Fearing ourselves, we need our illusions to protect us, even if the protection takes the form of finials and cartouches, corinthian columns and acanthus leaves. Modernism lacked mystery and emotion, was a little too frank about the limits of human nature and never prepared us for our eventual end. —J.G. Ballard, “A Handful of Dust” (2006)

The epigraph above offers a glimmer of the first work to be termed “architectural fiction.” A genre imagined by science fiction author Bruce Sterling in 2006 in response to J.G. Ballard’s essay “A Handful of Dust,” architectural fiction stretches the boundaries of what architecture is and where it might exist—in novels and video games and other non-physical places[in publications, in exhibitions, in photographs—in a realm decidedly beyond the brick].

Put simply, architectural fiction is fiction in which architecture participates actively. It comprises stories both “inspired by, or imposed upon, buildings and the built environment,” in the words of Rob Walker, whose Hypothetical Development Organization finds unsuitable buildings and the built environment as character, chief metaphor, and setting for their social critiques and literary explorations. Of course, theorists and philosophers have also long trooped the built environment, constructing spatial metaphors as vehicles for their ideas. For Michel Foucault, the panopticon embodied institutional control and surveillance, whereas, for Gilles Deleuze, the “Vitruvian Figure” and transportation problems. Or, on the quieter end of the spectrum, the “Futuristic Stadia” of the Phantom City, produced by Irene Cheng and Brett Snyder, incited dialogue about the city’s ongoing transit and transportation problems. Or, on the quieter end of the spectrum, the “Futuristic Stadia” of the “Magic Roundabout” and the “Museum of the Need for a Building,” a model for expression in contemporary aesthetics.

In contrast, architectural fiction comprises wide-ranging products—for instance, The Aqua Line (2000), an installation by the design collaborative Heavy Trash situated along a 15-mile “route” in Los Angeles. It comprised eight signs announcing a fictional but ostensibly forthcoming subway track connecting downtown to the west side—and incited dialogue about the city’s ongoing transit and transportation problems. Or, on the quieter end of the spectrum, the Hypothetical Development Organization finds unsuitable buildings and the built environment as character, chief metaphor, and setting for their social critiques and literary explorations. Of course, theorists and philosophers have also long trooped the built environment, constructing spatial metaphors as vehicles for their ideas. For Michel Foucault, the panopticon embodied institutional control and surveillance, whereas, for Gilles Deleuze, the “Vitruvian Figure” and transportation problems.

...
involves telling stories—it is as much fiction as it is engineering and materials science.” While that is true, courses in story-telling or fiction have yet to emerge in architectural pedagogies alongside courses in engineering and materials sciences, even though seeing architecture realized relies as much on designing a narrative—a plausible fiction— as it does on his or her grasp of structure and materials. It seems that, though we might teach and speak comfortably about the tangible elements that compose architecture, the art of thinking speculatively and crafting the fiction of an architectural proposal eludes articulation, definition, and certainly celebration within the discipline. Perhaps a mastery of fiction is not “essential” knowledge at the moment of joining two bricks—that moment when, according to Mies van der Rohe, architecture begins. But it is certainly “non-essential” knowledge that enriches, knowledge accrued daily in the act of speculating about architecture, knowledge needed at-the-ready in the field, or in the mine-field of politics, policy, finance, building codes, and clients.

Let me be clear: architecture is dependent upon fiction. In the absence of fiction, nothing happens.

As the fortieth anniversary of the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project passed on March 16, 2012, who might have been on the site that afternoon to mark the occasion, to celebrate forty full years of a site in the un-making? Where within those thirty-three remaining acres of now lush, verdant urban wilderness did they sit to imagine the future of the most narrativized dirt in the history of architecture?

