Slipstreaming

By Gale Fulton and Stewart Hicks

"our approach was to turn not so much to science fiction as to ecstatic realism…lets ditch architect as pseudo-engineered performance, be it for form's sake or for an empty Whole Foods greenness. Instead take risks again, let's make ecstatic architecture and architecture fiction, let's re-imagine the world." [1]

Ideas just aren't what they used to be. Once upon a time, they could ignite fires of debate, stimulate other thoughts, incite revolutions and fundamentally change the ways we look at and think about the world.[2]
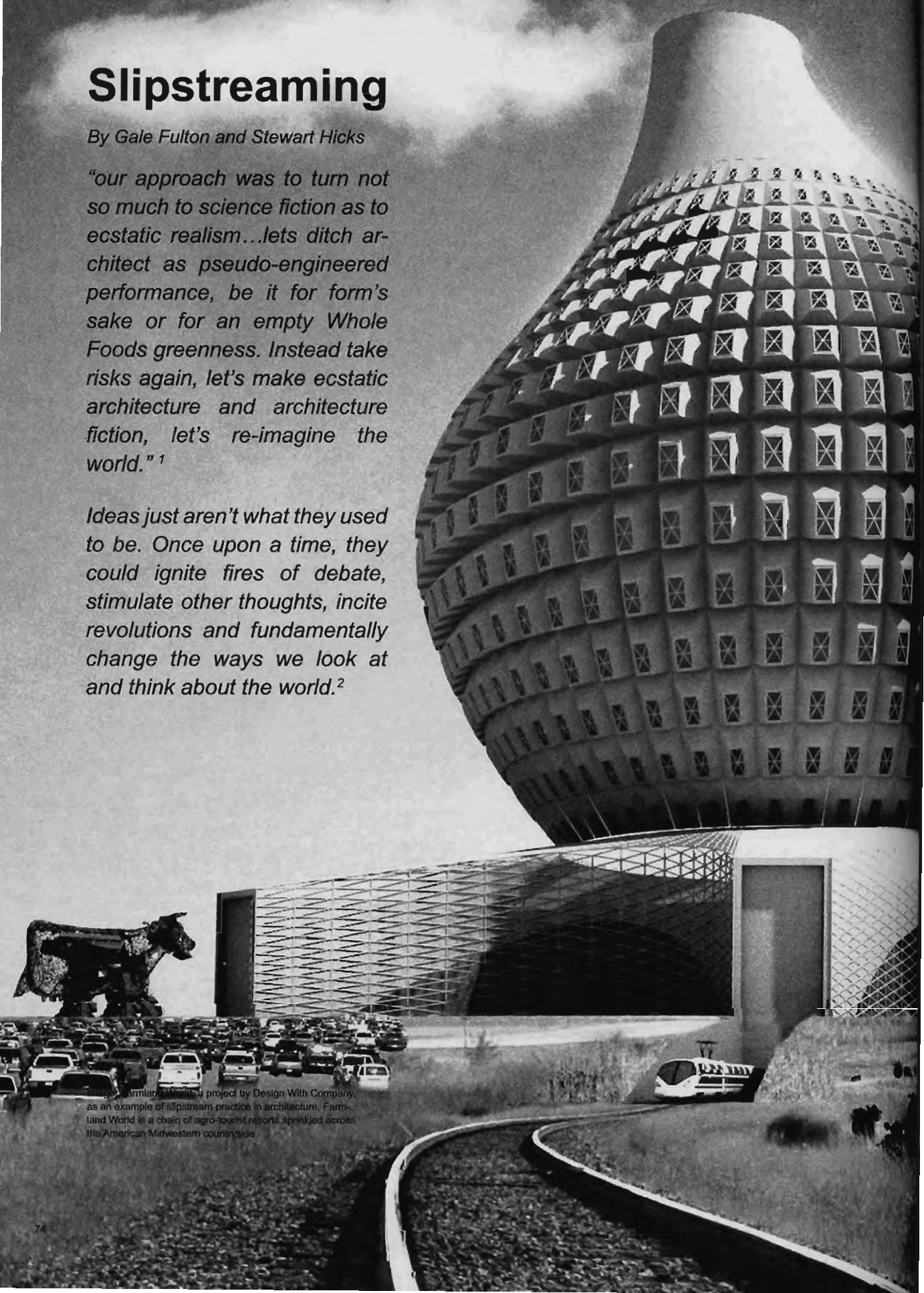
Image: Farmland World, a project by Design With Company, as an example of slipstream practice in architecture. Farmland World is a chain of agro-tourist resorts sprinkled across the American Midwestern countryside.

