

MIRNY

THE PRISON OF TIME

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ABSTRACT

Speculative architecture is sometimes used by speculative architects to enhance our awareness of dystopian elements that thread their way through societies, even when a society is striving for utopian ideals. This contradiction exists because a dystopia to one person may be viewed as a utopia to another – and dystopian conditions can sometimes become so commonplace that they are no longer viewed as out of the ordinary.

The site for this design research investigation is Mirny, Yakutia, Siberia, located 450 kilometres south of the Arctic Circle – a city of almost one million people with no access by road, set in permafrost year-round. The city developed around the open pit Mirny diamond mine that once brought wealth to the community; but while the diamonds are now mostly gone, the mine remains – one of the largest, toxic open holes in the world. With the depletion of diamonds, the city became largely forgotten, but the population remained. Yakutia is defined by the enormous pit and its decades-old, never-changing, Soviet-era architecture – lost in time. The utopian ideal from which the city was born is now shrouded in dystopian

conditions. But the people, those born in the city who have lived there all their lives, have known nothing else; they remain unaware of the utopian/dystopian contradiction.

This thesis looks at how transformations within our evolving built environments can result in contradiction. It challenges speculative architecture to enhance our ability to recognise such contradictions, distinguishing between utopian and dystopian urban conditions when they simultaneously define a city.

PREFACE

Picture a young Lithuanian woman: a highly educated, hardworking yet low earning engineer, tough as a nut and forever optimistic about the future. Now picture a young Russian man: a secondary school graduate, a carpenter with exceptional artistic and handcraft skills who does not shy away from a bottle of vodka complemented by aggressive behaviour.

These two people were the parents and primary role models to a girl, who was born in a small town in Lithuania at the dawn of the country’s independence from Soviet repression. The girl grew up subjected to the strong cultural, political, economic and social influences in a seemingly independent country. However, Lithuania wasn’t independent; it was reeling from 50 years of extreme authority from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

That girl is me and this thesis is an exploration, translation and reflection of my heritage, told through series of collages in the form of an architectural narrative.

Look into my soul, I know – everything you need is in there. It has to be. Because I’ve never sold my soul to anyone! It’s mine, it’s human! Figure out yourself what I want – because I know it can’t be bad! The hell with it all, I just can’t think of a thing other than those words of his – HAPPINESS, FREE, FOR EVERYONE, AND LET NO ONE BE FORGOTTEN!

- Arkady and Borris Strugatsky, Roadside Picnic

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INTRODUCTION	11
THE PRISON OF TIME	16
THEORY AND PRACTICE	26
NARRATIVE	26
CURATION	35
COLLAGE	42
PROPAGANDA	51
THE DESIGN	55
CONCLUSION	91
BIBLIOGRAPHY	92
SOURCE OF FIGURES	95

INTRODUCTION

As a young New Zealander born in Lithuania, to parents who were born and raised in Soviet Union, I find importance in bridging the gap between the environment of my upbringing and the culture of my development as an adult. I find myself intrigued by the differences between the two worlds followed by an astounding realisation – unless I have left the ex-Soviet Russian country and the continent of Europe, these differences would not have become recognisable to me. It is only upon me being removed from one, and thrown into a completely different world, that allows me to truly appreciate the country I grew up in.

Every single aspect of life in New Zealand - from the norm of smiling and saying “Hello” to the checkout person at a supermarket to knowing that \$50 bribe on the side of the road will not get you out of a speeding ticket - is peculiar, wondrous and antipodal. The difference between countries, cultures and environments becomes blatantly obvious; with no point of reference I stumble through years of learning new cultural norms, slowly realising that it is all embodied in the kaleidoscope of experience, knowledge

and cultural identity that each country provides.

As I approach the subject of this architecture thesis I seek to explore and emphasise the contextual meaning of cultural identity of remote cities. Having personally learned the experience of shifting contexts, I pursue an architectural approach which would allow me to engage and show the occupants of remote settings the context they live in.

A classic phrase “You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone” may somewhat ring true to the essence of this thesis, however I believe the more accurate version is “You don’t know what you’ve got until it is placed in or against alternative context, that allows you to see the value and beauty that has been unnoticed before”.

In 1972 Arkady and Boris Strugatsky wrote a novel Roadside Picnic (Пикник на обочине) which will assume the role of a provocateur for my master’s thesis; this novel was also a theme of the seminal 1979 Soviet Russian film Stalker (Сталкер) by Andrei Tarkovsky. The context for the

storyline is a dystopian/ utopian reality that acts as a metaphor for the human subconscious with a short glance to human soul.

The narrative of the book, and consequently the film, presents the audience with a town that has been visited by extra-terrestrial life form in an unnamed part of the world. However, having had no interest in establishing any contact with humans, the aliens departed leaving a trail of waste behind. What is one man's (or in this case alien's) trash is another man's treasure, and the authors of this extraordinary book have translated the well-known phrase into a multi-dimensional story. This presents us with a narrative about humanity as a whole, as well as a story about a human individual seeking to find happiness in a place of horror, pain and death.

The book is rife with political allegory and the inner struggles of a "Russian lit" protagonist. Set within a dystopian environment, the book is a metaphorical translation of a tale where the search for "self" manifests by separating "self" into multiple components in order to see "self" from multiple perspectives, and allowing for in-depth understanding of the true nature of a human being. In this sense, the novel is structured as a collage conceived to facilitate greater understanding of the unknown. The Strugatsky brothers approached the difficult and extensive subject of Soviet politics, fuelled

by the desire for economic benefit, by deconstructing and filtering it through multiple perspectives of a society formed, in this case, around a supernatural event.

This thesis will adopt the approach used in Roadside Picnic by recognising and assessing the dystopian qualities of a context that are unrecognised by the context's inhabitants; just as it took the "stalker" Redrick Schuhart (the narrative's protagonist and guide) to conduct new inhabitants through the alien-made labyrinth and open their eyes to its true meaning, enabling them to recognise dystopia and utopia coexisting. This thesis investigation will look at how speculative architecture might achieve a similar goal to this novel and film.

The problem is we don't notice the years pass, he thought. Screw the years—we don't notice things change. We know that things change, we've been told since childhood that things change, we've witnessed things change ourselves many a time, and yet we're still utterly incapable of noticing the moment that change comes—or we search for change in all the wrong places.