Happily, we can date the death of Modern Architecture to a precise moment in time...Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3.32 pm (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe project—widely known as such for nearly forty years—was finally demolished...—Charles Jencks, The Language of Post-Modern Architecture (1977)

Three decades before Ballard’s “A Handful of Dust,” Charles Jencks produced a masterwork of architectural fiction. The implosive demolitions of towers A-16 and C-15 in 1972 fact happened on March 16 and April 21, 1972, respectively, with most demolition taking place under the watch of camera crews the day before the implosion. Nevertheless, Jencks invented a convenient foil for defining the beginning of the Postmodern movement. He also effected institutionalized a narrative that had, as it turns out, little to do with modern architecture. In an influential article, historian Katharine Bristol resurrects this story, referring to Jenck’s narrative as the “Pruitt-Igoe Myth”—a myth that the housing project’s thirty-three tower buildings were demolished because modern architecture failed, placing the blame on the architects, George Hellmuth, Minoru Yamasaki, and Joseph Esherick. Jencks questions the narrative, arguing that as nothing more than a convenient story, one that eclipsed the fact that the project failed due to institutional and structural problems in its financing, planning, construction, and maintenance, the Pruitt-Igoe project eludes articulation, definition, and articulation is lost if it never returns to the built environment—if the fictions produced aren’t rooted in the context that one is drawing from, in order to transform the construction of the world around us, or our understanding of it.

The Pruitt-Igoe Now competition closed on March 16, 2012, the fortieth anniversary of the demolition of the housing project’s tower C-15. Seven jurors—Teddy Cruz, Professor in Public Culture and Urbanism, Visual Arts Department, University of California, San Diego; Co-Founder, CUE/Center for Urban Ecology, Sergio Palleroni, Associate Professor of Architecture, Department of Architecture, Portland State University, Theaster Gates Jr., Artist in Residence and Director of Arts and Public Life at the University of Chicago and Founder, Rebuild Foundation, Diana Lind, Executive Director and Editor-in-Chief, Next American City, Bob Hansman, Associate Professor, School of Architecture, Washington University in St. Louis, Joseph Heathcott, Associate Professor of Urban Studies and Senior Director, Participatory Citizenship and Community Activism Initiative, The New School, and Sarah Kanouse, Assistant Professor of Art at the University of Iowa—then selected three winning entries for first-, second-, and third-place prizes out of a total of 31 finalists chosen from 532 submissions.

The goal of the competition was to reward bold ideas—fictions that considered the surrounding area, the context in which the site of the former Pruitt-Igoe housing projects belongs. The competitive landscape included both speculative proposals that were products, as well as those that were processes, and invented or emergent architectural typologies were anticipated. The jury asked: How do we proceed from here? Who should have say? Who is most affected? Who has the most compelling claims to this space? Who stands to profit?

The author would like to acknowledge and thank Michael R. Allen for his role as co-organizer in the Pruitt-Igoe Now competition. His knowledge of and passion for the city of St. Louis is simply unparalleled.
This page: Recipe Landscape: Reinstituting Collective Ritual, Foreground design agency: Aroussiak Gabrielian and Alison Hirsch (New York, NY, USA). 2012. Second Place. Top: In this proposal, the footprints of the buildings are excavated and planted with gardens. By mixing the fruits of these gardens with milk and honey (generated on site through animal husbandry and an apiary), ice cream is produced on a scale that serves the city and larger region. Bottom: Urban agriculture, environmental stewardship, and cultural rituals of food preparation and consumption are foregrounded in this proposal, as the site of the former Pruitt-Igoe housing complex is transformed into a place of production, growth and sustenance.

Opposite page: What If?, Kerry-Anne Vesveselle (Paris, France). 2012. It is the emptiness of the former site of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex that inspires and calls for alternative futures. What if the solution was to be reasonable without being realistic? What if, one day, houses start to lift from the ground? What next?
Prognostication

Double Moon, Clouds Architecture
An artificial, twin moon hovers over the site of the former Pruitt-Igoe housing complex.

Hinterland, Jaewoo Chon (Mississauga, Canada). 2012. Hinterland proposes transforming the site into an extensive biowaste and wetland; a productive landscape that encourages recreational inhabitation of the site and acts as a catalyst for the dissipation of the residual negative sentiment concerning Pruitt-Igoe’s history.
Urban Expeditions(s), Djamel Kara (Ile-de-France, France). 2012. What if Pruitt-Igoe and “the new American ruins” were the necessary counterpart of the American dream, and the tangle of individual choices shaping a suburban American were actually sustained by public policies? The very essence of the city would be at odds with the image of suburban happiness. This proposal maintains that the city is “man’s attempt to remake the world,” in the author’s words, and attempts to engage residents in the process of envisioning the site anew.
Finding Traces, Sung Jin Cho. 2012. This project advances a potential process for exploring, transforming, and experiencing the natural caves that (may) underlie the site of the former Pruitt-Igoe housing complex, foregoing political, architectural or socio-cultural concerns. Holes are drilled, and poles are installed to support a roof, beneath which are two paths that can be followed into the (potential) natural caves.