This essay attempts to give shape and definition to a genre of architectural practice that, until now, has operated either namelessly or fallen victim to procrustean efforts to integrate it into categories incapable of allowing for its full potential. It has continued without a history or genealogy, and, perhaps usefully, without a clear objective for the future. There has yet to be an accompanying body of theory or criticism to aid in the definition or legitimization of this body of work (again, perhaps a good thing, or maybe the only way architecture and urbanism can be 'broadcast' in an information and media drenched world). The projects are most likely to be found in the blog roles of such websites as Building Blog, Architizer, or ArchDaily, and other venues that pass under the noses of established academic theories, traditions, and critics, but which maintain tremendous currency amongst an emerging generation of architects and designers more interested in what 'feels good' than what's 'right.'

For now, let's call this mode of practice "slipstreaming," an inchoate term borrowed from literary criticism. As the name suggests, slipstream is connected to the "mainstream" but primarily exists somewhat ambivalently within the interstices of science fiction, realist fiction and fantasy writing. Bruce Sterling first appropriated the term in 1989 in an attempt to put his finger on what he believed to be an emergent genre of literature that deserved differentiation from category and genre science fiction:

"It seems to me that the heart of slipstream is an attitude of peculiar aggression against "reality." These are fantasies of a kind, but not fantasies which are "futuristic" or "beyond the fields we know." These books tend to sarcastically tear at the structure of "everyday life"...

Slipstream does not define a category, but suggests an approach, an attitude, an interest or obsession with thinking the unthinkable or doing the undoable. Slipstream can be visionary, unreliable, odd or metaphysical." [3]

"It is a fantastic, surreal sometimes, speculative on occasion, but not rigorously so. It does not aim to provoke a "sense of wonder" or to systematically extrapolate in the manner of classic science fiction. Instead, this is a kind of writing which simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the late twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility." [4]

But beyond adding another category to our classification charts, what might architecture and urbanism stand to gain through analogies to slipstream? This essay - call it a slipstream primer - works to answer that question in an admittedly introductory way. Ultimately, we believe that slipstreaming in architecture and design represents an emergent attitude or sensibility towards production that is indifferent toward medium, which is better suited to span the multitude of cultural practices that now affect our lives.

Architecture's Slipstream
Traditional usage of the term 'project' seems inadequate to describe proposals within the slipstream - ecosystem gets closer if one can free that term from its science and sustainability captors. They are more like multi-media (in the broadest sense of the word - including physical materiality and space) ecologies communicated through sensation, affect, narrative, and graphic form. These stories include architecture(s) and urbanism(s) comprised of soaring balloons and furry tents, forms that are almost animal but not quite, 'easy' shapes and pretty patterns, monotone masses and shiny orbs, unnatural landscapes and urban monsters. Props from

these narratives can be built, but perform even if they are not – fully capable of achieving their goals through the use of tantalizing imagery, graphic narratives, sublime scenery, and "like" buttons.

