

Eastern Michigan University

Precarious Charm

The Puzzling Humor of Vernacular Strategies

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Graduate Thesis Exhibition

University Gallery

Nov 23, 2020 - Dec 11, 2020

## Acknowledgement

This project began as a collation of images and texts for the Art History seminar *Craft v. Art v. Design* facilitated by Ryan Molloy. I would like to thank Prof. Molloy, past and present members of the Eastern Michigan University graduate cohort, the keen undergraduates I encountered as both an instructor and a graduate assistant and the wonderful staff and faculty at EMU. Immense gratitude to my committee: Jason Ferguson, Corrie Baldauf, Brian Nelson and Dr. Leslie Atzmon. As this project and my practice continue, I appreciate the support, concern and criticism throughout my time as an MFA candidate.

## Abstract

In *Precarious Charm*, I worked from Bernard Rudofsky's definition of vernacular architecture to identify provisional and atypical strategies in non-pedigreed practitioners of craft, design and art. I augmented my own working definition of the vernacular to include Genpei Akasegawa's study of the architectural simulation and absurdity as *Thomassons*. I photographed examples of spontaneous problem solving in the underserved, impoverished areas of Johnstown, PA and the Warrendale neighborhood of Detroit, MI. These idiosyncratic approaches yield peculiarly funny structures that often obscure their own purpose, beg questions or problematize themselves.

*Besides, the art of living is neither taught  
nor encouraged in this country. We look at  
it as a form of debauch, little aware  
that its tenets are frugality, cleanliness and  
a general respect for creation . . .*

Bernard Rudofsky, Architecture Without Architects,<sup>1</sup>

Around 2005, I found a copy of Bernard Rudofsky's Architecture Without Architects at the Johnstown, PA chapter of the second hand seller *The Book Rack*. I was in my sophomore year of undergrad and enrolled in a number of art and architecture history courses. My exposure had been to ancient structures and contemporary buildings without much exposure to recent architectural theory. Rudofsky's study of vernacular and adaptive building in older civilizations immediately connected to a kind of problem solving I had seen firsthand: the use of materials at hand to fashion a solution that processed design, craft and art concerns simultaneously.

This approach often biases for or against either design, craft or art. The initial problem may be sufficiently addressed, yet other problems emerge from the solution. The initial problem may be obscured by the solution. Yet, there is both wit and humor behind the decisions of our vernacular maker. I photographed a series of examples that demonstrate the cunning strategies of the vernacular maker as designer, craftsperson and artist.

Rudofsky defines vernacular architecture through pre-architectural examples. Their relevance lies not in a lack of planning or technical knowledge, but in adaptive strategies that work with available materials and an occam's razoring of technical

approaches. Rudofsky finds importance in “Architectural mimicry . . . where man’s handiwork blends into the natural setting, thereby achieving a synthesis of the vernacular and organic form.”<sup>2</sup> This balance exists now as non-professionals account for site, available materials in their own garage cabinets and junk drawers and their broad access to information through the internet. A half-watched YouTube tutorial and a scan of the comments section has become the new oral tradition. In Detroit, residents respond to a network of highways and streets built to serve and showcase the midcentury apex of the automotive industry. In Johnstown, residents respond to the Appalachian hills and the cavernous mills abandoned by the fleeing steel industry.

Distinctions between the vernacular and the pedigreed builder reflect spontaneous solutions and the anticipation of problems. Rudofsky writes, “Formal architecture is, with few exceptions, connected in our mind with symmetry, the vernacular with its absence. Symmetry is implicit in every noble building.”<sup>3</sup> This symmetry is not necessarily exact, but sometimes a subtle balance that demonstrates esteem. Asymmetry functions similarly with indefinite idiosyncrasies that are sometimes difficult to pinpoint. The charm and humor of the vernacular lies in the indefinite peculiarities that present themselves like a puzzle. Imagine a hand painted *No Parking* notice that progressively falls out of level, each letter becoming more compressed as the writer realizes he is running out of room.

