

# Conversation on a Digital Follie

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Citation: Alvado Bañón, J.; Nobile, M. L.; Devereux, M.; Hadjichristou, Y.; Aleixo, S. (2021). Conversation on a Digital Follie. *UOU scientific journal* #02, 26-33.

ISSN: 2697-1518. <https://doi.org/10.14198/UOU.2021.2.03>

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## **Dialogues between Architecture, Imagination, and a Zoo of Imaginary Beings**

*OSAKA FOLLY (1990). "The Folly, a building type whose authenticity is based on experiential affect (and explicitly not on functional efficiency) was taken up by Arata Isozaki as General Producer of the 1990 International Garden and Greenery Exposition. At the official opening Isozaki described the BOLLES+WILSON pavilion as 'shapes we have not seen before'. The pavilion was an assembly of... components hovering above a rectangular pool... This Folly was an 'atmosphere-machine' – a building sized air conditioner – engaging its audience in its micro-climate".*

*BOLLES + WILSON webpage*

**MD** In its common usage, the term 'folly' suggests a foolish or trivial action, a lack of sense, an absurdity. But I argue that the architectural folly is none of these. It is anything but a trivial absurdity. It is serious.

If an architectural folly was not serious it would be wasteful, it would be the worst sort of vanity – simply a physical (or these days, digital) manifestation of a designer's ego. To confuse 'folly' with these suggestions would be a mistake. So then, what value can we place on the 'folly'? I would argue that the value is high indeed, and I would go even further, I would argue that without 'folly' architecture succumbs to the mundane and the prosaic. We need to take this concept of 'folly' seriously, because it gives architecture the space to be creative, to experiment without fear and thereby to advance our understanding and knowledge.

The physical folly has provided fun, respite and visual stimulus for long enough. Now is the time for the digital folly - a folly without a physical presence. Such a folly is a construct built upon a web, a network (to use words we are now so familiar with), that we substitute for the physical building materials. The tangible folly of history becomes the intangible folly of the future.

**JA** A Digital Folly (2021). A digital type based on experiential communication and learning above an administrative pool. This Folly is an "atmospheric screen" engaging its audience in its micro-knowledge. A sphere, a uniform solid where every point on its surface is equidistant from its center.



Tightrope Walker, by Paul Klee 1923

This digital, nomadic educational society interacts under the umbrella of the digital canvas; a screen as a laboratory searching for extraordinary knowledge. This new canvas is the digital "filmine" where everything happens.

The window of windows assembles open researches into a "Digital Follie". Every window is a lab itself, and the assemblage acts as an exquisite cadaver. A lab of labs, collectively produced, searching for knowledge. The "Digital Follie" is a beautiful organic arrangement established by a non-hierarchical structure. In this activity, one can see the precise arrangements of people in relation to one another. The screen pushes the possible beyond the current limit.

The concept of "appropriateness" acts as a glue to reinforce the structure of the assemblage.

**MD** This new digital folly is indeed the screen, but that is its advantage. It allows us to bring the folly with us, to show it to everyone who wants to see it, to invite others to help build it up further. The advantage of this is that the new digital folly is not the invention of a few, to be enjoyed by a small number, but instead it is the property of everyone. It is all the richer for it. It is not static, anchored to one Cartesian space, it is capable of expanding and adapting and of being adopted.

**LN** I would add that this digital follie is an open structure ready to re-adapt itself when a new element is included in its structure. As an incremental system its design is open to modification and new programme as every 'architecture' should be.

**YH** Someone may argue that this digital folly could be deemed the closest 'environment' to the ancient 'agora'. Attempting to include all in a horizontal structure. In contradistinction to the exclusion of the slaves, as happened in the ancient times, it may include all the people, even 'all the slaves' of our socio-economic systems, while shedding light on to the path of ... freedom (are we, can we be free?). Follies could also really, despite the exclusion of females in the past, include any kind of gender in their abundant fluidities. It could be a platform to accommodate all these thoughts of the immaterial aspects of the built environment, converging, and diverging ones. It can be appropriated by anyone and all. It may become, or rather it is constantly becoming 'the becoming'. The place to be. For any being...

