



Efficiency

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The space seems designed for *it*. There is something tyrannical about its presence, resolutely perched as it is in one of the corners of the room, at exactly seventy inches from the floor. From there, it surveys with its deep and only eye. It never blinks. It remains immobile, concentrating on the space it lords over, a preserve of generic artifacts; accounting for all things in it, the exact order they should adhere to. From its elevated perspective, it can see part of the planter in the kitchen, which is abruptly cut by the ochre plastic of the bathroom door, left open. The doorframe around this plastic door seems, at the same time, as if it is being swallowed by a body-sized mirror in the bathroom, bisected by the reflection of the main entrance door. In this sequence of continuous interruptions, the front door seems sliced by a blue wall. At the center of this wall, just below the ceiling, encased by white PVC framing, there is a small, round window that allows the suburb’s morning splendor to spill in. The shape of the window has been plagiarized from architectures that don’t quite belong here. Any silence and sense of idleness in the room is disrupted exactly every twenty minutes, as *it* exhales through its automatic eye a volatile cloud of that liquid that, with perhaps little justification, we have agreed to call *fragrance*. The aromatic particles that vaporize every twelve hundred seconds come in a mixture of synthetic popular smells—*Moonlit Walk*, *Happy Moss*, *Pumpkin Spice*, *Pine Forest*, etc.. A waft of *Cypress Delight* stretches between suspicious chemistry and ol-factory delight. Negative ions and ozone purify the air in the room until whatever was there is completely replaced, neutralizing all bacterial activity and any organic sources of bad odor. It’s Paradise on Earth. Order restored. But overwhelmed with the artificiality of a diorama. *It* is so efficient in its total control of the air in the room that the place, despite being a sequence of interrupted objects, looks like an optimized habitable capsule. It could be an empty object drifting through deep space—or through the imagination of Japanese Metabolists—free from the predictable pull of gravity.

But no. Drawing a perfect 45 degrees slope with its one-eyed sovereign’s gaze lies a heavy, human body, grounding things. The body is rigid and now perfumed. Excessively so. It would probably be slightly disgusted with itself, this body, unable to stand the mantle of overly sweet fragrance that it is wrapped with, were it not lost in to the complexity of how to translate, in order to capture its deeper wisdom, one of Ho Chi Minh’s famous sayings: “When the prison doors are open, the real dragon will fly out.”

What is the prison?

What is the dragon?

The tenant’s body, dead-still, splayed on the floor, entangled in cloying sweat smells and unrelenting thoughts, hides the marble pattern—*Morocco Slate*—of linoleum tiles, bought at the Home Depot, thirty cents a piece. He is looking at the textured ceiling, considering that its popcorn landscape, lifeless like an endless stretch of na-palmed jungle, has to be a good stand-in for some predicament or other. Maybe even for the one he is facing as he wrestles—without moving—with the perils of translation. Another twenty minutes have transpired and a fresh coat of aromatic dew covers his corneas. They shine, slightly irritated. It’s been nine days since the front door of the efficiency has been opened. This is how long the tenant has been struggling with a book of quotes by Ho Chi Minh that Roar Press, his employer, wants to release to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the Fall of Saigon. The air freshener has blown its aroma six hundred and forty eight times since he last went outside. It would have blown it one million forty nine thousand seven hundred and sixty times since the last American helicopter left Saigon, had air freshers been around that long.

Someone, obviously upset, is coming up the pathway. The tenant can hear his heavy steps, the impatience that gathers in them. The stranger walks with the determined gait of someone coming to collect rent that is twenty days past due. He’s boiling, but not enough to keep from appreciating his own work: the high fence painted a deep violet; the red-green-yellow hedge placed to hide the front door; the shiny surface of the new electrical meter, which sits next to two older models; the round window placed up high, which looks like the window of an airplane or a Kurokawa cell; the replica plastic owl perched on the roof to spook the pigeons, who are in the habit of roosting in the rain gutters. A golden retriever puppy, which could be an escapee from the movies but has only broken free from his old mother’s house, slows down his pace as it tangles itself between his legs. The dog trips him. In order to catch his balance, the landlord reaches for a mailbox overflowing with mail. The mailbox is shaped like a suburban house with green

