The Map of the City of New York of 1811 by the Commissioners superimposed a grid onto the Island of Manhattan. The drawing neither accounted for irregular edges of its shape nor the topography of the island. It rendered the lines of former streets, houses, and fields as dashed. Ordering the orthogonal grid of blocks independently of geography, history, and memory, the Commissioners defined an autonomous urban form.

Now consider Rosalind Krauss’s emphatic description of the grid as one of modernism’s founding myths: “In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back to nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree.”

By ordering the city to the shallowness of a gridded plane, the Commissioners unknowingly added urbanism to what would become central to the aesthetic discourse of modernism. They preceded the discipline of art by one hundred years. Their drawing brought abstraction to bear on the everyday lives of millions of people who would eventually inhabit that island. The map defined a distance, a sense of estrangement, between the city and its inhabitants through an object and concept of representational order.

In the two centuries that followed, the distance between the drawing and the city appeared to close. Although we purposefully interpret it as an aesthetic ordering system, the grid fulfilled the Commissioners’ pure instrumental reason: a parcelization of the city for the real estate market. The island was fully turned over to Capitalist speculation. What might have been abstract turned into kitsch.

“And so life is reckoned as nothing,” writes Victor Shklovsky. “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war.” And yet, “the technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an
aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*

To reopen the Manhattan grid to abstraction through representation, we subject the island to conventions of orthographic drawing and projection that estrange its now familiar form. In the three studies that follow, the urban object is summarily reconstituted through a mechanical reduction of resolution: extrusion. What emerges is a template for urbanism, governed not by the figure-ground plan, but by the flattened, gridded skyline. The models project the city from the outside in, describing it as a monumental whole made up of discrete parts.

In the first model, Manhattan is divided into parcels according to variations and anomalies found in the original plan. Once the iconic districts are outlined in plan, each one is treated as an internally closed system, defined by two internal skylines—one on the southern, and another, on the eastern edge. The independent elevations, when projected through one another, reproduce a recognizable, yet inaccurate, model of the island. The irregularities tie this abstraction
to quasi-real zones in the city, yet the union of the two projected skylines produces an uncanny sense of distance. Attached to its original reference, the exercise maintains as much as it alienates. The second model takes Manhattan to its lowest level of resolution. While the most recognizable image of the city is the skyline, an extrusion along this line delivers a radical estrangement from the real. The seventeen parcels of the first abstraction are reduced to one undifferentiated block in the second. Extrusion does not average. It does something else, favoring extremes. The model of the city does not recover the original; the form only retains the character and the name “New York.”

The final study gives the island a new form of discontinuity through a grid of evenly spaced two hundred acre parcels. As with previous models, each cube is then projected from three drawings only crossing two hundred skyline segments through one another.
When the cubes are placed together, the elevations do not match. Only the street grid lines up to connect the superblocks into a continuous urban fabric. There are visible seams. The cubic parcels resist being brought together into one unified model. Each one is a mini Manhattan, governed by its own internal logic.

This final reduction estranges the island through an alienated form of its own composition—the grid. Yet the new blocks resist conforming to the effective standards of efficiency, property, and function. In gridding the grid of Manhattan once again, we revisit the moment of the Commissioners’ original abstraction.


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1 Shotgun House

Competition:
Luigart Makers Spaces York Street Challenge (2014)
Finalist

Group Exhibition:
Treatise: Why Write Alone?
Madlener House, Graham Foundation, Chicago, Illinois
January 23–March 28, 2015

First Office Team:
Anna Neimark, Andrew Atwood, David Eskenazi, Brooke Hair, Melissa Lee

2 Paranormal Panorama

Installation:
Screening Room for the film Kalte Probe [Cold Rehearsal]
Mackey Gallery, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles, California
November 7, 2013–March 1, 2014

Collaborators:
Constanze Ruhm and Christine Lang, film directors, Austria

Client:
Kimberli Meyer, director, MAK Center for Art and Architecture

Funding:
Austrian Federal Chancellery / Arts Division

First Office Team:
Anna Neimark, Andrew Atwood, David Eskenazi, Ryan Roark, Mark Acciari

