

## Pidgin 23

# Contents

<b>Editors' Note</b> Pidgin Editors	6
<b>Norms and Forms of Dispossession: The Politics of Naming</b> Samia Henni	16
<b>Back to the Front</b> Sylvia Lavin	30
<b>From Whirlpool to <i>Wohnungsfrage</i>: The Model Home since the Great Exhibition</b> Brittany Utting	48
<b>Stagecraft Realities</b> James Michael Tate Response by Jennifer Bonner	66
<b>Mining Manhattan</b> Jongwan Kwon Response by Debbie Chen	88
<b>Spectators of Self-Deception: Defining Perception</b> Jimmy Carter	110

- 128 **Play Pedagogy**  
Brandon Clifford
- 142 **Arkheion to Home Screen:  
On Housing a Queer Archive**  
Evan Pavka  
Response by Jaffer Kolb
- 178 **Through the Looking-Glass**  
Min Keun Park
- 190 **Market Myths in a Crisis of Affordability**  
Thomas Feary
- 198 **Construction of the Climate and the Overhead  
Gaze in Brazilian Amazonia**  
Igor Bragado & Rennie Jones  
Response by Spyros Papapetros
- 238 **Lines of Discovery**  
A. Melissa Harris  
Response by Michael Young
- 268 **On Theme**  
Emma Benintende & Kate Yeh Chiu

# Play Pedagogy

Brandon Clifford

**PLAY PEDAGOGY:  
BASED ON A TRUE STORY**

NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK — 1945

FRANK and THERESA CAPLAN open a store dedicated to the serious task of transforming the future of America through the culture of toys. They believe that a new order of designed toys can engender creativity in children. These 'creative playthings' will maintain ambiguity in favor of resolution.

THERESA CAPLAN

Communist children will be solving  
puzzles while our children create the  
drama of unstructured play.

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS — EARLY 1950s

A rambunctious group of ambitious and idealistic young architects gather to plot a sea change. Frustrated with the previous generation, they concoct a scheme to join forces and undermine the hierarchy.

LEXINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS — THE FOLLOWING DAY

'THE ARCHITECTS COLLABORATIVE,' intent on developing an experimental commune, purchases five dairy farms. A place devoid of exclusionary fences. A place that will promote community. Still drunk on ideology and rather taken by group thought, they swear to secure a massive central plot of land for communal ownership.

THE FIVE FIELDS NEIGHBORHOOD — 2016

A wintery and wet evening in DECEMBER. A group of socializing adults huddles inside a hip mid-century modern house, thick with the aroma of mulled cider. Chilled, they are returning

from sharing their communal backyard with a visiting young designer. Children burst around the minimal walls, sliding on the hardwoods and giggling.

MICHAEL SCHANBACHER

As you can see, the land is gorgeous, but it has been sixty years, and a new generation of families is moving in. We want these kids on the common land as much as possible. It's time to reinvest.

The group has gathered with a single purpose in mind. They will convince BRANDON CLIFFORD to join them in designing and building a new generation of play equipment on the common land. But the sell is not so easy. The night is littered with programmatic contradictions peppered throughout obligatory lighthearted neighborhood gossip.

NEIGHBOR - COURTNEY APGAR

Remember, not everyone in the neighborhood is a parent. And they will not want to see their backyard turned into a toy-strewn yard. These are people with a high level of design sensibility, so it needs to be sleek for the adults and exciting for the kids.

BRANDON has been resisting the idea of designing the play equipment. He isn't quite sure what to make of this intensely interconnected group of neighbors. But as the night continues, He gets the sense that something is different here. This isn't an average American neighborhood. Some form of magic is happening here, but he can't sort out the source. He slows his hand on the cocktails, in favor of taking some notes. His interest has been piqued.

The group continues to build problems. Kids need to feel excitement, but it also needs to be safe. Should they worry about liability on the common land? Do they have insurance? How are they going to afford this? What is the least they can ask everyone to pay while still getting a go-ahead?

NEIGHBOR - MICHAEL LEVITON

Wait. We are trying to solve small problems. The big problem is that kids don't play on the land. Ainsley, why aren't you down there now?

CHILD - AINSLEY

If I go down there, it takes me 5 minutes to get there, and 2 seconds to climb and slide down the slide. Then I get bored and start to daydream. I can dream here...

The group of sobering adults look at each other stunned. They half-heartedly philosophize about an idea that play exists in two worlds—physical & imaginary. If only physical, it is exercise. If exclusively imaginary, it is dreaming. In this group thought setting, afraid of being judged for parental style, they collectively commit to a notion that promotes indeterminate play. A space that will abandon reality, safety, and liability in favor of a surreal experience for the imagination of the child. Their fate is sealed.

