

Prince Peregrine and the evil drag queen : a queer architectural fairytale on seriously valuing the unserious

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«Join Prince Perri's quest to save the architectural kingdom from the plague of academic seriousness, giving serious attention to the unserious and asking what can architects, design students, and ultimately architecture <do> with humor?»

PRINCE PEREGRINE AND
THE EVIL DRAG QUEEN—
A QUEER ARCHITECTURAL
FAIRYTALE ON SERIOUSLY
VALUING THE UNSERIOUS
Brady Burroughs

Join Prince Perri's quest to save the architectural kingdom from the plague of academic seriousness, giving serious attention to the unserious and asking what can architects, design students, and ultimately architecture <do> with humor?

Once upon a time, there was an evil drag queen named Franzine von Patri-Archy, known for her large wigs of wild red hair. Queen Franzine, from the Kingdom of Architectural Practice, married into the Kingdom of Architectural Education, joining these two lands. She rose to power amidst the turmoil of the sudden loss of its king and forgot the critical intention of drag, to undermine the status quo with its queer campiness.¹ The evil queen wanted to maintain the ruling order of the architectural kingdom and keep all of the power for herself, so she made architecture a serious endeavor, forbidding frivolity, humor and play. Any architectural educator who dared to question the values produced and reproduced within models of serious architectural education, as well as the power structures inherently intertwined and interconnected with these values, would be punished with precarious employment and be banished to the adjunct dungeon for all eternity.

Deep in the forest, near an abandoned grove of pear trees, lived Prince Peregrine Mehno Paughs (Prince Perri for short), an androgynous being who preferred gender-neutral pronouns and was known for speaking up against the injustices of the royal kingdom.² Like many <feminist killjoys> before them, Prince Perri was deemed <difficult> and had never experienced permanent employment.³ Although the prince was nearly fifty and had invested their life's work in service to the royal kingdom, they had no academic career to speak of, and therefore, nothing to lose in questioning the evil queen's decree. Prince Perri yearned for an alternative to the serious business of architecture. So much so, they wrote manuscripts describing improper and irreverent practices, developed out of ideas from the prince's <untimely> dissertation, on their own time and on their own royal shilling.⁴

Prince Perri knew that there must be other architectural subjects out there, with a similar desire to share these unconventional methods and unorthodox learning experiences. In fact, the prince had supported an uprising by an editorial group from a distant architectural kingdom before, in their effort to bring more love to architecture.⁵ There were rumors that this group was challenging the notion that the vulnerability of youth was a sign of weakness, asking «Couldn't the expression of one's own vulnerability even lead to a productive attitude?»⁶ Prince Perri suddenly felt hot, as if the body would self-combust, and set out on a quest.

Unbeknownst to the evil queen or any of her royal colleagues, the prince held a series of five two-hour secret training sessions during the spring of 2018.⁷ Prince Perri masqueraded as a town crier, riding across the land and reading a notice calling all willful master's architecture students for a course in <Unserious Architecture>. The notice read:

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Hear ye, hear ye! «Very rarely do you see the word <hilarious> in the same sentence as the word <architecture>. There

might be joy, of a high-flown, transcendent, quasi-religious kind, or pleasure variously luxurious or minimalist, aesthetic or ascetic, but we don't see many straight-up gags. Reverence is the order of the day. Irreverence won't do; ... What a mob of funsters we all are.»⁸

Respected leader from the Kingdom of Architectural Theory, Naomi Stead, describes how humor has long been used by architectural critics as a means «to smuggle critique into the master's house» in order to be both «amusing and critical.»⁹ She explains that the humor found in the critical designer blog FYNCT (Fuck Your Noguchi Coffee Table) is effective due to the fact that these designer-bloggers are so knowledgeable within their field and yet «have chosen to turn their flaying wit back onto the subject of their expertise.»¹⁰ They are able to be critical from the inside, because of their willingness to implicate themselves and their own profession in the process. They are not joking <about> design and the culture surrounding it; they are also part of the joke.

Come join a course in Unserious Architecture, a space of experimentation with the words and methods that architects use, to take a critical look at the <serious> language of architecture and its values, and imagine otherwise. Weekly tasks will be co-produced, documented and collectively curated on a digital platform, giving insight into the field of <design practice research>. Preparation outside of your regular royal studios will be limited, while active participation, a sense of humor, and the willingness to be the butt of your own joke is required.

As an alternative critical approach, it asks us to take risks and be vulnerable together, to see our own royal design work from a different (queer) angle. It also asks that we defy Queen Franzine's decree and take ourselves, and architecture, a little less seriously!