roof tiles. Instead of being held aloft by a post, it rests on the fins a manatee cast in concrete and colored rust red. It looks like the finned building that Valerio Olgiati projected in Albania in 2005. Around the tail of the manatee, on the ground, a few pieces of mail are fanned out—an envelope stamped with the Estrella Insurance logo, a letter form Medicare, two Sunpass invoices, and two brochures from Navarro Pharmacy. They have all been warped by dew, and are still moist. The image that jumps off the brochure right away is of a beige air freshener, with a timer, on sale. Two for one. The object’s general shape, along with the two small spiky bumps on its topside, make it look like an owl. Its dispensing valve gives it a cyclopean gaze. *Baterías no incluidas*—printed next to the plastic animal in Spanish.

The landlord picks up the brochure with the owl and walks toward the door that has been kept shut for nine days by deep thoughts about Ho Chi Minh.

What if the prison is design’s hung-over desire for meaning, authorial signature, exceptional morphological vocabularies?

What if the dragon is unstoppable generic production?

A voice booming behind him stops the landlord walking so intently toward the efficiency, at the very moment that he reaches the threshold of the door and is struck by a nauseating mist coming from inside the room. He turns, obviously affected by the blow of the fragrance. Every time that he is addressed in English he is startled, overcome by a mild dread, and it is only after this dread tightly grips his stomach that the landlord can make out what is being said to him. This time he isn’t sure if his abdomen is contracting because he has come in contact with English or with the aromatic mist in the efficiency. They are equally grating. The person addressing him is Mr. Graham, a seasoned inspector with Miami-Dade Building Regulations Department. The inspector knows that on Saturday mornings everyone relaxes their vigilance. They unwittingly give up their clandestine structures. No one sees him coming. The landlord, on the way to collect past due rent, thinks for a moment about the sort of decoy he would need to spook inspectors they way his replica plastic owl spooks nuisance birds. Without much ado, the inspector invites himself into the efficiency. The two men, each driven by his own sense of righteousness, enter the room. They do so at the precise moment that the air freshener, resolutely perched in its corner, exhales. One could almost think it was a defensive maneuver to protect its territory. The door remains ajar as both men run back out of the room. The automaton-owl only needs twenty minutes to conquer the gentle suburb with its futurist aromas, to send intruders scampering away.

The automaton-owl, thinks the tenant, must surely have something to do with Ho Chi Minh’s wisdom.

The Root Works for Fruit It Will Never See

Across the street, without quite understanding what is going on, a nervous neighbor calls her husband on his cell phone. Yusevia has recognized Mr. Graham, who five years earlier detected the two illegal additions she and her husband made to their house. In one, the second, they had only installed the kitchen, the floor was still untiled and the bathroom bare, but the kitchen was enough to be given a citation for multifamily use of the house without the proper permits. Both of the spaces they’d begun to build at the time of their encounter with Mr. Graham, even after being cited and fined in a zoning hearing that both Yusevia and her husband skipped, were finished. They have been rented out continuously for half a decade. Past due letters with the fine ceased arriving around the time the new mayor was sworn into office.

Under this regime of perpetual rent, the two efficiencies are like resource-extracting space capsules sent from Cuba to the alien terrain of Hialeah. Two enormous houses, a bit dilapidated and overcrowded, in the municipalities of Cerro and Cotorro depend of the efficient release by these two habitable capsules of resources on the ground. Eleven human beings, two dogs, five cats, and three pigeons, divided between the two houses, slurp up the dollars generated in these additions. As everyone knows, beyond people and dogs and pigeons, a number of other species live in and are fed by houses: moths, flees, ticks, tumored cells, tape worms, mold, and moss. To the list of those who depend on the rent money from the two efficiencies, one can also add two large gardens of great biodiversity. They are trimmed every two months. Twenty dollars that arrive from Miami via Western Union are designated for this.

