with all the guises and none of the disadvantages of truth.

If the world spins around the actions of discrepant characters, architects, as classic facilitators of power, have long had a seat at the table. But since most spatial

environments do not respond to the earnest prescriptions of architects and planners, our work might be more about agility, ricochet and cultural contagion. Architecture and urbanism contribute many wrong stories to the mix as they move headlong into the world, propagating forms of polity faster than proper political channels can legislate them. Architecture has always been an instrument to willfully alter the world, or to spread the rumor that an architect has altered the world. The counterfeiting process can be ingenuity. Rumor tutors spatial entrepreneurialism, impure ethical struggles and a new species of spatio-political activism.

Keller Easterling

is an American architect, urbanist, writer, and teacher. She earned both her B.A. and M.Arch from Princeton University and has taught architectural design and history at Parsons The New School for Design, Pratt Institute, and Columbia University. She is currently Associate Professor of Architecture at Yale University. Easterling is one of the most important contemporary writers working on the issues of urbanism, architecture, and organization in relation to the phenomena commonly defined as globalization.

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Images are taken from the exhibition *Some True Stories: Researches in the Field of Flexible Truth*, curated by Keller Easterling, with graphic design by Neil Donnelly, Storefront for Art and Architecture, 2008. Thanks to New York State Council on the Arts and Yale School of Architecture. The designers/researchers: Keller Easterling, Rustom-Marc Mehta, Thom Moran, Mustapha Jundi, Ashima Chitre, Gaby Brainard, Jacob Reidel, Carol Ruiz, Santiago Delhierro and Mwangi Gathinji. All images courtesy of Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York.

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Amazone

Carol Ruiz & Santiago del Hierro

The Napo River has been proposed as a means of extending the Amazon to the Pacific to create a trans-oceanic corridor that would bypass the Panama Canal and facilitate a new set of trade alignments for South America. These new global trade expectations compete for influence with oil exploration, fragile rainforest reserves, and dispersed indigenous communities in a region already packed with myths and political unknowns. The Napo, with its multiple interests, could be the site of business-as-usual, or an experiment in leveraging and orchestrating trade-offs between extraction and preservation. Amazone presents the contradictory stories of these multiple interests in the same sloppy way they are encountered in the field. It tells the story with the original amusement of discovering facts and data that seem to have been hidden from the public. None of the documents, maps and videos can be found in an organized database. Each of them presents just one piece of a growing puzzle.

VPL

Rustam Mehta & Thom Moran

VPL is the product of unexpected economies and partnerships resulting from hybridizing rail and air travel in a triangle of the American Southwest that contains eight of the ten fastest growing cities and three of the most congested airports in the country. Like other beloved American acronyms, the airport code VPL will become the name for a vast development zone in the desert equidistant from Las Vegas McCarran (LAS), Phoenix International (PHX) and Los Angeles International (LAX). The VPL Authority's proposal is a response to a systemic shortage of runway slots and persistent economic/political barriers to expanding existing airports.

This maverick agency promises to relieve pressures at LAS, LAX and PHX by using high-speed rail to link the three airports via a central hub in the desert. The move is a preemptive grab at high speed rail's 350mi 'sweet spot,' and paradoxically the cheapest way to add runway space for valuable international flights. While critics have called the area "planned sprawl," its proponents portray the scheme in progressive terms. The young developers, speaking in the jargon of complexity theory and the business models of Las Vegas casinos, are planning a single level, day-lit enclosure several square miles in area between the three airports. Part airport city, part casino, and part suburb, the plan will be the first stateside installation of Japanese high-speed rail technology, which has already been exported to Taiwan and will soon appear in China. Politically conservative businesses and politicians on the left and right have rushed to associate themselves with this "green" megastructure that is offering tailor-made subdivisions with inherently low carbon footprints that are an hour's train ride from many of America's largest, fastest growing cities.

Drawings and model courtesy of the VPL Authority.

Section 27-751

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"New York City Building Code §[C26-1205.7] 27-751 Minimum dimensions of habitable rooms: Habitable rooms shall have a minimum clear width of eight feet in any part; a minimum clear area of eighty square feet and a minimum clear ceiling height of eight feet. §[C26-201.0] 27-232 Definitions: MEZZANINE: An intermediate floor between the floor and ceiling of any space. When the total gross floor area of all mezzanines occurring in any story exceeds thirty-three and one-third percent of the gross floor area of that story such mezzanine shall be considered as a separate story."