This perplexing kind of structural humor was unfurled a bit further by Japanese artist and writer Genpei Akasegawa in the 1980s. He identified constructions that looked thoroughly architectural without having an architectural function. Named after

former MLB player Gary Thomasson—who looked like he could really whack dingers, but maintained a terrible record in the Japanese league—these *Hyperart: Thomassons* were documented by hundreds of observers and the results forwarded to Akasegawa for further scrutiny and publication. His working definition of a *Thomasson* was “a defunct and useless object, attached to someone’s instance and aesthetically maintained.”<sup>4</sup> There is a curious quality in the maintenance of vernacular structures. A slipshod lean-to shed may have been constructed in an afternoon, yet it is reinforced and repainted for decades.

As solutions beget problems, this phenomenon moves rhizomatically from lot to lot, neighborhood to neighborhood. The subcontractor oral tradition propagates alternative fastening techniques like the *ghetto Tapcon*—a drywall screw with a scrap of 12 gauge copper wire wrapped around the shaft. In underserved, poor cities, the bureaucratic infrastructure is worn too thin to chase code violators. In rural areas, immense plots and low population density allow for complete ignorance of codes and zoning. These scenarios allow for ripe experimentation in layout, construction and decoration.

Rudofskian thought is having a bit of a renaissance. His discourses with designers and writers like Paul Rand and Gyorgy Kepes are being reinvestigated and newly appreciated with attention to the institutional biases of their time. Felicity D. Scott notes that Rudofsky’s examples of “. . . vernacular architectures [are] cast as distinctly other, Rudofsky’s speculations on the refusal of communication and his embrace of a certain urban disorientation retained a problematic blindness—projecting

ideas and racial stereotypes onto cultures and populations to which he had little access—and at times implicitly, if not unwittingly, silenced cultural specificity.”<sup>5</sup> This “blindness” was systematic in Rudofsky’s épistémè and perhaps even requisite in his mission to see through the canon of pedigreed architecture and design. I chose to focus on regions in which I have resided to remediate my own blindness and minimize my biases toward these subjects as *other*.

I have included studies of my current neighborhood Warrendale in Detroit, MI and my hometown of Johnstown, PA. Both areas are impoverished and underserved, yielding ideal examples of this cycle of vernacular problems. I do not use the term “problem” pejoratively. Instead, there is a charming puzzle in visually auditing these problems. They beg for resolution in their provisionality or precariousness. What was the initial impetus for the design? When are issues of craft structural? Where are considerations of artfulness in material, composition and surface treatment?



Fig. 1, Warrendale

This was the first problem that I discovered in Warrendale. Several pieces of scrap plywood float over head height, loosely fastened and resting on a series of posts and the corner of an outbuilding. The contour of the structure reflects bends in the fence. Is this a walkway for chickens and cats? Is it for hanging objects-flora, meat, clothes-to dry? It is rain battered and strains to hold its own weight.





Fig. 2, Warrendale

This chill observatory addresses problems of leisure, visible distance and alternative energy. Although the dropping cost of battery cells now allows for economical conversion of sunlight to electricity, this example relies on harnessing sunlight for thermal generation. I am reminded of my grandfather (a champion of the jerry-rig) who spray painted a garden hose black, stapled it in a coil to a piece of plywood and mounted it on eight foot posts. With the aid of a pond pump, the system created a solar heater for the family swimming pool.



Fig. 3, Warrendale

Upon moving into my own slum-lorded rental, I immediately noticed the provisional fence that bounded our backyard. The double layered portion here involves a traditional post mount picket fence that is reinforced by the leaning, inverted second layer. Boundaries like this largely suggest division and do little to keep critters and humans out. During windy days, the neighborhood is overrun with liberated dogs.



Fig. 4, Warrendale

In this column by a novice mason, there is evidence of a demolished wall. Although the aluminum rod works in tandem with string to latch the gate, there is no fence in place of the speculated former wall. The border is open except at the three foot width of the gate.



Fig. 5, Warrendale

This gate is latched with a number of junk cables and wires. The process of securing this opening involved more time winding wire than it would have to attach a set of hinges, especially considering the unwinding process required to open the gate. Perhaps this is a semipermanent seal.



Fig. 6, Warrendale

The gate in fig. 5 obstructs entry to a former alley as seen above. Power lines run between the backyards in Warrendale, which initially created a narrow access alley. Residents have slowly claimed and occupied these alleyways with fences, outbuildings and out-of-service automobiles, much to the chagrin of linesmen and inspectors alike.