Contractor:
Marcos Lozano Construction

3... And Pedestals

Installation:
SCI-Arc Gallery, Los Angeles, California
July 26–September 7, 2013

First Office Team:
Andrew Atwood, Erin Besler, Kristy Velasco, Mark Acciari

Contractor:
Alley 36 Collaborative

Structural and Electrical Engineers:
Noos Engineering and E3 Electrical

4 Possible Table

Group Exhibition:
Possible Mediums, Taubman School of Architecture,
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan
January 17–February 24, 2014

First Office Team:
Andrew Atwood, Anna Neimark, Ryan Roark

5 Pinterest Headquarters

Office Design:
808 Brannan Street, San Francisco, California
Completed June 2013

Collaborator:
Janette Kim, all of the above (New York)

First Office Team:
Anna Neimark, Andrew Atwood, Mark Acciari, Benjamin Farnsworth, Ewan Feng, Kate Hajash, Austin Kaa, Brian Lee, Steven Moody, Darle Shinsato, Jane Zhu

Executive Architect:
Neal Schwartz, Schwartz and Architecture (San Francisco)

Contractor:
Novo Construction

MEP Engineer:
McMillan Electric

Photography:
Naho Kubota

6 Mountain House

Publication:

First Office Team:
Andrew Atwood, Anna Neimark, Erin Besler, Ewan Feng, Austin Kaa, Steven Moody
7 Infrastructural Monument

Installation:
WUHO Gallery, Los Angeles, California
December 8–December 18, 2011

Funding:
Advancing Scholarship in the Humanities and Social Sciences (ASHSS), University of Southern California (USC)

First Office Team:
Anna Neimark, Mark Acciari, Benzion Rodman, Regina Teng

Fabricator:
Kevin Baker, Universal Foam

Publication:

Funding:
Julia Amory Appleton Traveling Fellowship from Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design (GSD)

8 Zoopol

Competition:
Think Space: Ecological Borders (2011)
Honorable Mention

Publication:

First Office Team:
Anna Neimark, Andrew Atwood, Rachel Lee

Collaborator:
Tijana Vujosevic

9 Grid

Competition:

Group Exhibition: The Unfinished Grid
Museum of the City of New York, New York
December 6, 2011–April 15, 2012

Publication:

First Office Team:
Andrew Atwood, Anna Neimark, John May, Mark Acciari, Andrew Kim
About the Project
*Treatise* is an exhibition and publication project that brings together fourteen young design offices working at the forefront of conceptual architecture to consider the treatise as a site for theoretical inquiry, experimentation, and debate. Organized by Los Angeles–based designer Jimenez Lai and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, *Treatise* presents a collection of individually authored books as well as an exhibition of new and recent works by this dynamic group at the Graham Foundation’s Madlener House, from January to March 2015. Together, the publication series and exhibition provide a platform for the participants to articulate and exchange their theoretical angles and ideas, as they challenge disciplinary boundaries and explore new possibilities for architecture.

About the Graham Foundation
Founded in 1956, the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts makes project-based grants to individuals and organizations and produces public programs to foster the development and exchange of diverse and challenging ideas about architecture and its role in the arts, culture, and society.

Since 1963, the Graham Foundation has been located in the Madlener House, a turn-of-the-century Prairie-style mansion, designed by Richard E. Schmidt and Hugh M. Gardner (1901-02) and renovated by prominent modern architect Daniel Brenner. The 9,000-square-foot historic home now houses galleries, a bookstore, an outdoor collection of architectural fragments, an extensive non-lending library of grantee publications, and a ballroom, where the foundation hosts a robust schedule of public programs.

For more information, please visit www.grahamfoundation.org
Why Write Alone?
Jimenez Lai

*Treatise* explores two questions concerning the practice of architecture: First, why write? And, second, why write alone?