Wilderness Disturbanism, Tawab Hlimi (Toronto, Canada). 2012. Responding to the low population density, a wilderness is cultivated in the urban prairies of the North Side of the city of St. Louis. Through a long-term strategy, the urban wilderness and prairies of St. Louis are manipulated to produce oak dominated forests, using planned disturbances of fire and silviculture to stimulate its generation of valuable timber, acorns (for wildlife) and wilderness recreation.
About the Contributors

Greg Barton
Greg Barton is an MSc candidate in Critical, Curatorial, and Conceptual Practices in Architecture at Columbia University. Previous publications include texts in Volume and CLOG. Barton was recently a research fellow at Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York, NY.

McLain Clutter
McLain Clutter, BArch (Syracuse), MED (Yale), is an architect, writer, assistant professor at the University of Michigan’s Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, and principal of the design and research practice MCRD. Clutter lectures and exhibits internationally, and his essays have appeared in Grey Room, MONU, and the edited volume Formerly Urban: Projecting Rustbelt Futures (2012).

Ludwig Engel
Ludwig Engel studied cultural sciences, economics, and communication sciences in Berlin, Shanghai and Frankfurt/Oder. With raumtaktik-office from a better future (www.raumtaktik.de), he works at the intersection of urban planning, architecture, and futurology addressing strategic questions concerning the future of the city. His forthcoming doctoral dissertation concerns urban utopias at the beginning of the 21st century.

Mark Ericson
Mark Ericson, BA (Rutgers), MArch (SCI-Arc), is an assistant professor of architecture at Woodbury University in Los Angeles and has also taught at the University of Pennsylvania. He has worked for AGPS in Los Angeles/Zurich and Erdy McHenry in Philadelphia. His research and teaching focus on the construction of representational strategies relative to technological developments in the discipline of architecture.

Simone Ferracina
Simone Ferracina, MArch (Accademia di Architettura/USI-AAM, Mendrisio, Switzerland), is a New York-based designer and founding editor of Organs Everywhere (Œ), an independent online journal at the intersection of architecture, technology, media, and ecology (organseverywhere.com). His research and writing have appeared in Kerb (2011), Landscape Futures: Instruments, Devices and Architectural Inventions (2012), and prominent online blogs. His project Theriomorphous Cyborg took first place in the 2011 Animal Architecture Awards.

Johannes Gabriel
Johannes Gabriel is a freelance researcher, consultant, and doctoral candidate working on environmental analysis, future studies, and scenario planning. He is a non-resident fellow of the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), Berlin, and is engaged in its Global Governance 2022 Program. He is also a fellow with Berlin-based consultancy Die Denkbank. Research interests include philosophy of science, Asia’s transition societies, informal networks, and international security.

Ellen Hartman
Ellen Hartman researches military landscapes at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Engineer Research and Development Center. Her work with the Department of Defense encompasses historic landscape preservation planning, environmental policy effects on Army operations, and land and resource management patterns on military installations. She holds an MLA from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

David L. Hays
David L. Hays, MArch (Princeton), PhD (Yale), is an associate professor of landscape architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a founding principal of Analog Media Lab. His research interests include garden and landscape design in early modern Europe, with a special focus on France; contemporary theory and practice of landscape architecture; and the history of cartography.
Irene Hwang

Irene Hwang, BA (UPenn), MArch (Harvard), teaches architecture at Northeastern University and has also taught at the University of Michigan’s Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, where she was the 2010-11 Oberdick Teaching Fellow. A founding partner of Constructing Communication (Barcelona), her work focuses on the discursive and productive contexts by which the project and artifact of architectural activity can be re-imagined and re-deployed.