What remains consistent across this range is the selective exaggeration of observable features of society that pushes believability or identity to its breaking point and sometimes beyond. These 'projectives' fictionalize everyday life rather than realizing fictional architectural narratives. They point outward, beyond themselves, to reveal or conjure a reality that isn't what it seems to be, but is – a contemporary landscape of pleasurable cognitive dissonance. Indeed, one of the qualities that architectural slipstream shares most with its literary counterpart is that of 'making the familiar strange or the strange familiar', or as author Carol Emshwiller states it "estranging the everyday." [5]

Genealogically, slipstreaming in architecture and design owes much to a more radical time when the "conceptual architecture" of groups like Archigram and Superstudio poked at our ribs until we writhed in discomfort. These 'idea activists' understood the potential of architecture to work through various media – well beyond buildings – in order to provoke society into rethinking the seemingly natural conditions of daily life. But while the 'paper architecture' of this generation and those that followed became increasingly strident, even tedious, in its critique of contemporary, capitalist society, slipstream attempts to achieve its effects through charm rather than chastisement. If critical (paper) architecture meant to jolt you into intellectual consciousness by striking you with unfamiliar, foreign objects, slipstream coaxes you into awareness by caressing your cheek with strangely familiar forms and intoxicating atmospheres. Slipstreamers tickle and delight us with the airy brush of whimsical speculation.

One of the primary conduits of slipstream architecture is BLDG BLOG, authored and curated by Geoff Manaugh. For Manaugh, architecture is a medium to tell stories about the world and mustn't be reduced to the production of buildings alone. Because of architecture's ubiquity, it is potentially unsurpassable in its ability to link seemingly disparate ideas into a web of fantastical conjecture. Manaugh fully understands the 'post-medium specificity' of architecture – a quality that we believe to be central to an architectural slipstream:

"It's too often assumed that if you want to talk about architecture, then you need to talk about the work of architects. Frank Gehry is architecture, in other words; William Burroughs, inflatable children's toys, and The Odyssey somehow are not. The obvious problem here is that to find more exciting examples of architecture

from the present day – and to explore architectural culture more fully – you need to look beyond mere buildings. As Mike Webb of Archigram once wrote: "When you are looking for a solution to what you have been told is an architectural problem – remember, the solution may not be a building. Architecture is not limited to buildings!" [6]

One such project is *The Berg* by German architect Jakob Tigges, a new landmark for the city of Berlin. Billed as the world's biggest artificial mountain, the Berg "exists" within a web of associated media, though a Facebook fan page, subway posters, YouTube videos, postcards, images of antique paintings hanging on walls, tattoos, a website, and even a live feed webcam that monitors the artificial construction. It has a fictional alternative history and a constructed present through a series of hyper-real documents and media. The "authentic" experience of standing in awe of a mountain, or climbing its rocky face is referenced through the faked media that is traditionally summoned to capture it. Without simply predicting the future for its audience, it allows for multiple and alternative views of a discordant present. *The Berg* occupies no 'real' space within the city of Berlin, but the fact that it could – its virtuality - allows us to understand and examine the role of landmarks, geology, politics and the city in a way that building alone might not. This type of project does not provide comfortable answers or solve problems or adhere to generally accepted notions of medium or disciplinarity. It poses questions, images alternatives, and stages potentials - nudging the public toward a new openness. It is moral but not moralizing.

Towards a Politics of *Strange*
Architecture appears to once again be interested in the political. After a decade of post-decon and pomo abuse recovery programs in which architecture split into camps of autonomy and instrumentality, the 00's most productive experiment was the post-critical – a crucial step towards the emergence of a post-ideological architecture. We believe the post-critical decade, while founded on potentially ideological projects such as Somol's projective or Speak's post-theory, cleared the way for an expansion of architecture into relatively unchartered waters – into the slipstream. We can be political without being activist – check your 'earnest mawkishness' and moralizing at the door. We can privilege speculation without utopia and pragmatism without ideology. Slipstream offers a form of resistance akin to fight clubs before they left the clubhouse.