Single-author architectural treatises can be traced back two-thousand years; they were further advanced by medieval Italian architects who attempted to make sense of what was being built in the world, why we desired it, as well as, how it could be constructed. To this day, an architectural treatise departs from building (*fabris*) in order to explore reason (*ratio*). Our image of the architect has long since shifted from the professional at work on a construction site hauling bricks and applying mortars — today, the architect draws, reasons, orchestrates, and projects.

If the description of a philosopher is one who writes to make sense of the world, then the duty of the architect is not only to further one’s ideas through words, but also to build one’s questions into reality. The promise of youth is often spent laboring in a library, consuming the writings of those who came before. While this process remains vital, it possesses a precarious shadow side. If the foundation of our knowledge becomes orthodoxy, we neglect to ask our own questions back at the abyss. Furthermore, we forget that those very writings we uphold were once produced by young individuals in their own libraries, and the resulting interpretations conferred by future generations remain just that — opinions about the rules of their times — not truths, and not solutions.

In the second half of the twentieth century, *Pamphlet Architecture* was introduced to the world. In its first fifteen years of existence, the series published fourteen issues written by a generation of young architects trying to articulate and clarify their own ideas, processes, and rationale for “building.” Fast forward to 2015: the culture of architectural writing has evolved. Aside from the occasional exception, the majority of manifestos written by architects are now produced as part of a compilation. There are even exhibitions based on compilations of compilations. While I believe the compilation form certainly has a strong contribution to make to the culture of architecture at large, I wish to point out the decided difference in depth of investment between single-authored and collected treatises.

This returns us to the second question of this project: Why write alone? Or for that matter, why write together? In the case of *Treatise*, a Tarzan call into the forest drew out fourteen non-conformist architectural designers to produce their own treatise and to participate in an exhibition, where their selfish pursuits would amass to form this collection. Here, the act of writing alone generated an uncompromising output — a treatise unwavering in thought because it disregarded the white noise of external voices. At the same time, however, the construction of this allied peanut gallery allowed for dialogue, discourse, and ongoing debates.

Despite that, I do not intend for this series to linger: we will do its work today, while we are young and in the company of our peers. We will do it now and move on with our lives, leaving its call to be taken up by another generation. The afterlife of this project can be found on the web, as well as in the Graham Foundation’s bookshop. And in addition, its legacy will be carried out through the future undertakings of these fourteen offices.

Here, I would like to take an opportunity to acknowledge former and present members of Bureau Spectacular for their key contributions to this project, including Andrew Akins, Julia Di Castri, Matthew Messner, Jesse Hammer, and Jacob Comerci. I am also grateful for the many conversations I have had with Joanna Grant, Andrew Kovacs, and Thomas Kelley about this project; it would not be possible without them. Thanks, too, to Stanley Tigerman, for setting such a fine example. The Graham Foundation’s Ellen Alderman, Mia Khimm, and Pat Elifritz have been vital in bringing the exhibition to fruition. And most of all, I want to thank Sarah Herda, for shaking me out of apathy.

*Treatise* was made possible through the generous support of the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. It involved the time and effort of fifteen brilliant thinkers, and the support of their home institutions, particularly the University of Illinois at Chicago, where it all began. Additional funding was made possible by the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, thanks to the assistance of Kyle Reynolds. The immaculate graphic design was the result of work by Natasha Jen of Pentagram, generously produced in kind.
Bittertang
Babies and Baloney

Bittertang is a New York-based design farm run by Antonio Torres and Michael Loverich. Their work explores multiple themes, including pleasure, frothiness, biological matter, animal posturing, babies, sculpture, and coloration, all unified through bel composto. Bittertang has built three inflatable pavilions, a pregnant sugar-oozing piñata, a plush toy collection, a sagging birdcage, and edible environments.

Bureau Spectacular
The Politics of Flatness

Jimenez Lai is the founder of Bureau Spectacular, a studio of art and architectural affairs with a focus on storytelling. It is a sanctuary for misfits that imagines other worlds and engages architecture through the conflation of representation, theory, criticism, history, and taste into pages of cartoonish nonsense.