When Yusevia decided to build the first of the two additions, she still organized her life around the pretense that she was an architect. Her three years at the School of Architecture at the University of Havana were enough to convince her unconditionally of the merits of German functionalism, American organic architecture, and Japanese Metabolism—and of her own place in this lineage. She spent innumerable hours, in those days, studying the lat-

est buildings in magazines she found in the University’s hot and stuffy library. At the beginning, she suggested to Her husband that they should build their addition in such a way that the structure would be in dialogue with habitable cells of asbestos cement that Hugo D’Acosta and Mercedes Alvarez designed and worked on between 1965 and 1968. She thought of these cells as a pinnacle in thinking that really sought to address the possibilities of real experimental housing. It is was revolutionary architecture in the most necessary fashion. Her visit, while she was a first year student, to the factory where the prototype for these cells aged quietly in a corner wasn’t enough for her to understand the object fully enough. But it was enough for her to be able to judge its historical importance, its up-to-dateness. Yusevia, now in her air-conditioned living room in Miami, set out to find images of the structure on the Internet, to piece together the object and the thinking behind it in order to find ways to apply it to the context she know found herself in. But she ran instead into the often reposted article on the carcinogenic potential of asbestos and its ban in the United States.

Undeterred, she began to sketch structures which could be erected without using asbestos but that would match the versatility and economical use of space that can be sensed in some of Absalon’s cells. Her new structures could easily be erected with drywall and sprayed concrete. In the end, Yusevia and her husband built a tube-shaped unit that looked like Absalon’s *Cellule No.3* (1992). The only difference—since, articulating the one non-negotiable discrepancy she feels with the modernist values she adheres to, she doesn’t like white structures—was that it was painted a textured pale green. Inside, she starkly decorated it with only a poster for the film *Loin du Vietnam*. She found the poster for three bucks in one of the thrift store in Flamingo Plaza. She liked the space bare. This way it could be about the design. Her wager on form. She knew that after it was rented, the tenant could make whatever changes he or she wanted. This bothered her to no end. It fired up the little implacable Corbusier she carried inside, deeply ingrained. But it didn’t irritate her enough to keep the addition off the market. In fact, one of her tenants, a somewhat conservative man, asked her for a discount because he found it a bit inconvenient to have to sleep in a cylindrical cubicle.

Due to certain irreparable atrophies induced by an architectural education, even an unfinished one like Yusevia’s, it wasn’t enough for her to just design and build a structure. She need to develop an entire architectural program to justify it. Considering the dynamic between her efficiency and the two houses in Havana that it was to support, she decided to call her program *PANTOGRAPH*. As the names suggests, the program was inspire by the logic of the pantograph, an instrument used to reproduce drawings and texts. It works this way: If you draw a circle with a two inch radius with one end of the pantograph, the tool will, at the very same time, duplicate this circle with its other end. This second circle can be the very same size as the first or it can be rendered at a larger scale, in perfect proportion, depending on how one adjusts the pantograph. Based on this logic, she was certain that any upgrade to her efficiency would echo with an amplified benefit to her family’s two houses back in Havana. It was as if one city was being affected by any changes that visited a small structure in another city. For instance, when she accepted to punch out a small window that looked on the garden in her cylindrical cell, this simple gesture, allowing her to raise the rent \$100 dollars, due to the exponential properties that the pantograph activates, underwrote the building of balcony in the loft that bisected her mother’s house in Cerro. The original design (echoing Absalon’s) had no window. It was difficult to rent the space at a reasonable price because of this. Yusevia’s cell certainly couldn’t compete with the other efficiencies in the area. The first potential tenants claimed to be claustrophobic during the initial visit and were never heard from again. She had to give in. To fend off any sense of defeat, Yusevia justified the alteration to her cell by proposing that the very overarching logic of the pantograph program authorized local changes in the designed object when necessary. And of course it worked: every adjustment made to the efficiency echoed an architectural answer in Havana. There wasn’t always a formal or typological correspondence between what was happening in Miami and what happened in Havana. Her model wasn’t about generating perfect homologies between one place and the other. It was the Cartesian principle of the pantograph that authorized the metaphor she was working with. Building a stand-alone bathroom for her addition, for instance, yielded a bedroom and a bathroom on the rooftop of her mother-in-law’s house in Cotorro. When she replaced the dishwashing sink with a continuous surface that included a sink, a dish drying rack, and a pair of burners, this rearrangement of objects, meant a new plumbing system in both houses in Havana and the replacement of the old water tanks made out of carcinogenic fiber

cement for new plastic ones procured in the back market down by the port. When her husband purchase a router and offered free wifi in Miami, in Havana they paid for the connection for both houses to an illegal service that is based on the principle of American cable TV—even if at a much more rudimentary level—that was only available to families blessed with a monthly arrival of dollars.