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And so it began. Nineteen brave young architects from far and wide met on that faithful day in the pear grove, to train in the art of the unserious.¹¹ Little did they know, the evil drag queen got word of these secret meetings through her loyal sidekicks and royal henchmen who spied on suspects of deviant architectural activity.

Session 1: Five Minute Werk¹² Out!

Prince Perri welcomed the young architects and asked: Why work with <the unserious>? The prince explained that <the serious> is bound up with norms, habits, and assumptions of what is valued in architecture. If someone has made a <serious> proposal or if they are taken <seriously>, this usually means that the proposal or the person is considered with approval; they are valued. Within the architectural kingdom, the system of values that decides what is considered <serious> holds power. Working with <the unserious> is one way to question that power, along with its system of values, hence the royal decree.



Video stills, 2018. Isa Da Costa Lopes, Malin Rosvall,
Tove Ekström, Leni Ellburg Hillström



Chillin' Like a Villain, KTH, Stockholm, 2018.
Photograph: Iwa Herdensjö



Video stills, 2018.
Queen Franzine (Moa Sellerfors)

The first warm-up exercise was to create a common theoretical base. In smaller groups, participants read, discussed, and prepared a five-minute summary of key texts that dealt with humor as a critical tool and/or unserious practices in architecture or academia.¹³ The fearless knight of «queer seriousness», Sir Gavin Butt of Visual Culture, asked: «What might be the power in embracing purportedly non-serious forms of behavior? Might there be a kind of politics to that?»¹⁴ While Despina Stratigakos, venerable sage of Feminist Architectural History, contemplated the lessons of Architect Barbie: «Inside architecture's hallowed halls, Barbie's «girlie» attributes were not a mark of oppression, but of resistance. These dolls looked you right in the eye and asked, «Why can't architects wear pink?»¹⁵

These texts had touched upon ideas and experiences that were relatable, with a language that wasn't exclusionary, showing that humor can be used as a critical tool, even if there are risks involved. For something to be experienced as humorous, we have to «get it» and not feel like the object of ridicule. Camp humor is not mean-spirited. As the queer rule of camp humor goes, «You can't camp about something you don't take seriously.»¹⁶

Session 2: Critical Love Letters

Prince Perri could feel the deadly plague of academic seriousness spreading and knew that it was time to address critique and criticism, the central «serious» modes for learning and valuing within the architectural kingdom. The exercise was to critically reflect on the act of critique of a built work and an awareness of one's own position in critically engaging with that work. The object of critique, The New Architecture School of the royal kingdom by the queen's architects Tham & Videgård, was chosen for its familiarity to most of the group, as this was the location of their regular royal design studios.¹⁷

After a collective brainstorm to list all their complaints about the building they used every day (a traditional critique), the prince asked them to write love letters to the architects or architecture, conveying their «critical love» in inventive and humorous ways. Thanks to a magic potion from bell hooks, the revered sorceress from the Kingdom of Feminist Theory, everyone was able to adopt what she calls a «love ethic», «to critically examine our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn.»¹⁸ They tested how a shift in position (from critic to sweetheart) and in the words architects use (from criticism to critical love) could change the act of critique, through various writing forms, from text messages, to sonnets, to unrequited teenage love letters:

«Dear Architecture School,
What you do to me... I don't know where to start... I run in circles over you. You make me dizzy. You hold me so tight. You make me lose my breath. There's nowhere I can hide... I can't eat, I can't sleep, I get constant shivers... It feels like the best parts of you are out of my reach, if only I had the

guts to call you and maybe you would open up. It's probably for the best... and even though I turn my back on you every night, I can't help myself, I keep coming back. Some nights not leaving at all, and the few nights we spent together I still felt lonely... Love is blind. You're still my favorite. I wouldn't have it any other way.»¹⁹

Emboldened by this exercise, one of the participants posted their critical love letter within the walls of the royal kingdom's New Architecture School, in an act of (loving) resistance. This did not go unanswered, as the evil queen kidnapped the participant and sent a spy in their place. A master of illusion, Queen Franzine was one of the best drag queens in the land, so the exchange went undetected.

Session 3: Architectural Karaoke

The constant pressure of fighting the evil queen's decree took its toll on the group. One participant became visibly irritable, so before Architectural Karaoke began, Prince Perri mentioned that Queen Franzine was once considered the greatest karaoke performer in the royal kingdom. The participant's eyes lit up as they exchanged glances, and the prince felt warm and began to sweat. Caught off guard by unexpected feelings, Prince Perri avoided eye contact and began with the instructions: «Just as changing medium in the development of a design project can bring about new discoveries— moving from drawing to building a model, a change in genre can have a similar effect on textual ideas. Today's training involves listening to what architects say about architecture, and helping them re-say it with a song.»