Miriam Kelly

Miriam Kelly is a senior architect at Feldlen Clegg Bradley Studios in Bath, UK, where she specializes in the creative reuse of historic buildings. She worked previously in Edinburgh, London, and with the German Development Service in Nepal. Accredited in building conservation, her current projects include the restoration of Lowther Castle and Gardens, improving visitor facilities at Windsor Castle, and housing the British Postal Museum and Archive in London.

Robert J. Krawczyk

Robert J. Krawczyk is a professor of architecture and Associate Dean of Undergraduate Academic Affairs in the College of Architecture at IIT. His teaching and research of over three decades focus on digital craftsmanship, and his work covers digital methods and artwork integrating science, mathematics, architecture, and technology. He is the author of The Codewriting Workbook: Creating Computational Architecture in AutoLISP (2008).

Jonathan Massey

Jonathan Massey is an architect, historian, and associate professor at Syracuse University. His research showing how architecture mediates power by giving form to civil society, shaping social relations, and regulating consumption has appeared in many journals and essay collections as well as the books Crystal and Arabesque (2009) and Governing by Design (2012). Massey is a co-founder of the Transdisciplinary Media Studio and the Aggregate Architectural History Collaborative.

Gissi Pálsön

Gissi Pálsön holds a BA from Harvard, an MA in landscape archaeology from the University of Iceland, and an MSc in landscape architecture with a focus on the historic environment from the University of Bath. He is currently involved with archaeological research in Iceland and Malaysia. His academic interests include landscape, the visual culture of archaeology, and the material culture of twentieth-century public parks.

Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen

Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen, MArch (Tampere University of Technology), MED (Yale), PhD (Columbia), is an associate professor at the Yale School of Architecture. Her research focuses on twentieth-century European and American architecture with special interest in the genesis and meaning of form within national and historical contexts. A noted authority on Alvar Aalto, Eero Saarinen, and Kevin Roche, her work has been supported by the Getty Foundation, the Graham Foundation, and the Finnish Academy of Arts and Sciences, among other agencies.

Edward Sancho Pou

Edward Sancho Pou holds graduate degrees in architecture and construction engineering and a PhD cum laude from the Polytechnic University of Barcelona (UPC). His book Architectural Strategies (2012), studying the approaches used by architects to secure commissions, sell projects, and erect buildings, was published with support from the Graham Foundation. Sancho Pou is a member of the Cercle d’Arquitectura research group at UPC and is the founder and former director of the Barcelona Centro de Arquitectura gallery.

Catherine Seavitt-Nordenson

Catherine Seavitt Nordenson, BArch (Cooper Union), MLA (CCNY), MArch (Princeton), is an associate professor of landscape architecture at the Cornell College of New York and principal of Catherine Seavitt Studio, a practice integrating architecture, landscape, and infrastructure. Research interests include design adaptation to sea level rise in urban and natural environments; rethinking landscape restoration practices given the dynamics of climate change; and the history, processes, and ethics of the de-domestication of large herbivores for grassland restoration and land management.

Amir Soltani

Amir Soltani, BA (Fine Arts, San Francisco State), MA (Environmental Design, Berkeley), is a designer and researcher in architecture and audio-visual studies and a doctoral candidate in architecture at Cambridge University, where he is a researcher at DIGIS (Digital Studios for Research in Design, Visualization and Communication). He is actively involved in the production of electroacoustic music and contributes regularly to electronic arts publications and festivals in the UK and abroad.

Hermione Spriggs

Hermione Spriggs, BSc (Anthropology, University College London), is an MFA candidate at the University of California, San Diego. She is interested in the overlap between being human and being “thing.” Spriggs is a fellow of Mildred’s Lane and part of the research networks The Culture of Preservation (AHRC, UCL) and Something from Nothing: Fearless Speculations in Art, Science and Activism (UCSD Centre for the Humanities).

Jimmy Stamp

Jimmy Stamp, MED (Yale), is a writer, researcher, and recovering architect whose work has been featured in numerous print and web publications. Interests include contemporary interpretations of Postmodernism, the integration of new media technologies into the built environment, and the role of narrative in architecture. He is currently writing a book documenting the history of architectural education at Yale.