Yusevia discovered that she was the inventor of a practical architecture and of unique generative principals. It was a kind of inter-territorial architecture. In some way, it was similar to the ideas elaborated by Maki, renegade member of the Japanese Metabolists, who defined under the name *Collective Form*, and more specifically under a variation of this project dubbed *Group Form*, an architecture without form, articulated more by established relations and flows than by defined spaces and forms. Yusevia felt so confident in what she had come up with that she sent a proposal, along with a manifesto titled *Pantograph: A Retroactive Manifesto on the Efficiency*, to an architectural contest in Italy. The part about the manifesto being retroactive was a gesture of humility on her part. She knew deep down that she hadn’t invented a protocol. Thousands of homes in the Third World better their conditions with remittances made up of the collected rents of efficiencies in Miami. But she had been the first architect to conceptualize this phenomenon, to give a name and articulate new concepts to capture it, and to unfold her life and that of her family, as a kind of living project, under the principles she had outlined.

Yusevia’s husband isn’t answering her call. Worry is morphing into a knot of panic along her shoulders. She’s tense. Across the street, Mr. Graham is petting a puppy who is scrubbing and digging its muzzle into the lawn. It’s trying to get rid of the disgusting scents that are flooding the area. She is hoping that he won’t look her way. She keeps her eyes on him. Mr. Graham seems taken by the puppy. She imagines that the landlord he just snuck up on could easily bribe him with the dog. Maybe not. Mr. Graham’s incorruptibility is legendary. It seems to Yusevia as if the disturbance that shook her is slowly disintegrating. A kind of harmony seems to be returning to the block; everything is falling back into place. She notices, as she starts to feel this new calm, that she no longer minds the homogenous architecture of the suburb she has been sentenced to. Not the way she did when she first arrived fifteen years ago. It turned her stomach then. She wondered what could become of people who live in those recurring houses. She thought that they became just like their dwellings—all identical and stiff; all their quirks diluted into a kind of cinderblock subjectivity. But now she knows it may be the exact opposite: that in the camouflage of sameness, of repetition, strange and astute ways of moving in the world against regulations and restrictive mores are always being plotted.

Yusevia hangs up the phone and walks toward the backyard, trying to cover any view of it from Mr. Graham across the street. She is imagining that her body is swelling, spreading like a tarpaulin that wraps around her entire property. She is hoping that the desire to be endowed with this obstructing power is enough to help her block more space from view, or to keep Mr. Graham from looking over and wondering what that weird extension on the side of the house is. The second efficiency she and her husband erected—the weird extension—was designed and built much faster than the first. Since the first one was built in the ideal spot in the backyard, hidden from curious gaze of neighbors and inspectors, the second was in an area that was more exposed, on the side of the house. This second efficiency is a room conceived in such way that it drew benefit from the experiences of building and renting the first one. Which is to say that it is a very common looking room, with standard room distributions, normal doorways, a kitchen and bathroom, and regular windows. It is indistinguishable from the rest of the house—or from many of the other illicit additions in the neighborhood. In some way, it follows the un-exceptional logic of building an efficiency in such a way that it blends into the house. A kind of tectonic-mimeticism. It was built this way thanks to the practical nature of her husband and the advice of an old Home Depot employer. Had it been up to Yusevia, they would have gone with a concept that she wished to explore based on Paul Nelson’s idea of a suspended house. She was thinking that the could erect a self-sustaining structure, an I-beam cube, over the entire yard, from which, hidden behind a tree, a room would hang and the ideal tenant she dreamed of, obviously interested in historical nuance and innovation, would pull mangoes from the tree in the afternoons and think about architectural marvel he lived in.