CAMES/gibson
A Performed Memoir

Grant Gibson is a Chicago-based educator, registered architect, and founding principal of CAMES/gibson, Inc., an architecture and design practice committed to creating environments and objects that are cross-pollinated with common social, political, and economic interests, as well as individual experiences and desires.

Design With Company
Mis-Guided Tactics for Propriety Calibration

Design With Company (Dw/Co) is the Chicago-based architectural collaborative of Stewart Hicks and Allison Newmeyer. Dw/Co seeks to transform the world through textual and visual narratives, speculative urban scenarios, installations, and small-scale interactive constructions.

Fake Industries Architectural Agonism
Architectural Replicas: Four Hypotheses on the Use of Agonistic Copies in the Architectural Field

Founded by Cristina Goberna and Urtzi Grau, Fake Industries Architectural Agonism (FKAA) is an entity of variable boundaries and questionable taste that provides architectural tools to mediate between citizens and institutions, the public sphere, and disciplinary knowledge.

First Office
Nine Essays

First Office was founded by Anna Neimark and Andrew Atwood in downtown Los Angeles. The practice works on topics in architecture through humor, electrical conduit, and white paint.

is-office
No Project

is-office is a Chicago-based design firm specializing in objects, interiors, and buildings. Founded by Kyle Reynolds and Jeff Mikolajewski, the firm leverages the unique agency of physical form to engage issues of culture, urbanism, lifestyle, and iconography indigenous to the modern metropolis.

Andrew Kovacs
Architectural Affinities

Andrew Kovacs is a Los Angeles-based designer and visiting assistant professor at UCLA. He has exhibited at the Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York; the Architecture and Design Museum, Los Angeles; and Jai & Jai Gallery, Los Angeles. His work on architecture and urbanism has been published in *Pidgin*, CLOG, and Domus, among others. He is the creator and curator of Archive of Affinities, a website dedicated to the architectural b-side.
Alex Maymind
Revisiting Revisiting

Alex Maymind is a Los Angeles-based designer and teacher. Since 2002, he has been studying, writing, talking, drawing, thinking, perusing, observing, making, performing, and engaging architecture in a variety of formats, venues, and mediums. His writing ranges from a genealogy of the free section to an exploration of globalization’s clichés.

Norman Kelley
Eyecon

Norman Kelley is the architecture and design collabora
tive of Carrie Norman and Thomas Kelley, based in New
York and Chicago. Their work, which includes site-
specific drawings, re-examines architecture’s relationship
to perception through deceptive optics.

Point Supreme
Athens Projects

Athens-based Point Supreme was founded by Konstantinos Pantazis and Marianna Rentzou in 2008. Through a process of research and self-initiated proposals, their practice integrates architecture, landscape, and urban design for the improvement of Athens.

SOFTlab
Identity Crisis

Founded by Michael Szivos, New York-based design studio SOFTlab operates at the intersection of architecture, art, video, and interactive media design to engage a wide range of projects through a mix of research and ideas.

SPEEDISM
The Dead Angle of Architecture

Pieterjan Ginckels is a Belgian artist and architect, whose work concerns itself with the acceleration of modern life. In 2008, Ginckels cofounded SPEEDISM with Julian Friedauer, to form a collaborative that proposes anti-methods for an increasingly theme-based, spectacular, and accelerated society.

Michael Young
The Estranged Object

Founded in 2008, Young & Ayata is a New York-based architectural design studio founded by Michael Young and Kutan Ayata. Their practice views the tensions, overlaps, and frictions created through multiple mediations as the conditions for an aesthetic of estranged realism in architecture.
Treatise: Why Write Alone?
Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies of the Fine Arts
January 23–March 28, 2015 • Chicago, IL


SPEEDISM, film still from TWO-FACED MF EASY RIDE, 2015, dual-channel video installation with sound and fog (6 min., 8 sec.). Produced by Pieterjan Ginckels, Aster DeValck and Hantrax. Courtesy of the artists.