EXCITED by this epiphany and also knowing what it could mean for the liberation of the design process, BRANDON stands and falsely declares he has an important meeting to attend. He kisses AINSLEY on the top of the head and in an attempt to sound cool, shouts 'CIAO' to the consortium of parents.

## PHONE CALL — THE FOLLOWING DAY

MICHAEL SCHANBACHER, curious about what happened with the abrupt ending, calls BRANDON and asks for his thoughts on the potential project. He admits the budget will be low, but it could be a good excuse to hang out and get some exercise over the summer. He and BRANDON have collaborated on a number of projects in the past and he is counting on BRANDON to serve as a buffer to his neighbors.

## BRANDON CLIFFORD

I say we do it for free. There isn't enough budget to pay our fee and build the project. BUT, this way, we will have complete creative control. Just make sure they know there will not be a design review. If they say no, we can point them to some off-the-shelf play equipment. What do you think?

FIVE FIELDS NEIGHBORHOOD COMMUNITY MEETING —  
LATE JANUARY

MICHAEL SCHANBACHER puts the idea to a vote. He brazenly shows up without a single drawing. He reminds the community of their origin story, that this community magic is the result of a design experiment. He asks them to once again embrace an experiment and put faith in design.

The community, re-engaged in the idealistic intoxication of sixty-years ago, agrees to the proposal. They retire to their homes wondering what they just agreed to.

## PHONE CALL — TEN MINUTES LATER

## BRANDON CLIFFORD

Really? SHIT...!



BRANDON and MICHAEL come to grips with the idea that they agreed to design and build a play structure for kids that is intentionally purposeless. These two architects are educated to design spaces for adults...Door handles are placed 34" off the ground. Hallways are 3' wide minimum. Doors should be no more than 2'-6" wide. These are the dimensions with which architects are trained—the accessible dimensions of adults. What do these two know about how wide an opening should be for a kid? These apparently respectable professionals can recall a time when they played, but they certainly don't play anymore. They know nothing about play.

In an attempt to feel prepared, the duo concocts a scheme to design prepositions of play — over & under, slow & fast, thin & heavy. An effort to build up a language of actions & imaginations that resist their own preconceptions. They are deeply worried that they will build another swing set, or an element with a single determinate action. Haunted by Ainsley's critique of play equipment, the duo sweat over their own liberation.

#### MATTER DESIGN — LATE MAY

BRANDON and MICHAEL have struggled for months over congealing their prepositions into a comprehensive design—a set of drawings that could take them into construction. Frustrated with the slow progress, they agree to begin, conceding the project to a loose logic. The principles are interesting, but the design is not resolved...

They are out of time. They will have to design it on the fly.

## FIVE FIELDS COMMON LAND — SATURDAY IN JULY

After long grueling days of digging and extracting massive boulders from the dairy farm landscape, a crew of weekend warriors has successfully built what looks to be the beginnings of a fence. The irony of this within a neighborhood intent on a fenceless community is not lost on the group. They must work fast to manifest these posts into play space.

Children are once again on the common land, but not because of a play structure. They are there by default because the parents are laboring on the land, constructing an impossible future. The children are relegated to play on the pre-existing but determinate play equipment. With each creak of the rusty swing, the idealistic crew loses hope in their own dream.

## FIVE FIELDS COMMON LAND - SUNDAY

JOHANNA LOBDELL

I can't reach the top of the boards  
anymore. Do you think we could start  
building a deck so I can keep cladding  
this fence?

MICHAEL SCHANBACHER

DEFINITELY! We could really use a new  
task anyway.

As the team approaches exhaustion at the end of a long weekend of labor, they reach for their beers and concede the work to the next weekend. The KIDS grow bored with 'adult talk' and ask if they can climb on the construction. The designers attempt to explain that the entrance is not complete. The stairs don't yet reach the ground. But before this logic is absorbed, the children climb between a wall and an incomplete object, bounding up to the deck above.

## ADULTS

That's not safe!

The KIDS don't care. They fly around the incomplete bundle of timber. They explain to the inquiring parents the 'purpose' of the apparently useless elements.

## KIDS

It is a wiggle pole. When you shake it, the underworld rumbles and you have to make it to the other side before they catch you.

The SO-CALLED CREATIVES pay closer attention. They begin to excuse their mistakes. Maybe they don't need to complete that staircase... Maybe that entrance isn't too narrow... They attempt to relieve themselves of more labor.

As the discussion continues, they become entranced. They gradually understand the value of contradictions of logic. Perhaps it is the IPA, but they remind themselves of the irresolution they agreed to. All of this practical labor has clouded their judgement.