- Arkady and Borris Strugatsky, Roadside Picnic

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Figs 1.1 & 1.2 STALKER MOVIE POSTERS (1972)

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Much of the creative work of the Soviet Union – painting, film, music, poetry, and even propaganda posters – had an enormous impact on global culture. Some of this work also brought to the forefront the dystopian elements that threaded their way through Soviet society, even within the context of a vibrant culture in search of utopian ideals. This contradiction between utopia and dystopia has become increasingly inherent in cities of the twenty-first century facing rapid expansion and rapidly changing global ideals. For the purpose of this thesis I choose to explore this notion by geographically limiting the scope to Russia, therefore selecting the town of Mirny in Siberia, Russia that simultaneously showcases utopian and dystopian qualities through its birth and development in the past six decade period.

The aim of this thesis sits within use of Mirny as a vehicle to explore and answer the research question (below) fuelled by four architectural theories as objectives.

(How) can speculative architecture be used to present dystopian qualities and perspectives to utopian inhabitants of a town that is architecturally, socially and politically imprisoned in the tomb of time?

This thesis will therefore explore if and how certain transformations within our evolving societies and built environments can result in contradiction. It raises a challenge for speculative architecture to enhance our ability to distinguish between utopian and dystopian urban conditions when they simultaneously define a city.

Three architectural and art theories commonly utilised in the early Soviet regime will fuel this explorative work. As the primary focus is to narrate the town's story to its occupants in a very particular context using the language that the audience is familiar with, I find it appropriate to use narrative, curation, collage and propaganda as objective approaches to architecture.

As I go through objectives one by one, starting with narration, I find them intertwining with one another. Narrative shapes simultaneous events into a sequence that then stimulates one's imagination as the plot grows in ability to be interpreted. Likewise, in architecture, the linearity of narrative function dissipates as the spatial dimension meets the time element. This theory is explored by Nigel Coates in his book called Narrative Architecture. Coates investigates the ability of narrative to fictionalise our surroundings in effort to accentuate the true reality. Rem Koolhaas celebrates this notion in his project called Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture. There, Koolhaas challenges the country's social and political

movements by presenting us with a series of collages that showcase a walled city in the middle of London. The gated community is a parody to consumer society in an elaborate and ironic narrative of belief in the autonomies promised for the youth culture.

Assessing Koolhaas's project we find evidence in narrative's capacity to induce generation of personal constructs against a particular context. Carson Chan, an American curator, equates such notion to curating architecture as a subject matter instead of architecture simply housing exhibits of axiomatic art. He then proceeds on outworking this theory by curating Denver's Biennial of the Americas 2013 art and architecture exhibition.

In juxtaposition we find Viktor Shklovsky and his essay Art as Device. Shklovsky speaks of defamiliarisation as a tool for an artistic production of information that imparts the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. This is closely followed by the well renowned artist's Marcel Duchamp's Fountain as an extremely controversial exhibit resonating its polemic nature all through the 20th century.

Drawing inspiration from Rem Koolhaas, I find it fitting to utilise collage as a vehicle that will carry the narrative against a particular context. Diane Waldman argues of potential merits found in assemblage of individual pieces

that each hold a value, highlighting the metamorphosis of the new found object. This is reiterated by Danish architect Nils-Ole Lund who fosters the idea that the modern architecture doesn't hold timeless value and proceeds into assembling two – dimensional collages that challenge the notion of utopia and the built object. Somewhat curious, heavily inclined toward satire, his collages speak truth of modern architecture and its failures.

The chapter is closed off by looking at how collages were utilised for mass communication in the form of propaganda purposes in Soviet Russia. Propaganda itself being a value-free term, generally carries negative connotations due to its intricate use in the times of crisis for political agenda spread to an entire country. Means were simple and understandable even by illiterate citizens. Posters – sharp, attractive and to the point, as well as exploiting ancient prejudices, showing a good knowledge of how people think and using the techniques that sway opinion.

This thesis is a simple exploration of the notion of propaganda in conjunction to curated narrative through series of collages that may tell a story of a town submerged in the past with bleak outlook for the future.

THE PRISON OF TIME

There are very few countries in the world that are full of simultaneously utopian and dystopian qualities. Characteristically, these qualities arise from countries' social, political and economic accounts, typically subjected to extreme organisational suppression. The dichotomy of utopian and dystopian realms evolves through reactive response to events happening out of communities' control.

The basis of this thesis is to explore speculative architecture's capacity to present dystopian qualities and perspectives to utopian inhabitants of a town that is architecturally, socially and politically stuck in time. A small town of Mirny in Siberia, Russia presents us with unique traits of these dichotomies created by the state apparatus of Soviet Russia socialist regime.

Virtually mythological site has come to light in 1954. In the depths of Siberia Soviet geologists have discovered a high content of diamond mineral present in soil samples taken from Siberian Vilyul river. This resulted in tracing the paths of the garnet veins leading to major

discovery of kimberlite pipe that fed the Mir mine for the previous millennia. Hostile environmental conditions that surrounded the region did not stop the Soviet government nor the determined engineers and labourers making the open-pit mining operations last for almost 50 years. Today the outcome can be seen from space – over one-kilometre-wide gaping hole in the ground scarring the surrounding Siberian landscape.

This thesis will not address the environmental impact the open-pit mining has had upon the landscape, though evidently the scar of this scale is simply irreversible. Instead it will look at the scar as a phenomenon, or an article, with architectonics and community that have formed alongside and around this mine providing us with an unparalleled narrative opportunity.

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A picnic. Imagine: a forest, a country road, a meadow. A car pulls off the road into the meadow and unloads young men, bottles, picnic baskets, girls, transistor radios, cameras ... A fire is lit, tents are pitched, music is played. And in the morning they leave. The animals, birds, and insects that were watching the whole night in horror crawl out of their shelters. And what do they see? An oil spill, a gasoline puddle, old spark plugs and oil filters strewn about ... Scattered rags, burnt-out bulbs, someone has dropped a monkey wrench. The wheels have tracked mud from some godforsaken swamp ... and, of course, there are the remains of the campfire, apple cores, candy wrappers, tins, bottles, someone's handkerchief, someone's penknife, old ragged newspapers, coins, wilted flowers from another meadow ... "I get it," said Noonan. "A roadside picnic."