The New York City building code defines "habitable space" as any room with an 8-foot ceiling. But in fact, many buyers will accept ceilings that are a few inches lower. Brooklyn architect Robert Scarano has capitalized on this gap between the code and the market, and parlayed it into a building type that has transformed his native borough. Scarano is perhaps best known for the glassy luxury condominiums that have sprouted throughout Brooklyn's "up and coming" neighborhoods in recent years. These buildings, which stand literally head and shoulders above their neighbors, are evidence that his team has mastered the art of maximizing building envelopes up to (and sometimes beyond) the limits allowed by code. While the typical Brooklyn rowhouse is three stories tall, Scarano's buildings rise more than 50 feet—the height of a five-story building—on the same narrow lot. This additional volume comes from Scarano's signature move: double-height living spaces with mezzanines whose ceilings are just shy of 8 feet high. In past permit applications, Scarano has claimed that the mezzanines are not "habitable," and has subtracted their square footage from the overall area. This has in turn enabled him to build bigger than would normally be permitted while simultaneously creating the airy, loft-like apartments buyers desire. The result is a new building type—the Scarano mezzanine loft—that takes its place alongside the Mansard roof and the setback skyscraper as an autochthonous typology born of local building regulations and development pressure. Scarano's ability to exploit code loopholes has made him popular with developers—indeed, the firm's representatives claim to have "thousands" of projects completed and underway in Brooklyn alone—but it has also drawn fire from local community boards and the press, not to mention the law. In fact, several of the firm's buildings are under investigation for zoning violations and site safety issues. Despite the controversy, however, we see Scarano as a compelling example of an architect on the make—twisting, tweaking, and in ways re-shaping the rules by which he operates. Much has been made of the architect's general lack of power in the design and construction process, and the ways their actions are constrained by clients, codes, and contracts. Scarano, on the other hand, has turned constraints into opportunities, and the sheer prolificacy of his practice cannot be ignored. We thus present his story as a lesson architects would be loath to dismiss.

Drawings courtesy of Scarano Architect PLLC and United States Architects PC. Special thanks to Tamar Kisilevitz at Scarano Architect and Michael Greenwald and Yoo Ji-Hyun at United States Architects for their assistance in assembling this material. Models by Radli, Inc.

Mecca

Ashima Chitre & Mustapha Jundi

There are many familiar means of generating small amounts of electricity through pressure or absorption of sunlight. Piezo materials and fabrics embedded with photovoltaic strands are among these. The Jeddah/Mecca flexible floors and tents were unusual because the epicenter of oil seemed an unlikely place for the most massive experiment with these materials to date. During the height of the pilgrimage season, the tents and the mats underfoot leverage energy from the large volume of visitors. Also surprising, the imagery of the tents has merged with that of the Mecca Mega-mall to become an iconic conglomerate used in billboard and bus advertisements.

Cable

Keller Easterling & Mwangi Gathinji

In the last hundred years, the ocean floor has received more and more strands of submarine cable of all types. Yet East Africa, one of the most populous areas of the world, remains in a broadband shadow with no fiber optic submarine cable link and less than one percent of the world's broadband capacity. Broadband in Kenya, for instance, costs 20 to 40 times what it does in the United States.

While over a decade of planning has yet to deliver the cable, at the moment, several competing cable schemes are in a race to land in Mombasa. The road between Mombasa and Nairobi is receiving a terrestrial extension of the fiber optic cable and serving as a test bed for new urban outcroppings of the technology. In that development, Kenya has turned upside down one of the most durable contemporary trends in global urbanism: the free zone. Far from being the place where strikes and labor organizing is forbidden, Athi River EPZ, for instance, promotes labor unions and serves as a place for labor consolidation and exchange. More EPZs in Nairobi also defy the usual model by delivering infrastructure to the center of urban areas rather than to enclaves outside the city. Dr. Bitange Ndemo, The Permanent Secretary in The Ministry for Information and Communications, has managed the foreign consultants, donor and financiers involved in the cable projects in a way that may offer competition to avoid monopolies and extra resources to deliver cable to remote villages.

Floor

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The drawing installed here argues that the ordinary floor is changing the terms of architectural design. Transportation designs frequently range between the elevated utopian remedies (less interesting to us) and the slightly mad visions of amateur enthusiasts. Perhaps reacting to our often dumb and monovalent transport networks, projected designs often depict a complex and responsive new circuitry of infrastructure intersections.

The floor drawing does not belong with the transportation drawings of Norman Bel Geddes, Lawrence Halprin, Geoffrey Jellicoe or Brian Richards. It first appeared in parts on one of the web's popular AutoCAD exchange networks. Members of these networks generously share drawings named, for instance, "Andrew.dwg," "do not delete.dwg," or "Elks club parking lot.dwg" because... someone might need them someday. The drawing, together with its text, was particularly impressive precisely because there was nothing futuristic or visionary about it. Rather, it presented an exuberant rehearsal of existing transport technologies for which the floor is a navigational surface. Moreover, it explored the merger of the car and the elevator as it is now rehearsed in warehouses, ports and other logistics environments. New automated vehicles read floor graphics and signals for instructions.

The drawing does not depict a clichéd dream of omni-directional movement, but simply an expanded repertoire for the common floor. Note also that the floors and columns of Le Corbusier's "Domino House" have been redefined as both structure and passageway. The new floor, like the elevator, is depicted as a highly contagious germ or multiplier of urban morphology. Like many drawings found in the AutoCAD exchange networks, this one appears to have been lovingly created with some affection for the floor's new graphic excesses.

Thanks to Robbert Lohmann, FROG Design and Nathan Koren, ATS/ULTra.

Endnotes

- 1 See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
- 2 Jacques Rancière in "Art of the possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in conversation with Jacques Rancière" *Artforum International* 45.7 (March 2007): 256.
- 3 *New York Times*, June 22, 2008.
- 4 *New York Times*, July 29, 2008.
- 5 *Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2008.
- 6 *New York Times*, March 10, 2009.
- 7 *New York Times*, March 23, 2009.