Sterling's original essay was motivated by the fact that Science Fiction had 'lost touch with its cultural reason for being', and he glimpsed some potential in Slipstream to rectify that. Despite the slipperiness of the

term, it has been useful for capturing a host of difficult-to-classify texts and locating a slew of emerging voices within literature as well as for reaching back - recategorizing and reconsidering past works that fit at best awkwardly within the categories in which they were originally placed. This act of curation or 'history making' is essential to slipstream in that it allows architecture to "create its own precursors" to borrow from Borges, and through this admittedly revisionist approach to history, Slipstreamers are able to craft an unforeseen future without turning their back on the past.

Slipstream writing achieves its effects by blurring the distinction between literary genres of realism and fantasy. Because we are never quite sure where the realism ends and the fantasy begins, fantasy can be treated under the tenets of realism and vice versa. But what is analogous to "realism" in architecture? Henry James argued that the main tenet of realism in literature was that writers must not select facts in accord with preconceived aesthetics or ethical ideals. Instead, they are to record their observations impartially and objectively. Realism downplays plot in favor of character and concentration on middle-class life and preoccupations. If we understand design to include the material objects as well as the media ecology associated with the construction and reception of such objects, realism might be achieved in architecture and design when these media cross reference one another more-or-less objectively. However, slipstream design toys with the collapse of space and its mediation.

While it is increasingly accepted that media participates in the construction of our "reality," it often becomes a scapegoat for skeptical onlookers - drawing attention away from or obscuring other means of reality construction. Because architecture, urbanism, and landscape have for so long claimed to shape our reality directly with material, light, bodies, and space, it can often appear somewhat inadequate for the staging of alternative realities. But today's design disciplines are ever more saturated by, and entangled in, various media ecologies at the same time as the contemporary subject seamlessly slips between the virtual and the real. Slipstream takes advantage of this environment of ambivalence in which physical constructions are no longer sine qua non for architecture but have become mere components of larger myths (ecosystems) and cultural constructions that reflect on architecture and urbanism's position toward reality. The constructed nature of reality constantly receives greater acknowledgement, thereby feeding back on itself to become more and more an intrinsic part of reality. If, as Sterling suggest, it's "common for slipstream books to ...[pull] annoying little stunts that suggest the picture is leaking from the frame and may get all over the reader's feet,"

slipstream design has the capacity to flutter back and forth, from your foot to the media frame and back.

This back and forth quality of Slipstreaming is an emergent quality of our increasingly networked condition. Whereas design has long been divided into patron or "client" and "user" whom often have competing desires, Slipstreaming embraces – in some cases even leverages - participation and audience support so as to foster a more fully democratic process and outcome. This new mode of multi-directional, multi-channel, 'participatory design' is enabled by emerging forms of crowd-sourced funding such as Kickstarter, which allow authors and designers to finance projects directly through small contributions by sympathetic donors, have the potential to liberate design production from wealthy "patrons" and functionalist bureaucrats. [7]

Conclusion

Slipstreaming, then, is a mode of architectural and design practice that achieves its politico-aesthetic effects, primarily, by 'estranging' the everyday world. This estrangement is enacted through various modalities in order to avoid a one-size-(or style) fits-all architectural approach in favor of a vast multiplicity of strategies and tactics which appeal to or, in some cases conjure, entirely new audiences. And because of Slipstream's interactive, unfolding, is-it-real-or-not ambivalence, it suggests a wild, new territory for design agency. It is primarily this openness and ambiguity that suggests Slipstream as a more potent framework than others that have been proposed recently like "Absurd Realism (Michael Meredith)", "Architectural Fiction" (also Bruce Sterling but expanded by Kazys Vernalis), or even the 'post-critical.' But much of its potency also stems from the very fact that there is no slipstream without "main-

stream." Indeed, attention to, and willingness to engage at some level, the mainstream, remains an integral component and ensures the relevance of any Slipstream work. Rather than continuing with esoteric inside jokes, slipstream presents the possibility of creating new audiences and politics through an architecture and urbanism that branches and forms roots in the media of our everyday lives while advancing an aesthetically political agenda aimed at producing a new sensibility – that of making one feel very strange. And might it be that repeated encounters with the Slipstream could lead to creatures that are, by today's standards, strangely feeling?