- Arkady and Borris Strugatsky, Roadside Picnic

Fig 2.1 MIR MINE AS SEEN FROM SPACE

Mirny town was founded in the most peculiar of circumstances. As Soviet Russia was reeling from the Second World War, the discovery of the Kimberlite deposit in Siberia could not have been timed better from economics point of view. The ruling of the Socialist Party in post-war agendas was oppressive with little consideration for an individual. Rather, the focus was directed toward prioritisation of industry growth and development. At 62.5° N, sitting a few degrees below the Arctic Circle, the newly discovered soil full of diamonds was the ultimate target – financial, intellectual and technical resources were heavily allocated to establish a commercial size and capacity open-pit mine.

Due to the remote locality of the hidden wealth, it was impractical to transport workers and equipment to and from the region. The solution appeared to be simple – build a settlement for the workers on the edge of the mine. Over the following couple of decades, as the mine capacity and size expanded, the settlement has become self-sufficient – an appealing selection of shops, schools, hospital, museums, sports and recreation facilities, diamond ore processing facility and an airport – all for a population of forty thousand people and millions of tons of diamonds.

The period at the time of the town development was ripe with political allegory. Soviet Russia was rising from the

proverbial ashes, spreading its wings, getting ready to fly into the world. Every aspect of Russia’s labour spoke greatness – everyone is equal, no one is forgotten, happiness for everyone – unyielding propaganda. Naturally, art and architecture were a very large part of this masquerade - mouthpieces projecting doctrines carrying immoral intentions. Messages were short and to the point, most of them unspoken. They were presented by contemporary Russian artists who refused to move away from constructivism as a form of expression until post-modernism had taken place in the world. Such an expressive style, with the creative license to build colossal sized structures and statues in order to express the power and immenseness of the nation, produced some persuasive political results.

With the fall of the Soviet Union and Western influences flooding in, large concrete structures are now scattered across Russia, standing the test of time, narrating the story of their times; but only a few are listening. People living amongst these concrete giants are oblivious of the story they have to tell, pushing them into the background of the mundane. Despite Mother Russia largely taking on external influences in art and architecture in the post-Soviet era, the remoteness of Mirny deprived this little town of further development, effectively leaving it at the threshold of the new age.

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Fig 2.2 MIRNY TOWN LOCALE

Fig 2.3 MIRNY TOWN ENTRY SIGN

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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Fig 2.4 SOVIET PROPAGANDA IMAGES LITTERING SIDES OF BUILDINGS

Fig 2.5 SOVIET PROPAGANDA IMAGES LITTERING SIDES OF BUILDINGS

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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Fig 2.6 MIRNY POWER PLANT. COLOSSAL IN SIZE, IT SPEAKS OF POWER

Fig 2.7 MEMORIAL TO THE PIONEERS OF DIAMOND PROSPECTING

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Fig 2.8 MIRNY TOWN ON THE EDGE OF THE MINE

Today the town of Mirny features a unique variation of Stalinist architecture assemblies. From enormous statues silently telling a semi-fictional story of the three brave explorers who pioneered the Mir mine to the classic “Krushchevkas” – apartment buildings occupied by people who choose to advocate the instigated fiction over truth.

Adopting architectural communication approaches, which are discussed in the following chapter, this thesis looks at ways of how to tell a story of Mirny town to its residents through varying perspectives that they may not have considered before.

Fig 2.9 MIRNY TOWN AERIAL VIEW

25

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THEORY & PRACTICE

NARRATIVE

Three architectural theories commonly utilised in the early Soviet regime will fuel the explorative work of this thesis. As the primary focus is to narrate the town’s story to its occupants against a very particular context using the language that the audience is familiar with, I find it appropriate to utilise narrative, curation, and collage with propagandistic qualities as approaches to architecture.

Storytelling and architecture are as old as time. The two notions have mutually coexisted in societies for millennia, rarely crossing each other’s paths. Nigel Coates, an English architect, presents us with an all-encompassing argument that accommodates narrative and architecture in a singular realm. Coates’ book Narrative Architecture explores the potential for narrative as a way of interpreting buildings throughout the history of time. It demonstrates the importance of narrative as a design approach that can enable architecture to remain relevant in this complex and multi-disciplinary age.

Coates begins the argument by stating that narrative is a category of rhetoric. Along with exposition, argumentation

and description, the constructed format of a narrative extends beyond speech and into poetry, singing, writing, drama, cinema and games. Narration shapes and simplifies events into a sequence that can stimulate the imagination, followed by the prospect of the story being retold – verbally, graphically or spatially. As the dynamics of the plot unfolds involving shifts in time, location and circumstance, the story tends to progress along a sequential trajectory (Coates, 59).

In architecture, the linearity of narrative function becomes suspended as the spatial dimension interferes with time (Coates, 59). The narrative approach depends on a parallel code adding depth to the basic architectural language. The time element is always shifting in response to the immutability of the physical structure. While permanence is celebrated as an architectural quality, inevitably one should be intrigued about the opposite. The difference between a mere image and a work of art lies partly in its endurance of existence and of meaning. In architecture, that endurance is both positive and negative, depending of public perception (Coates, 60).

Physical parts of a space denote meaning as a result of actions and experiences of the participant, who in return assembles them into a personal construct (Coates, 60). The narrative coefficient resides in a system of triggers that carry poetic capacity supplemented by functionality of space. Narrative, therefore, means that the object contains some other existence in parallel to its function. This object has been invested with a fictional plane of signification that renders it transient, mercurial and subject to interpretation (Coates, 60). Whilst a conventional narrative in a work of fiction binds characters, events and places within a principal plot framework, a physical environment narrative carries all of the above (Coates, 61).

Narrative “fictionalises” our surroundings in an accentuation of explicit “reality”.
—Nigel Coates, Narrative Architecture

Similarly, Umberto Eco reinforces the narrative argument by stating that narrative communicates subtly and unpredictably, often performing better when hidden rather than overt. Narrative, according to Eco is a connotation, rather than a denotation, implying its proximity to function without being the function itself. It is a paradigm of the temple that represents God it houses rather than the denotive meaning of the act of worship. In a world of postmodern and post-structuralist perception, the term “narrative” brings significance to a level of meaning that substantiates the object whilst containing an animated inner quality that interprets human actions in relation to place (Eco, 15).