## BRANDON CLIFFORD

DAMN. That's it. We need to design spaces that we think we know, but undo that known's purpose. We need to create with paradox, not in spite of it. This play structure will have no function, but will appear functional.

## CHILD - JUDSON

What does function mean?

The CREATIVES retire to the SCHANBACHER dining table to draw. They scrap the original design and create doorways that threshold to noth-

ing. Structural elements that extend into the landscape without purpose. Volumes that hover impossibly. Stairs that lead to nothing. Holes in the floor!

JOHANNA LOBDELL creates a color palette that promotes imaginative zones for teams. She designs ambiguous entrances graphics that suggest possible entrances that disguise real ones. She overlays colors to develop false perceptions of volumes with graphic elements.

The team now knows what they are experimenting with and it is not a new idea of play, but a new way to play through the design process. They will simultaneously undo any action. They will live in two worlds—virtual and physical. They will imagine while rapidly drawing. They will play.

MIT — FIRST DAY OF 'CREATIVE COMPUTATION'

BRANDON CLIFFORD is preparing an experimental pedagogy for a course on computation for a group of architecture students unaware of entering into an experiment. He is still on a high on his rediscovery of play. He will play with the CLASS.

#### BRANDON CLIFFORD

Computation is simple. It is logical, procedural, directional, and predictable (he declares this while he knows it not to be true). Design on the other hand is complex. It is cyclical, illogical, and often frustrating in its slippery lack of purpose. And yet, here we are learning computation and design simultaneously...I will admit, it is an impossible task to reconcile these two worlds.

So, let's make a pact to collectively get through this paradox. In the course of this class, when you produce something logical, stop and produce something illogically. If you are struggling with code and finally get it to work, see if you can break it. It sounds easy no? I want chaos. If you agree to do this, I will promise to judge you on the merit of this experiment.

The CLASS murmurs and starts to look at each other. Gossip that BRANDON has given up spreads through the online chats they maintain throughout the lecture. They are unaware that he is witness to this chat session.

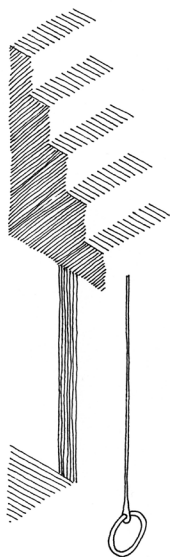
BRANDON CLIFFORD

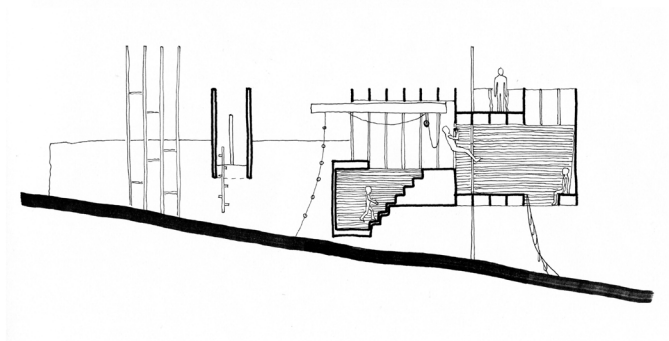
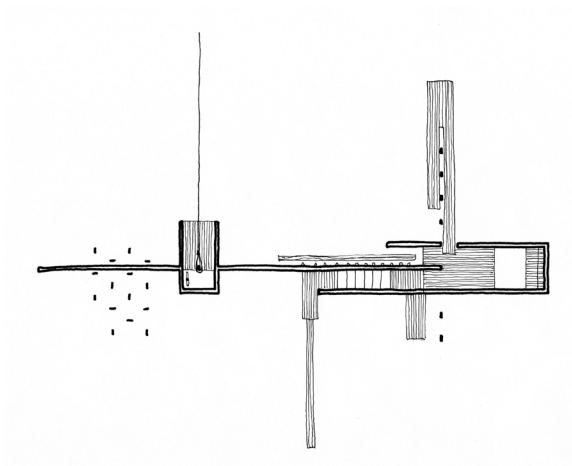
Okay! This week we are learning calculus-based computation. You will be using calculus to tackle the following playful paradox.

Exercise 0 – Compute a curvaceous detail that performs in opposition to its appearance.

Details are functional combinations of structural elements. They should be stiff and solid. Curves on the other hand are arbitrary, stylistic, and uncontrollable. Aren't they?

Through the act of paradoxical play, the CLASS will remind itself that neither of these preconceived facts offered by their professor are true. In the process of contradicting their own realities, they compute, produce, and create new things. They play.











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