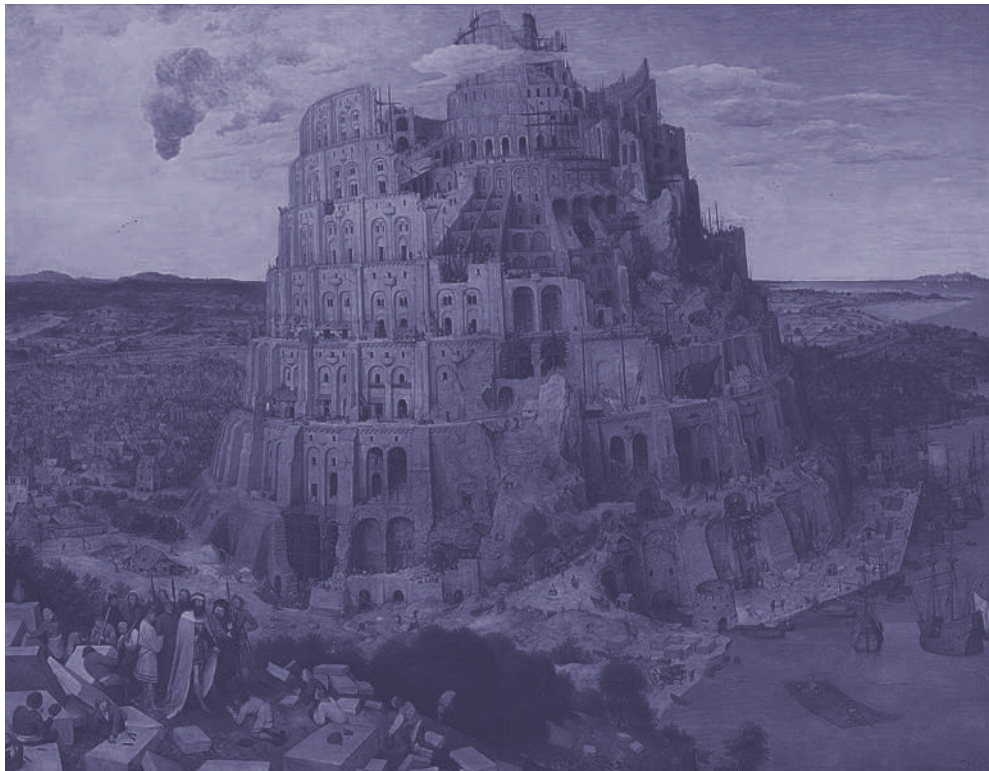
Besides the myriads of these possibilities, it may open as it is a folly and it is not dictated by the 'leading power', for its inherent identity does not imply this; it carries by itself other myriads of doubts and concerns. What about the ones that do not have access to the digital folly? Is this then only for the privileged ones? What about our co-inhabitants - the other living world - the animals, plants, birds? And immaterial qualities? How do we communicate the ever-changing phenomena? How do we facilitate its participation? Are we getting in the trap of various exclusions? Of recreating another one bubble for a minority of some humans? These concerns are not attempting to undermine the emergence of the digital folly, but rather to put more questions on the table that are born by the actual digital folly's birth itself.

**SA** In this conversation, I preferred to hear first and try to connect the apparent loose ends that might show up. However, picking up from Yiorgos last questions is not an easy task. So, let's start by Joaquín's provocative reference to BOLLES + WILSON pavilion. It could be said that these architects designed in 1990 the OSAKA FOLLY as a building type. However, it can be argued that their Folly cannot be named a building type but a type of place, as it "is based on experiential affect" of the "atmosphere" created by the shaped spaces. And this does not seem a folly; in fact, it seems to be full of sense, even full of sensorial meaning. It can then be agreed that architectural follies are not simply a physical manifestation by themselves. They are valuable places for the application of new knowledge in creatively changing what has been known as the everyday life. The ways society traditionally acts, thinks, and feels on a daily basis has changed, and there are indicators that this change has come to stay.

Screens are replacing physical environments, and it could be said that Digital Follies are replacing the physical follies. However, I argue, that a folly without a physical presence does not have the capacity to add to the visual stimulus, the activation of the other senses that the physical reality may trigger. No future can be built with the lack of physical contact with reality, with what is real. And following this rationale, the Digital Folly is a nonsense. However, considering the Digital Folly as a place, i.e. an experienced space and therefore, where people may give meaning to that space - where tutors and students explore the capacity that this unbuilt environment has to education, to teaching and learning architecture - may actually work as an engaging "atmospheric screen". Thought of as a canvas, as Joaquín proposes, the screen links people from around the world in the same

surface, speaking different languages, at different times of the day. The screen nullifies time, but the drawings, photographs, 3D models, mockups and other types of images are timeless and enables speechless communication. The Tower of Babel that students and teachers spoken languages could build, is here flattened and replaced by images in a non-hierarchical structure, where the common language of architecture is understood and discussed, where inclusiveness sets the atmosphere of a sharing place.