Beginning of 1970s was submerged in architectural challenges and revolutions. As Archigram movement thrived influencing conceptual architects around the globe, not being an exception, in 1972 Rem Koolhaas produced the Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture. It was an east-west strip across central London that would draw citizens to the perfect world inside its high walls (Coates, 65). The project was born from Koolhaas's fascination with the effect of Cold War in cities like New York, London and Moscow. Drawing strong references from Russian Suprematists, Koolhaas proposed a vast and highly compartmentalised enclosure across central London into which much of the population would voluntarily migrate to be part of a freer and more ideal world within the walls.

The project resonated with the Berlin Wall, acting as a parody to consumer society in an elaborate and ironic narrative of belief in the autonomies promised for the youth culture (Coates, 65). The wall became a condition of freedom by self-imprisonment. Voluntarily segregated, people find shelter within the walls of a prison of metropolitan scale (Lucarelli, 2011). This intervention was designed to create a new urban culture invigorated by architectural innovation and political subversion. Here Koolhaas uses collage to create vivid scenes of life within these visionary urban confines. The collages are supplemented by a short narrative providing a backdrop

to the depicted scenes.

Driven by the monotony of their day-to-day lives, citizens of London would queue at the gates of this equivocal paradise. Having passed scrupulous inspection, they would be admitted as permanent residents in a series of compounds where perfection of the new life would be assured (Coates, 65).

Coates argues that the project was a complete vision oppression to the possibility of a novel or a movie spanning all scales. With it utopia seems to have acquired a conceptual death that prevented it from regaining the attraction it had had in the previous decade reducing Communism to a caricature long before the collapse of the Soviet Union (Coates, 65).

Remarkably, Koolhaas argues that seductive nature of this vision of power indicates an equivalence between social code and physical framework that supports it making a self-satirising utopia suggest an absence of narrative. Coates adds that Communism had never really provided a dense or humane language to constitute a narrative with any colour, contrast or surprise. In this sense it was simply a counterfeit version of Modernism, in which the society mimicked the machine (Coates, 65).

Koolhaas project challenged the notion of narrative through addressing a seemingly narrativeless environment in the context of time. Observing and analysing the collages depicting an alternative world, one cannot help but conceive personal constructs against their own individual contexts, experiences and knowledge (Coates, 60).

Originally no more than some pathetic strings of barbed wire abruptly dropped on the imaginary line of the border, its psychological and symbolic effects were infinitely more powerful than its physical appearance. The Good Half, now glimpsed only over the forbidding obstacle from an agonizing distance, became even more irresistible. Those trapped, left behind in the gloomy Bad Half, became obsessed with vain plans for escape. Hopelessness reigned supreme on the wrong side of the Wall. As so often before in this history of mankind, architecture was the guilty instrument of despair.

- Rem Koolhaas. Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture

Fig 3.1 EXODUS. AERIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Fig 3.2 EXODUS. THE WALL

Fig 3.3 EXODUS. THE PRISONERS

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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Fig 3.4 EXODUS. THE PRISONERS

CURATION

Personal constructs arising from observing a narrative generates a unique collection in one's mind. When such collection is subjected to a specific context, it begins to carry a capacity to manifest itself in an alternative subject and contextual background. One could identify such presentation of imaginary and memorial collections as a form of curation. This thesis will therefore partly adopt a curatorial approach enabling the exploration of the narrative in varying contexts and perspectives.

The term "architecture" generally refers to any complex structure – it represents conceptual framework and logical organisation of systems. The phrase "curating architecture" therefore becomes gradated, implying curation of architecture (physical structure) as subject matter is performed in parallel with the structural process of curating (Chan, Hugill, & Busch, 2016).

Viktor Shklovsky in his essay Art as Device argues that it is a synthesis between the two interpretations, however the phrase "curating architecture" solely relies on its defamiliarising effect. Strategic out of context use

of axiomatic artefacts prolongs the active process of perception, enabling critical thought. The link between defamiliarisation and architecture is the temporality of perception, whether in built environment or in the virtual forms of infrastructure space (Shklovsky, 12).

Defamiliarisation refers to the artistic production of information that imparts the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.

—Viktor Shklovsky, Art as Device

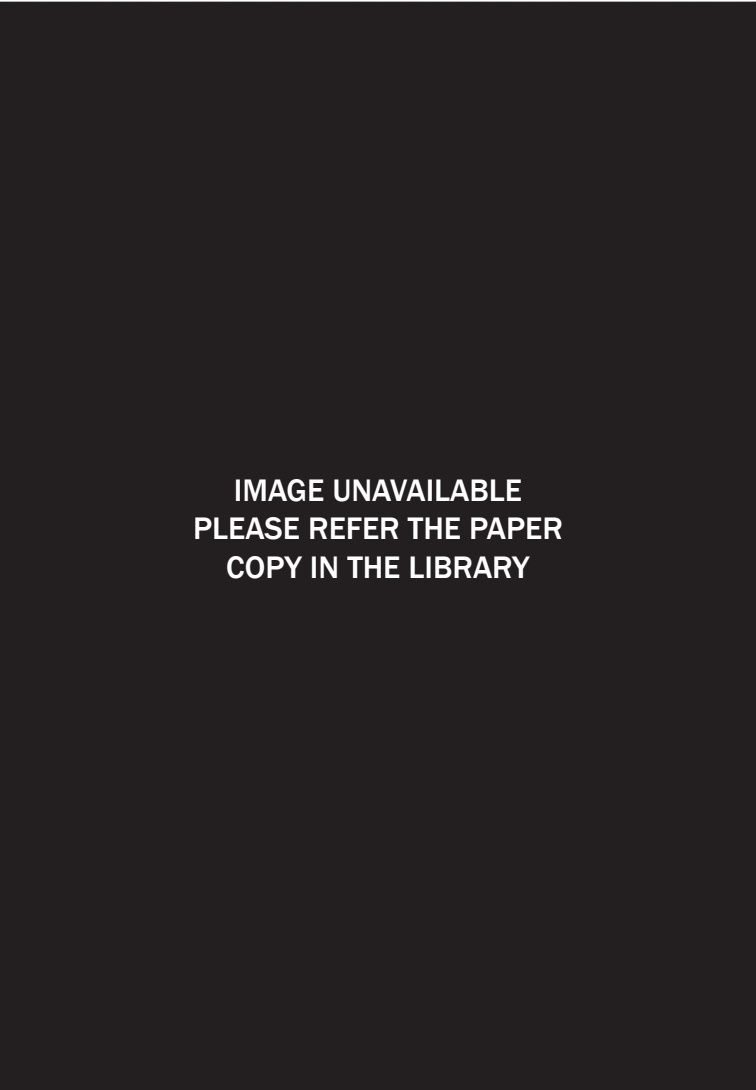
The well renowned French artist Marcel Duchamp has pioneered this theory in the early 20th century. The legend of the controversial Fountain – a rudimentary urinal purchased from a plumbing supplies store and placed upside-down as a work of art in an un-juried exhibition. The story continues with extensive discussions amongst artists and art critics around the world arguing the legitimacy of the un-juried exhibition board’s rights to reject the submission.

