



HAROLD AS FEEDBACK'S FOIL

IMPROVISATIONAL COMEDY AND ARCHITECTURE

Sarah Hirschman

Architects speak about the needs of users with program diagrams in project proposals, and sometimes they perform postoccupancy surveys, but most often the ideas that drive a conceptual design aren't ever actually tested in a real way, not do they benefit from feedback. We're not with a disconnect between intention and results. In comedy, the test of efficacy is immediate and results are clear—if someone laughs at a joke, it's a success. Looking closely at the way humor works, then, could potentially reveal clues about how architecture might incorporate feedback into its design process. In his *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious*, Freud writes that the joke is "a double-voiced remark which serves two masters at once. Everything in jokes that is aimed at gaining pleasure is calculated with an eye toward the third person... and this gives us a full impression of how indispensable this third person is for the completion of the joking process."

Feedback generally refers to something exterior to the process of designing—the collection of data from clients or users. Not only does there lack a clear rubric for interpretation of the data, there's no standard mandate to collect it. How do we weigh the reported experience of one constituency over another, and how do we confirm the conclusions others make? Who decides what data gets collected, and how it gets used? This essay proposes a new model for understanding communication and collaboration in the design process following Keller Lasterling's observation: "Architects typically love numbers, metrics and scores. We love to make difficult questions harder. We love to train [ourselves] to do labor-intensive tasks," and so "a better role for the architect is not that of an optimizer but that of a comedian."¹ The

architect's comedy is increasingly conventional, especially as working software like Autodesk Revit imposes a central calculation response within the office in its inescapable settings-oriented, Lasterling's "architect-as-optimizer" operates just as the ritualized of finding, depending with traditional "hierarchical, vertical" culture, "in favor of direct engagement with 'larger' cultural organizations that actually direct more of the speaking." Improvisation has been present in one form or another within architecture since the middle of the last century. This essay considers a structured subset of improvisational comedy, what might be known as "Chicago-style improv," for rigorous insight into intentional collaboration, and post a way in which feedback can thrive within structure.

Through the basic tenets of improvisation—spontaneity, use of material at hand—remains relatively consistent, its implications and the way improvised words are received, vary widely across creative fields and through time. Where the improvisation of dancer improvisation pursues like Jackson Pollock might be said to access deep subconscious knowledge (an individualistic perspective an alternative approach that became popular in the 1960s regarded improvisation instead as a kind of extreme form of collaboration. According to American studies professor Daniel Waldrop, "this model privileges creative work, typically in performing arts like music and dance. In this kind of work, the artist's creative ideas were understood to emerge not 'from the depths' of the unconscious mind, but from the group dynamic."² This emphasis group improvisation as a way to create new words rather than considering improvisation as a secondary psychoanalysis for an individual to explore.

Architecture has flirted with improvisation before. In architect Cedric Price's Fun Palace project (1966), users were invited to manipulate their environments and create hypercontextual and specific items that suited their needs. The Fun Palace was, an architectural historian/theorist:

18 Inflection

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Inflection #05 Feedback

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