A Slipstream Primer

So you think you might want to enter the Slipstream? Here area few strategies to get you started. Remember: The goal of slipstream is not to "create" new worlds from a blank slate – no pretensions of a modernist avant-garde allowed - but to summon them forth in a process that may require one to quote, chop, relocate, recombine, and turn them against themselves:

1. Be playful and promiscuous with the representational conventions and boundaries of various media & disciplines to tell your story. Graphic novels and comics are good. "Real" documents from your fictive world that somehow slipped over to the other side frustrate credibility and expand possibility. Travel guides, doctored family photographs, magazine articles, websites, etc. can all work. Create an ecology of associated objects, each pointing to one another.(Examples: Jimenez Lai's architectural fictions in *Citizens of No Place* that occur in both built installations and comic narratives; Michael Meredith's 'Working Bibliography' for the absurd) [8]

2. Stop making sense – or at the very least stop making this a major priority. It's even better if by not making sense, you can imply that nothing we know makes "a lot of sense" and perhaps even that nothing ever could. This tendency will only increase. (Examples: The Stockholm Sporten Masterplan by Bjarke Ingles Group. What the heck is that big shiny ball? Follow the discussion on www.archinect.com. Sallie Jesse Raphael asks, "Wait, how does that thing float? It says it generates enough electricity to float. Maglev? Rocket boosters? Pure ego?")

3. Take a cavalier attitude toward "material. "Declare war on those that fetishize "fact" at the expense of fun and/or fictional. Borrow, quote, and sample harder than the Beastie Boys. Historical figures can be used in ways that outrageously violate the historical record. History, journalism, official statements, advertising copy . . . all of these are grist for the slipstream mill, and are disre-spectfully treated not as "real-life facts" but as "stuff," raw material for collage work. (Examples: Berlin 2050 by Protocol Architecture which consists of faux historical documents that include *The Wilbert Contracts, The Nesin Map,* and *The Rühmann Notebook* that document a "hidden route (subsequently discovered and documented by Rühmann) [that] was used for communication and transfer of scientific documents and material in the 1970s and 1980s between the East and West."

4. Practice being a participatory fan. Quentin Tarantino's love of film began while working as a clerk in a video rental store. His fascination with the idea of genre is a constant source of creativity. Kill Bill is a Western in the disguise of a Kung Fu movie. In the slipstream, homage to other genres can be paid but you can't obviously be in one of them. Kessel and Kelly advocate a 'playful postmodernism' in which the work acknowledges its status as a fiction and may also work to somehow challenge or subvert the genre being referenced. [9] (Examples: FAT's (Fashion Architecture Taste) *Kill The Modernist Within* exhibit that studies the evolution of timber frame construction and translates it into a typeface that spells the title of the exhibition)

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Notes:

1. KazysVarnelis, "What Could Have Been," January 17, 2009 accessed at: http://varnelis.net/blog/what_could_have_been
2. Neal Gabler, "The Elusive Big Idea," New York Times, August 13, 2011
3. J.P. Kelly and J. Kessel, "Slipstream, the Genre that Isn't," in Feeling Very Strange: The Slipstream Anthology (Tachyon, 2006) vii-xv.
4. Bruce Sterling, "Slipstream," Catscan 5, 1989, accessed at:http://w2.eff.org/Misc/Publications/Bruce_Sterling/Catscan_columns/catscan.05
5. Ibid. xiii.
6. Geoff Manaugh, The BLDG BLOG Book (Chronicle, 2009) p.32
7. Currently, the most funded type of project on Kickstarter is graphic novels.
8. Michael Meredith, "For the Absurd," in Log 22, 2011, pp 7-15.
9. Kelly and Kessel, xii-xiii.

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