Beatrice Wood, an Avant Garde movement artist, has outlined the importance of the Fountain stating:

“Whether the artist with his own hands made the fountain or not, has no importance. He chose it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.”

This trigger of a new movement of “readymades” conquers exhibition spaces even today. Existing objects taken from real life are modified or re-contextualised to function as works of art. The idea at hand, of art primarily as a concept rather than an object, is what makes Fountain arguably the most intellectually captivating and challenging art piece of the 20th century (Mann, 2017). (The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp, 1975)

Fig 3.5
ALFRED STIEGLITZ PHOTOGRAPH OF MARCEL DUCHAMP’S FOUNTAIN, 1917



Juxtaposition to the Fountain can be seen in Carson Chan’s work as an executive curator for Denver’s Biennial of the Americas 2013 art and architecture exhibition Draft Urbanism.

Chan challenged the notion of conventional architecture exhibitions where the compulsion of placing model buildings inside gallery space was an accepted norm. Instead he chose to address the opportunity to engage the physical city as an exhibition. Chan turned downtown Denver into a giant display, showcasing art on all the downtown billboards as well as placing museum labels on buildings themselves.

They observed that simply placing a label on a building, they were able to transform something that people generally walk past into an object of display. Chan notes that estrangement, paradoxically, allows us to become familiarised with the already familiar (Chan, Hugill, & Busch, 2016).



Fig 3.6 - 3.14
BILLBOARDS BY VARIOUS ARTISTS FROM DENVER BIENALLE CURATED BY CARSON CHAN, 2013



Fig 3.15 - 3.23
BILLBOARDS BY VARIOUS ARTISTS FROM DENVER BIENALLE CURATED BY CARSON CHAN, 2013

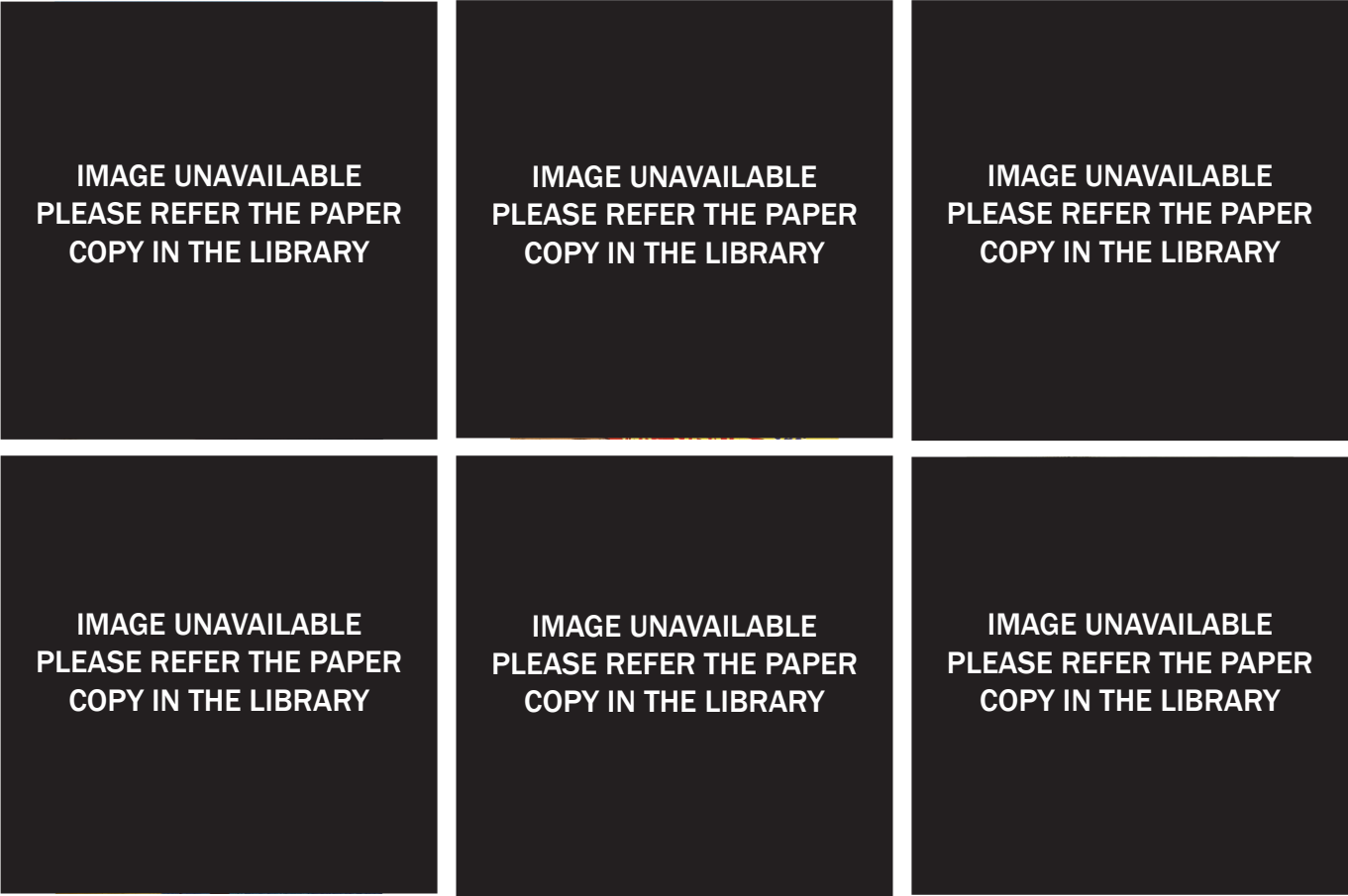


Fig 3.24 - 3.29
BILLBOARDS BY VARIOUS ARTISTS FROM DENVER BIENALLE CURATED BY CARSON CHAN, 2013

“Because buildings have such symbolic and representational significance, I think it’s particularly important in the digital age to engage the public with the physicality of the lived world.”