Fig. 7, Warrendale

Here a vernacular curator has installed a number of concrete animals as guardians of their yard. Elements of composition and balance figured into the artful decisions of the resident. This also questions the relative binary of sculpture and statue. The careful consideration of relationships between site and object allow these beasts to transcend their statuary qualities to become sculptural elements. This is Warrendale's Storm King.



Fig. 8, Warrendale

*The One Dollar Plus Store* is a non-franchised bodega that serves as an economic and social hub on Warren Ave. I have used this mural as source material to generate sculptural work and I find it to be a striking image every time I drive by. The text is surprisingly consistent compared to the claw-like hand grasping not at, but in front of the depiction of a wad of cash. This subtle layer separation creates a tension, despite our mind's ability to complete and comprehend the cash grab.



Fig. 9, Johnstown

I have observed this tropical pair of garage doors since my childhood. The vernacular aesthetic provides a necessary alternative to the cold, overcast conditions in Appalachian Pennsylvania. This mural has been maintained and restored for over 30 years without changes to the landscape and the subjects within. The available scope when painting outside affords both visual impact and visibility. The mural is the preferred method for vernacular painters.





Fig. 10, Johnstown

The use of cut-offs from stock material are better suited for surfacing than the burn pile in poorer areas. Here, sheared post ends are used as shingles on the facade within a porch. The inconsistency in size creates an imprecise grid that adds a rustic quality to this duplex.



Fig. 11, Johnstown

Probably salvaged from a ceiling, pressed tin panels sheath the undercarriage and wheels of this mobile home. Shifting the panels to a vertical orientation creates the illusion of a masonry wall. The provisional paint job blends the solution into the siding, but the unfinished state emphasizes its misfit.



Fig. 12, Johnstown

The vernacular builder often takes a deal on stock material, prioritizing money over aesthetics. This three color home demonstrates eras of failure, renovation and availability.



Fig. 13, Johnstown

Commonly called *Insulbrick*, this asphalt and aggregate shingle siding was prevalent around the midcentury because of its low cost and ease of installation. The stamped brick pattern works as a camouflage for patches that require much less knowledge and energy than a masonry wall. The lifespan is similar to roofing shingles (about 20 years) and the patches degrade as quickly and often culture insect nests.



Fig. 14, Johnstown

Seen through the trees, this compound has a composite roof made from shingles, new stock corrugated metal and tarps in familiar green, blue and brown hues. Though inconsistent in appearance, all three methods are effective in the moment.

Provisionality is often a reflection of workflow and a schedule of problems.



Fig. 15, Johnstown

This skewed garage shows how builders must adaptively design to irregular lots caused by the necessary infrastructure in mountainous regions. The structure fits the back corner of the property and allows for parking with an oblique approach. The obtuse angle creates an optical illusion; a visual problem of fitting a car into the garage. The structure also complements the ridgeline in the distance.



Fig. 16, Johnstown

A small matrix of reflectors warn oncoming traffic of this stone, while also marking position and protecting the stone itself. A smaller rock supports the strip of wood on the left, upon which one reflector is affixed and another simply leans. What is the importance of this stone and its posterity? In the case of an accident detrimental to either motorist or stone, the removal of the stone with a mattock in foresight would have expended much less energy.



Fig. 17.1, Johnstown

This maritime themed patio deck demonstrates the vernacular builder's acuity, in as much as the structure reads as sufficiently *boatey*. But is there more to this landlocked vessel than its simulation? It could be climbed and played upon, but it is determinedly not child safe. Johnstown is known as for a history of disastrous floods, yet this is not a watertight escape pod.





Fig. 17.2, Johnstown

If the purpose of the boat patio deck is simply to look like a boat, this example leans toward a vernacular art. The builder was perhaps a former naval officer, or maybe just a big Jimmy Buffet fan. In creating this site, the builder augmented the residential architecture with sculptural interventions. The patriotic surface treatment reinforces that the structure is meant to be looked at, experienced and trod upon.



Fig. 18, Johnstown

Hefley Spring is a natural water source that has been cooperatively maintained for several decades as a public resource. Although it rests on a narrow berm where route 56 enters the West End, traffic patterns slow to allow jug-fillers to pull off and back on to the road. Johnstown's sewage system is crumbling and this is a crucial alternative to polluted tap water.