These Digital Follies offer a sense of freedom that governments are denying and controlling everywhere. However, in their spaces, one can move freely, one can even interact with those images of three dimensional reality and feel the dizziness of a cliff, see the sunlight passing through a window, observe the movement of the sea water and the flying birds in the sky. However, Digital Follies can never simulate the scent of a flower, the difference of temperature between a sunny spot and a shadowed one, the warm breeze at the end of a summer day or the cold of ice in our hands.



"The Tower of Babel" by Pieter Bruegel, the Elder (1563).

## **Dialogues between Architecture and Imagination**

*"Space has no room; time not a moment for us. We are excluded. In order to be included – to help our homecoming- we must be gathered into their meaning (we are the subject as well as the object of architecture). Whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more. For space in our image is place, and time in our image is occasion". Aldo van Eyck. Smithson, Alison, ed., Team 10 primer, MIT Press, Boston, 1968.*

**JA** Despite the proliferation of Institutions, such as Universities, Architectural Associations and large-scale exhibitions, these can't, on their own, define the legitimacy of contemporary architecture today. The digital folly seeks to enact the multidisciplinary direction through which architectural practices and processes come most alive. In the studios, a constitutive map of contemporary knowledge circuits: art, theory, science, culture, ecology, and politics collide. Urban systems and meta-territory experiences open to freedom, openness and changes.

**MD** It is a space in which all can have a say, it is not the space of the elite, nor is it the contemporary manifestation of those who commissioned, designed or benefitted from the physical follies of old; it is an open space, a space for all.

**JA** No disciplines and no hierarchies. The space as a zone of activity, a communicative and practical intersection.  
The Digital Folly serves as an arrangement that provides room for experiments in thinking, in methodological approaches, in all forms of translation, and in other forms of the production of knowledge.  
Pop-up digital spaces appear everywhere. The ordinary, and the emergence and continuation of manners, customs, and responsibilities are part of the everyday architecture and life. Soft digital spaces signal an attempt to understand the implications of relational approaches to spatial planning and interpersonal programs.

**LN** Digital spaces as experiments in interpretation of the current (and future) society.

**MD** They become the place for all to 'play' (with ideas) and to do so with inhibition.

**JA** UoU is a relation of spheres interconnected, a trip through windows all over the world trying to find a path to the future.  
Imagination relates ideas that have nothing in common. The journey through multiscale windows creates an intelligence collective based on the imagination.  
As part of this community, we imagine a learning path full of contributions, a dynamic open dictionary to redesign the dialogue between architecture and society. Nowadays, as equilibrists, we move on with uncertainties, but with the intuition that connectivity is the key to producing knowledge.

**MD** But a word of warning; this 'community,' this 'global reach' and this 'access' to the digital folly might unintentionally dilute our differences. Yet, these are differences to be celebrated, not homogenized. Our 'path to the future,' as it is put above, needs to respect this and not be allowed to become the space of only some. The digital folly must not be 'foolish.' We need to keep speaking our individual architectural languages and have the space and confidence to do so.

**JA** The capability of every window to remain and grow is the capability to interact and generate multiple relations. The Digital Follie is an imaginative production of knowledge based on architectural thoughts.

**YH** Could this also thought to be an expression of the commons, thought, among others, as the equal access to knowledge and to the other immaterial resources? With no main entrances or privileged positions... could this also become something like pillars, announcing entrance (or exit / channels of distribution of information) to all those who still do not have access to it?

**LN** Ecological thinking is one basis of our Digital Follie. In this sense, the reflection on "ecological thinking", on the idea that every piece of information or knowledge is inseparable from its cultural, social, economic, political and natural context. And also on the need to simultaneously hold together a range of knowledge in the project; it's the basis to be involved - as designers, researchers and educators - in the design of the contemporary city. "The separation of disciplines makes it impossible to grasp what is woven together. [...] There is a complexity - when the different components that constitute a whole are inseparable - [...] and when there is an interdependent, interactive and inter-retroactive link between the parts and the whole, and between the whole and the different parts" (Morin 2000)

**MD** This is where the 'architectural folly' diverges from the simple 'folly' and plays its full role. This is its strength.

**LN** This thought is dynamic and stimulates the search for relations between each phenomenon and its context. It is a matter of considering political ecology as a democratic science at the basis of teaching. (Latour 2001) In this idea of "ecological thinking", art re-captures its function in "revealing" the relationship between humans and the world. (Dorfles 1968).

**SA** This relationship, framed by the international strategy of sustainable development of human society, calls also for individuals' consciousness and responsibility as stewards of values that should be preserved for the benefit of future generations. And in this aspect, architecture, and architects, will have a significant role to play. Nonetheless, and returning to the beginning of this topic on "Dialogues between architecture and imagination", this second provocation builds on Aldo van Eyck's statement. Relocating this thought within academia, it can be said that traditional classrooms are limited spaces where classes are ruled by a time period in which

students' imagination is challenged, face to face, by professors. In the current time, teaching and learning needs no rooms, but places and occasions to discuss, explore, create, gain and produce knowledge on architecture. It is believed that the Digital Folly can provide such room for thought, for virtual experiments of imagining the future of architecture.