In new groups, they identified «serious» architectural ideas and key themes expressed in a YouTube architect interview and translated them into «unserious» genres, by proposing alternate lyrics of at least one verse and chorus from a cheesy pop song. The session ended with a group sing-along. French architect Odile Decq, known for her use of bold colors, met Madonna's «Material Girl» 1984, with lyrics like: «Some use orange. Some use yellow. I think they're ok. If they don't give me proper color, I just walk away.»²⁰ There were two renditions of Indian architect Anupama Kundoo's ideas on time, luxury, and craftsmanship; first transformed by Cindi Lauper's «Time After Time» 1983, followed by «that» participant's performance of a heart-wrenching rendition of Bonnie Tyler's «Total Eclipse of the Heart» 1983. «And I need to craft tonight. And I need it more than ever. And if you only craft this right. We'll be crafting on forever.»²¹ Prince Perri became flushed.

Session 4: Chillin' Like A Villain

Others noticed. There was gossip. Something was strangely familiar about this participant, but the prince couldn't put their finger on it... Regardless, this was the last training session in preparation for the final examination, an exercise in positioning and repositioning through fictional personas, while connecting movement of bodies in space to architectural conditions.

Prince Perri asked everyone to come dressed as their favorite villain, an alter ego (much like drag), including dominant personality traits, strengths/weaknesses, special physical attributes, bad habits, comportment, catch phrases, as well as any necessary objects or props. Remembering the words of the sorceress, «When we all take risks, we participate mutually in the work of creating a learning community.», the prince dressed in costume as well.²² Most villains came from works of literature or film, except for «that» participant, who dared to come as the evil queen! The likeness was uncanny!

As she beamed with confidence, Prince Perri pretended not to be awestruck by the drag skills of this queen. Fortunately, the guest instructor, Squire Iwa Herdensjö, took over.²³ Expert in practices connecting design to choreography, she taught the group four basic choreographic moves that dealt with architectural elements or conditions; climbing stairs, opening doors, twisting torsos (Calatrava reference), and polishing façades (rubbing one's butt on a surface). They rehearsed together and broke off into smaller groups, with the task of implementing and adapting these four moves to their new personas. Each group was to clip a short film to view together at the end of the session.

Although they were beginners in expressing an architectural idea through movement, the personal distance created by the personas made «dancing as architect» easier, providing a fun way to interact with built space in full scale. Convinced that their cause would defeat the plague once and for all, they invited architects throughout the royal kingdom to the final spectacle. Meanwhile, the queen (yes, it was her) had such a good time that she released her captive. Participation in the tactics of unserious architecture had brought back fond memories from her queer campy youth, so Queen Franzine came to the World Premiere. Everyone discovered that the queen had infiltrated the group. Now it all made sense! But... did this mean? No. Prince Perri couldn't have fallen in love with the evil queen! In the past, the prince did have a thing for «bad girls», but come on! That's what all the royal therapy was for!

Final Examination: World Premiere!

When preparing the final task of the soon to be unserious architects, Prince Perri was inspired by the wizard John Bohannon's pedagogical trickery, in his annual «Dance your PhD» contest.²⁴ With skills gleaned in the previous session, participants were to prepare a two-minute video of a choreographed dance depicting some aspect of their royal studio projects; a construction detail, the movement of light, a sequence of spaces, or even an underlying theoretical idea. The production was to include costumes, location, lighting, sound, text, and anything that helped convey a story and left the viewer wondering: Are you serious?

All nineteen architects proved through their architectural performances that they did not take themselves too seriously. After the screening, the prince made a short speech: «This training has introduced critical theory and possible,

although unconventional, approaches to design research, as a complement to your royal studio projects. It's difficult to know what questions these unserious practices will raise and how they might shift royal architectural values. I do know, however, that the «youthful» qualities of playfulness, curiosity, and a willingness to show vulnerability will serve you well as survival skills in the future. The confidence to try things that might fail, to do things that aren't perfect and put them out there anyway, is a true sign of brave unserious architects.» The crowd cheered and celebrations began.

And what of the prince and the queen, you may ask? This is a fairytale after all. Well, in this queer version, Prince Perri believed that marriage was a patriarchal institution and enjoyed the freedom of living on their own. Rather than marry the queen and assume the throne as (drag) king, the prince left the royal architectural kingdom altogether, in search of the mythical land of meritocracy. Perri continued to meet Franzine— who renounced her title and returned to the drag scene, in a casual and consensual relationship. And Prince Peregrine Mehno Paughs and Queen Franzine von Patri-Archy lived happily ever after.

The End