Fig. 19, Boswell, PA

South of Johnstown, Somerset County is comprised of far-flung boros, unincorporated townships and farmland. Cooperative efforts control the electrical infrastructure, with moonlighting linesmen operating like volunteer firemen. Although many utility co-ops have been established for many years, the continued cooperation of residents serves problems of maintenance and interconnectivity.



Fig. 20.1, Johnstown

After the 1977 flood and the acceleration of global manufacture, the vital steel industry in Johnstown began to disappear. This left huge mills and warehouses vacant and abandoned. Besides the orthodox delinquent use of these spaces to do drugs and smash things, a very small community of graffiti artists have taken to these spaces as studios.



Fig. 20.2, Johnstown

I was allowed entry to two spaces in particular at the behest of the writer Nucer, whom I grew up with in Johnstown's small skateboard scene. Although these spaces are illegal to enter and the artists have something less than squatter's rights, they are afforded solitude and have yet to be accosted by police. The few disturbances to date are credited to pharmaceutical opioid addicted scrappers.



Fig. 20.3, Johnstown

These spaces have been neglected and pose some threat of collapse, but their openness prompts adaptive use. Artists faced with the problem of where to make and show work transform the spaces' purpose. When asked what he would call these buildings, Nuceri responds, "Home? I don't know . . . something between a studio and a temple. A place to focus and just paint, undisturbed. Watch the hawks nesting in the ceiling. Hear a brick drop and hope it doesn't take you out."



Fig. 20.4, Johnstown

The architecture is cavernous and the ceiling height is to the scale of a cathedral. It was a place of never ending labor in three daily shifts, and dedicated work continues now on a much smaller scale with greater creativity. The high windows and leaking light serve the quiet, monastic ambiance. It is a perfect place to make and view art with a requisite knowledge and hike to gain the privilege of access.



Fig. 20.5, Johnstown

Although I am neither a graffiti connoisseur nor a subjective fan of the medium, I am interested in vandalism and marking conventions. Here there is a recorded dialogue between different epochs: the mill worker marking the area for standard manganese used in steel production and several vandal-artists operating in divergent styles.





Fig. 21, Johnstown

For better or worse, small businesses work in a similar cooperative fashion to the rural electricians and the vandal-artists. The now defunct Buck's Hobby Shop provided rocket kits, creepy baby doll appendages and (the often sniffed) enamel paint and model glue. To better suit the hobbyist craftsman, the proprietor opted for a faux barn facade to simulate the agrarian idyllic on a six story building downtown. This decor would have been a problem to potential leasees, but the barn motif coalesces with the current storage service occupant.



Fig 22, Johnstown

An interested party purchased the former site of a *Value City* to establish an indoor flea market. Rather than deal with the problem of new signage, they instead redacted portions of the former store's name to create their own: *Value-it*. The network of various sellers and traders has maintained its position as a Johnstown hotspot for over ten years, providing handmade crafts, exotic swords, used media and drug paraphernalia.



Fig. 23, Johnstown

*Weaver's Confectionary* draws many of its customers by offering scratch-offs and number tickets. Although the commonwealth's lottery system puts a lot of money into advertising, the draw of legal gambling prompts business owners to simply stencil their own signage. Other adaptive responses to the demand include *The Fifth Ave. Taproom* constructing a walk-up window for sober gamblers. The lottery is a way of life in the poor regions of southwestern PA.



Fig. 24, Johnstown

Unfortunately, the PA lottery system exploits its players and even makes use of the very adaptive, vernacular strategies of the lower class. Here they have occupied one of many unused spots at *The Galleria* food court. Because the mall is failing, its main visitors are elderly walkers and bus transfers. Not only was this space repurposed for number tickets and off-track wagering, but the entire escalator has been redesigned with a lotto paint job and a multitude of suspended, numbered balls.

## Endnotes

1. Bernard Rudofsky, Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964), 5.
2. *ibid.*, 47
3. Bernard Rudofsky, The Prodigious Builders: Notes Toward a Natural History of Architecture with Special Regard to Those Species That Are Traditionally Neglected or Downright Ignored, (New York: First Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 229.
4. Genpei Akasegawa, Hyperart: Thomasson, (New York: Kaya Press, 2009), 15.
5. Felicity D. Scott, Disorientation: Bernard Rudofsky in the Empire of Signs, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 100-101.