- Carson Chan

COLLAGE

Reflecting upon the narrative and curatorial approach to storytelling, the vehicle which will carry the narrative of this thesis plays huge importance. Previously discussed Rem Koolhaas presented his work as a collage – an assembly of pictorial motifs and fragments from disconnected origins into a new synthetic entity that casts new roles and adds new meanings to its parts. Collage, together with montage, are quintessential techniques in modern and contemporary art and filmmaking. It offers new narratives, dialogues, juxtapositions and temporal durations. Its elements lead double-lives; the collaged ingredients are suspended between their ordinary essences and the new roles assigned to them by the poetic ensemble.

Collage is the noble conquest of the irrational, the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them.

—Max Ernst.

Collage and assemblage are favoured techniques of artistic representation in our time; these media enable an archaeological density and non-linear narrative through the juxtaposition of fragmented images deriving from irreconcilable origins. Collage invigorates the experience of tactility and time.

—Juhani Pallasmaa

Starting with the reiteration of the flat plane, particularly seen in the imitation of wood-grained wallpaper in papiers collés by the legendary Picasso, the newly established art form has culminated into a new way of representing and investigating the potentialities of three-dimensional space in a two-dimensional medium. Collage facilitated a new conception for the representation of space.

A collage as a work of art consists of the assembly of various fragments of materials, combined in a manner that gives the composition a new meaning, beyond those inherent in any of the individual fragments. According to Diane Waldman in Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object, a collage has several levels of meaning: “the original identity of the fragment or object and all of the history it brings with it; the new meaning it gains in association with other objects or elements; and the meaning it acquires as the result of its metamorphosis into a new entity” (Waldman, 23). Simultaneity of spatial, material, and intellectual content is inherent in collage through a synthesis of unrelated fragments, as the process of construction remains evident in the resulting work.

Collage was developed as a new method of spatial representation – particularly evidenced in Cubism, where aspects of daily life were represented through abstraction, material juxtapositions, fragmentation and synthesis

of form, cataloguing spatial and material qualities of commonplace subjects. The bold geometric forms of the Cubist collage were quickly adopted by artists outside France including the Soviet Union, while political unrest in Europe leading up to World War I saw the appropriation of collage for political and sociocultural purposes. The Italian Futurists soon responded to the radical shift in representation initiated by Cubists, incorporating issues relating to modern technology, fascinated by the speed, industrialisation and dynamism of modern life (Shields, 35).

Russian Avant-Garde followed the trend of shifts in visual representation. Starting with Futurism and Suprematism and evolving into Constructivism, Russian Avant-Garde was highly politicised, the goal being to direct art towards a social purpose and demonstrate the ideals of new society. Faceted with tumultuous political upheaval at home, artists, architects and writers chose to stay instead of leaving the motherland, and they actively engaged and responded to the new social and economic order (Shields, 56). It was the atmosphere of political revolution that forced these people to seek new modes of expression, looking to folk art and icons for inspiration. The newly elevated status of a peasant in Russia became an iconic symbol and a prime focus of Russian Avant-Garde artists.

Fig 3.30 TATLIN'S TOWER, 1915

In 1915, Vladimir Tatlin, a Russian painter and architect, began series of constructions assembled from industrial materials, claiming that “real materials in real space” will give the power to his work to transform the society. Tatlin drew his inspiration from Picasso and presented his first set of “painterly reliefs”. Four years later Tatlin was commissioned by the Department of Fine Arts to erect a monument in the centre of Moscow. This resulted in Tatlin producing a Monument to the Third International. Although Tatlin did not live to see this project realised at full scale, the project proved to be of lasting value. The Monument to the Third International is a hybrid structure, an architectural collage, the emblem of Tatlin’s union of painting, sculpture, and architecture. As such it represents an architectural parallel of his initial commitment to the counter-reliefs, themselves a hybrid of painting and sculpture. In this way, Tatlin demonstrated his willingness to break down the barriers of conventions that separated one from the other. His example provided inspiration to numerous artists in the twentieth century who wished to synthesise painting and sculpture and create new art from this union as well as influencing the Minimalist movement in Europe and America in the mid-1960s.

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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Danish architect Nils-Ole Lund fosters the idea that modern architecture doesn’t hold timeless value. Between utopia and irony, Lund produces collages to reveal a subtle political satire of current times and the negative effects of architectural profession on landscape and cities (Lucarelli, 2012).

By means of his collages he comments on, satirizes and attacks what his profession, architecture, does to landscapes, cities and individual houses. He acts with comprehensive knowledge of an architectural historian and theoretician who makes visible beyond distances in space and time dimensions of artistic and historical depth by putting together seemingly heterogeneous elements into new unities which also develop aesthetic and philosophical qualities of their own (Thomsen, 18).

Lund combines in his photo-collages seemingly realistic, heterogeneous elements into new homogeneous unities which pretend never to have been heterogeneous in first instance. By this method he creates artificial realities, buildings put together out of fragments of existing buildings, frequently in a strange or exotic environment, which claim to represent buildings that exist.

Lund is convinced that architectural utopias were usually conceived as dreams to improve existing bad housing situations or socio-economic conditions of urban life

(Thomsen, 19). For him utopias regularly turned into nightmares as soon as people tried to realise them. The reason for that lies in the rigidity of uniform concepts which soon reveal intolerant, authoritarian qualities of suppression. Even Scandinavians in their satellite cities are not free from such conceptions, which, of course, in Lund’s individualistic opinion are misconceptions.

The collage for Lund is a simile for reality; it comes pretty close to what reality is in a modern town, in democracy, or in a market-oriented liberal economy. A town necessarily has to be a collage, composed of fragments which originally drew their meaning from different contexts. Town planning, the architect and teacher of urban planning in him postulates, only making sense if it proceeds according to the compositional principles of the collage (Thomsen, 19). Contrasts, oppositions, transitions, and gradually changing developments must be constructed in order to reconstruct the town. Lund reiterates: “For the town to come back to life, one has to accept the collage-like reality and to act in accordance with it as urban interconnections redevelop.”