Perhaps one of the contributions that the Digital Folly may give to architectural education - considered as a multidisciplinary area of knowledge - is the recognition that credible information takes time and effort to find, and it may not even yet be available on-line. The intense use of this resource in the last year has also shown that untrustworthy information is at the tip of one's fingers, demanding a stronger ethical approach to research.

### **A Zoo of Imaginary Beings.**

*Preface to the 1957 Edition: "A small child is taken to the zoo for the first time. This child may be any one of us or, to put it another way, we have been this child and have forgotten about it. In these grounds - these terrible grounds - the child sees living animals he has never before glimpsed; he sees jaguars, vultures, bison, and - what is still stranger - giraffes.*

*He sees for the first time the bewildering variety of the animal kingdom, and this spectacle, which might alarm or frighten him, he enjoys. He enjoys it so much that going to the zoo is one of the pleasures of childhood, or is thought to be such. How can we explain this every day and yet mysterious event? We can, of course, deny it.*

*We can suppose that children suddenly rushed off to the zoo will become, in due time, neurotic, and the truth is there can hardly be a child who has not visited the zoo and there is hardly a grown-up who is not a neurotic. It may be stated that all children, by definition, are explorers, and that to discover the camel is in itself no stranger than to discover a mirror or water or a staircase". Jorge Luis Borges and Marguerita Guerrero. *Book of Imaginary Beings*, Preface. 1957. (Original title: *Manual de zoología fantástica*)*

**JA** UoU Journal, as a Digital Follie, creates a fun atmosphere where everything could happen. We are explorers and every edition is a seed for a new edition, a kaleidoscope where everybody plays with the dynamic digital form.

"The window that produces rain" generates a multiple drop to draw a "dropping city". A place where everyone is invited, a risky adventure with two constrictions: to experiment and have fun.

"Thermal beings". The changing process from physical to digital being generates a kind of thermal map. A dynamic map where regular and irregular shapes create a subtle substance that shines and glows.

"One thousand heads". A multilayered brain connected by a digital body. The next step is unpredictable. We do not know the way to feed it and how to reorganize the energy produced. It is unstable but grows devouring knowledge day by day.

**LN** Embracing the notion of 'unstable' energy is the only way of letting the project grow and develop. Every alteration of the system makes possible a new movement in search of balance, this is what makes the digital follie a continuous experiment open to modification.

**SA** UoU Journal, as a Digital Follie, is an amazing and exciting way of keeping up and in touch with the world of architecture, with colleagues, with ideas, and develop new questions together, crossing cultures, social boundaries and distances of space. And we are reminded that the approach of Jorge Luis Borges and Marguerita Guerrero to the human being, with 120 descriptions of mythical beasts, might just represent the number of different nationalities attending UoU workshops and publishing in UoU Journal. As the small child taken to the zoo for the first time, we have enjoyed very much to produce this second issue of UoU; it has been one of our pleasures. In time, we can make our own UoU Zoo. And if we all became neurotic with all the changes produced by the digital world, we may always come back to these early issues and recall how it all started.

*“The beasts of that kind have no milk [said Perelandra] and always what they bring forth is suckled by the beast of another kind. She is great, beautiful, and dumb, and until the young singing beast is weaned, it is among her whelps and is subject to her. However, when it is grown it becomes the most delicate and glorious of all beasts and goes from her. And she wonders at its song.” C. S. Lewis: Perelandra*

**JA** The design of the Digital Follie is a multiscale process of fun. In the same way as a ropedancer, we perform difficult feats of balancing. It is a continuous performance trying to add something new or original. There is an intuitive flow under the umbrella of fun. A thirst for knowledge that depends on the next movement. Play it!

**MD** The digital architectural folly is the chance for play, fun and laughter. These are the ingredients of life; and architecture is about creating 'space' for life to happen.

**SA** Returning smiles to peoples' faces, with no masques. Establishing dialogues between architecture and...follies!  
This issue of our Journal UoU became a Digital Follie in itself. The digital issue, which seemed like a folly to build up - or even to pop up! - in these turbulent times, quietly passed the summer ecstasy of masques liberation, of a new sense of freedom, and entered the fall with social interactions back at home, at the office, and at the university campus. The return of students and teachers to the digital architectural folly seems to provide a bridge between what seemed to be an absurdity and the power of creating in a digital world.