With a conception like this, city, life and world can only be understood as collages, and here Lund is not far from Italo Calvino’s poetic conception of the city as developed in Invisible Cities. He proves that the desire for classical harmony may well be a stimulus for a designer, but such

classical harmony may well be a stimulus for a designer, but such classical harmony, at least in the modern context, does not exist. Each of his pictures has at least one story behind it, usually it combines several. But they also tell ambivalent stories to the viewer, to whom they offer ample opportunities for differing interpretations. It is fun to trace the origins of images, however too much knowledge may be obstructive to a genuine aesthetic evaluation and enjoyment. These collages develop a life of their own and they tell different stories to different people.

“Reaching paradise is uninteresting, but the road to paradise or to all those other fantastic and exotic places may be full of marvellous surprises.”

—Nils-Ole Lund, Collage Architecture

Fig 3.31 NILS-OLE LUND COLLAGE FIRST THE BUILDING, THEN THE SITE, 1982

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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Fig 3.32 NILS-OLE LUND COLLAGE THE TOWER OF BABEL, 1970

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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Fig 3.33 NILS-OLE LUND COLLAGE ARCHITECTURAL OUTLOOK, 1986

Fig 3.34 NILS-OLE LUND COLLAGE COLLAGE CITY, 1980

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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PROPAGANDA

Collage was not only used for the expression of artists' ideas, opinions and beliefs; it was an effective form of communication to masses in the form of propaganda. Generally associated with negative applications, propaganda in actuality is a value-free term. It is defined as a systematic propagation of a doctrine, cause or information reflecting the views and interests of those advocating such dogma (Ellul, 54). Propaganda manifests in multiple forms – magazines, posters, social media, news and advertisement – some argue even the architecture. Propaganda acted as one of the main communication tools in and throughout the existence of Soviet Russia naturally having huge influence upon the development of art, architecture and social format.

Soviets, particularly Bolsheviks, utilised Soviet propaganda posters as a solution to spreading the revolutionary fervor to illiterate population. In the early years of the Soviet Union, propaganda posters were used to spread literacy while at the same time indoctrinating the masses in Marxist-Leninist thought. When the Civil War (1918-1921) broke out, the poster became a weapon – glorification of

October Revolution, pushing people to join Red Army and vilify the White Army.

The means of communicating through pictorial medium were simple and understandable even by illiterate citizens. Posters – sharp, attractive and to the point, as well as exploiting ancient prejudices, showing a good knowledge of how people think and using the techniques that sway opinion. Without any attempts to address the rhetoric, the posters were generally understandable in the blink of an eye from a distance.

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Conversely, in 1919 El Lissitzky, Russian painter and designer, produced a politically charged propagandistic work in support to Red Army called Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge. The red wedge being the symbol of the revolutionaries infiltrating the anti-Communist White Army. Lissitzky uses colour coding (red, white and black) reinforcing the message indicated in the poster title. Directly symbolic, the shapes and colours speak of Red Army invading the Whites. The vivid colour contrast achieves perplexed perception of positive and negative spaces opening up a plateau for interpretation. Lissitzky’s work carries Suprematist qualities (appropriate in the art scene at the time) that are exceptionally minimalistic but have influenced the works of many designers in the 20th century.

The following chapter of this thesis will explore the notion of propaganda in conjunction to curated narrative through series of collages that tell a story of a town submerged in the past with bleak outlook for the future.

Fig 3.35 EL LISSITZKY, BEAT THE WHITES WITH THE RED WEDGE, 1919



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The investigation of narrative, curation, and collage, as design theories have enabled me to produce images with potential to contain a story. It is my intent to utilise the techniques outlined in the previous chapter to explore whether the produced images “speak” of Mirny town as a place of frozen time, imprisoned architecture and population who is oblivious to blatant propaganda right in front of their eyes.

The following images are structured and presented in a form of a catalogue, just like one could be found in an art gallery upon an exhibition. Each image or set of images are paired up with a short description telling a hypothetical story. The stories begin with simple imagery, reflecting my journey of assembling collages, exploring the design principles presented in the case studies. They progress through into somewhat disconnected, elaborate, brave, silly, creepy or whimsical stories that provide various perspectives to the viewer allowing to understand what this isolated town is hiding behind the face of monumental architecture.

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... our plane shakes as we descend. The pilot appears to be bored as he navigates the small contraption around the mine getting ready for landing. I glance out the window and observe a man in a boat. The river looks calm, only a few ripples in the water as the fisherman struggles to reel in his catch. How lucky are few who get to enjoy the glistening of the gem fish. I should have brought my fishing rod ...

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... from the darkness they look toward the light. They come close to the edge, but never leave the shadows. They stare at one another waiting for the signal ...

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... entombed he lays silent. His lips don't speak of history,
and they will never tell the future. The truth is in there; all
you have to do is look ...

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... they call it stairway to riches. How low you can go is
stated on the reverse side of your ticket ...

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... the snow has melted long ago and the waters have finally receded. As the ships leaned quietly on their sides, the crew set out to explore the new found grounds. Remnants of civilization bring sorrow to their faces, but they plough on, no time left to waste ...

66

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... legend has it she is hollow. But how can the guardian
be hollow? If the safety is within the one who's full of love
and care, she cannot be hollow! I suggest we open her up
and find out ...

... there is something peculiar about the world on its side.
There is nothing stopping these little houses from falling
off it. Nothing holding little spaghetti-like roads in place. Is
gravity stronger here?

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... It's a bird, It's a plane, It's a Super Soviet Man!

Super powers include but are not limited to:

- Ruling the nation
- Winning Second World War
- Leading the nation into nuclear age
- Triggering wars in other countries

72

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... I found a postcard in my grandma's photo album the other day. She looked at it with nostalgia and incomprehensible sadness in her eyes. She took a deep breath, smiled and said:
—Your grandpa sent it to me from Mirny. He loved it there...

73

74

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... the beach was mostly empty when we got there. Only a couple of holiday makers enjoying themselves, watching Krushchevkas play in the sun ...

75

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... as the Tyranny grew, the buildings got taller. To make space for more Tyranny. Power lines struggled to keep up with vertical expansion; clambering over the top of one another in effort to see what's behind the Tyranny ...

78

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... the front line in full swing. The battle is abandoned upon
a discovery of a new and rapidly approaching threat ...

79

80

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... the glorious aftermath. They leave as they came - tidy formation, silent engines hum away. The enemy burns to the ground, the world is safe once again ...

81

82

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... have you ever seen past, present and future at the same time? Have you ever wondered about the changes a landscape goes through during millennia of pokes, prods and attacks? Have you ever considered what it feels as we rip it apart and piece it back together? Have you ever noticed the silent tears on its face? ...

83

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... the invisible symbol of proletarian solidarity quietly
hovers over the region. It whispers to peasants and
working class alike:

— We are one, we are united, we are powerful ...

86

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE
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... she still hides in there - waiting, listening, learning. The loneliness no longer scares her, she got used to isolation. Sometimes, when she is feeling extra brave, she will look up, perhaps even touch the toys scattered randomly at her side ...

87

The presented collages act a medium of presenting the narrative of Mirny to the town's occupants and outsiders alike. The stories reflect issues as observed by an outsider in a propagandistic manner. Drawing close references from the works of Rem Koolhaas, Nils-Ole Lund and Carson Chan, the collages contain unspoken stories that enable one's imagination to develop them further. Small captions provided with images suggest one of many possible background narratives, again suggestively open to interpretation depending on the observer's personal constructs generated based on personal experiences.

Techniques such as defamiliarisation, was utilised often in order to provide the observer with point of reference outside its context. Minimal, subtle changes to the overall original image seem to have a significant impact. Internal observer, a resident of Mirny for instance, will recognise the landmarks, buildings, statues depicted in the collages. The same observer will then notice articles that are out of context, irrespective of familiarity, eventually generating psychological response to the image.

Similarly, an outsider, a person who is not familiar with Mirny landmarks, will pick up on elements in the images that are familiar to them and attempt to place and understand them against the unfamiliar context. The response generated in one's mind will effectively have a different outcome as they proceed through the images.

The varying levels of success across the presented images is directly relative to how successful the unspoken narrative is. Some images are direct, the hidden meaning is exposed and little is left for interpretation. Other images, complex in nature evoke the unprecedented value to the observer's mind.

Due to the nature of thesis objectives and how they intertwine in meaning and effectiveness, the success or failures of collages cannot be pinpointed to a particular methodology selected at the start of the thesis. As some collages took a more direct approach to one particular methodology, others, took on a blend of the three, typically resulted in more complex outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This thesis sought to explore if and how certain transformations within our evolving societies and built environments can result in contradiction. Speculative architecture is challenged to enhance our ability to distinguish between utopian and dystopian urban conditions as we find them simultaneously defining a city.

Three architectural and art theories commonly utilised in the early Soviet regime were explored with the focus toward narration of the town's story to its occupants in a very particular context using the language that the audience is familiar with.

Narrative was explored as it shapes simultaneous events into a sequence that then stimulates one's imagination as the plot grows in ability to be interpreted. Drawing on close references to Nigel Coates in theory and Rem Koolhaas in practice, evidence was found in narrative's capacity to induce generation of personal constructs against a particular context. Koolhaas utilised collage to narrate speculative architecture as an environment.

Juxtaposition was found in Viktor Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation as a tool for an artistic production

of information that imparts the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. This is closely followed by Carson Chan's curated exhibition that celebrated architecture as articles for display.

Nils-Ole Lund took a wild approach toward collage challenging the norms of day to day life of an architect. Lund challenged the idea of modern architecture unable to hold timeless value, proceeding into assembling two – dimensional collages that challenge the notion of utopia and the built object. Somewhat curious, heavily inclined toward satire, he made his collages speak truth of modern architecture and its failures.

These three precedents have led to creation of collages that represent a small Mirny town imprisoned in time due to its remote location. The stories are created around utopian inhabitants of a town that is architecturally, socially and politically stuck in time. A small town of Mirny in Siberia, Russia presented us with unique opportunity to explore these dichotomies created by the state apparatus of Soviet Russia socialist regime.

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Fig 1.1 Stalker Movie Poster, 1972. http://www.impawards.com/intl/russia/1979/stalker_ver6_xlg.html

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Fig 2.2 Mirny town locale, 2019. <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Russia/@47.3332829,45.35418,3z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x453c569a896724fb:0x1409fdf86611f613!8m2!3d61.52401!4d105.318756> + author.

Fig 2.3 Mirny town entry sign, 2019. <https://visityakutia.com/mirny-diamond-mine-city-tour-siberia-russia/>

Fig 2.4 Soviet propaganda images littering sides of buildings, 2019. [https://trendovi.ru/videotrend/yCFo0PHWHy-o / %D0%93%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4 %D0%9C%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9 \(SunShine Films\).html](https://trendovi.ru/videotrend/yCFo0PHWHy-o / %D0%93%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4 %D0%9C%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9 (SunShine Films).html)

Fig 2.5 Soviet propaganda images littering sides of buildings, 2019. [https://trendovi.ru/videotrend/yCFo0PHWHy-o / %D0%93%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4 %D0%9C%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9 \(SunShine Films\).html](https://trendovi.ru/videotrend/yCFo0PHWHy-o / %D0%93%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4 %D0%9C%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9 (SunShine Films).html)

Fig 2.6 Mirny Power Plant, 2019. [https://trendovi.ru/videotrend/yCFo0PHWHy-o / %D0%93%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4 %D0%9C%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9 \(SunShine Films\).html](https://trendovi.ru/videotrend/yCFo0PHWHy-o / %D0%93%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4 %D0%9C%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9 (SunShine Films).html)

Fig 2.7 Memorial to the pioneers of diamond prospecting, 2019. [https://trendovi.ru/videotrend/yCFo0PHWHy-o / %D0%93%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4 %D0%9C%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9 \(SunShine Films\).html](https://trendovi.ru/videotrend/yCFo0PHWHy-o / %D0%93%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4 %D0%9C%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9 (SunShine Films).html)

Fig 2.8 Mirny town on the edge of the mine, 2019. <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2019/02/17/mirny-mine/>

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Figs 3.1 – 3.4 Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture, 2011. <http://socks-studio.com/2011/03/19/exodus-or-the-voluntary-prisoners-of-architecture/>

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