A Guerrilla Wins if It Doesn’t Lose

A shot of techno cuts across the neighborhood. It cuts through Mr. Graham. Disturbed by the racket, he picks himself up from the floor, where he has been playing with his dog, a golden retriever, for what seems like hours. He

decides to go for a walk as a way to flee the noise, maybe spy some new illegal construction in the neighborhood. He pack his camera. In a nearby backyard, Laurie Cotarelo, an ambitious young DJ, is struggling to get just right her *future house* version of “Carta del Che.” It’s 1999. Little does she know that the track she eventually comes up will become a club favorite. These days, her “cover” is constantly re-quested in Miami nightspots like Vedado Social Club.

A woman who owns a small cafeteria at the end of the block feels a chill climb her spine when the song comes on. Behind the drum machine and the distortion, she recognizes the lyrics. She knows where they come from, and she recognizes the voice of Fidel Castro uttering them.

Miami is changing, she tells herself.

She is married to a Salvadoran. She’s arrived with her children through the program of visas that the American government extends to the island. Her husband is a veteran of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación (FMLN). He was recovering from a wound in Havana when they met. She was his dedicated bedside nurse in the hospital where they amputated a leg that was mangled by a grenade. Years later, the Salvadoran guerrilla became a Cuban citizen, and this facilitated the move of the family to the US. In Miami, they live from the sale of *pupusas* and the rent they draw from an efficiency, a hidden addition in the backyard of their little cafeteria, which has yet to be discovered by Mr. Graham.

The mysterious Hong Viet Dung just moved in. He had some trouble with his previous landlord. The son of Vietnamese refugees, Hong works as an editor for Roar Editions. He walked out into the backyard, smiling, when he heard the music that was cutting through the still air of the neighborhood. He’d been dragged out of his cave for a much needed break. He’s been hard at work on a book of quotes by Ho Chi Mihn, which is now overdue. His unexpected moved slowed the progress he was making. No one can see him back there in the yard, as he enjoys the music. Only a bird’s eye-view could really expose him. And this is Mr. Graham’s dream—to put together the first squadron of anti-efficiency drones. With a view from above, he could gather detailed information on the clandestine operations of the neighborhood; he could register in real time the additions and adaptations; he could follow the routes of the garbage bags and detect other movements; he could tag suspicious accumulations of building materials in the backyards of the suburb. His reports would be substantial, meticulously detailed, and lit by the urgency of a precise diagnostic. He would also have a fuller idea of the size of the enemy forces he faces and of their always renewed resources and tactics. Finally, he could put an end to the invisibility of these constructions and of all the multi-family illegal operations in the area. It would be like turning a light on in an anthill at night.

Mr. Graham can’t stand the idea of the peaceful suburb, of the squirrel crossing the street and the lawn perfectly manicured. For him, the suburb is dark territory, a hive of mercilessly violators of the law. In each of the suburb residents that Mr. Graham comes across he finds the astute eyes of Juan Martín El Empecinado, the Spanish guerrilla leader that Benito Pérez Galdós recreated in his *National Episodes* (1873). Mr. Graham knows that he is dealing with people of the ilk of Abd-el-Krím el Jatabi, Leila Khaled, Che Guevarra, Abimael Guzmán, Ho Chi Mihn, and Mao Ze-dong. He has no illusions that these are benign folk. They are his opponents in urban warfare, in guerrilla warfare. He knows that they operate only at a tactical level and collapse all their goals into a single, implacable one: the erosion and tiring-out of the enemy. Aware of this, the inspector, a voracious reader, has shifted all his literary interests, afflicting himself with a kind of irreparable tunnel vision, so that all that he ever reads now are books on guerrillas and guerrilla tactics. His reading pushed him, two years ago, into enacting his own counteroffensive surge. He planned and executed an infiltration. He left his single-family home in Coral Gables and rented an illegally built efficiency in Hialeah for himself. He set up camp in enemy territory. He found the efficiency through an anonymous report posted on the city government’s webpage. Instead of following up on the report, as was his duty, he went to the location and rented it out.

The anonymous complaints that come to the webpage he monitors are becoming increasingly stranger—and to him this is an index of how few allies he has in the territory. In his tiny room, he studies things until long after midnight. His books have overflowed their shelves: they can be found in the corners of the bathroom, the kitchen table, on top of the mini-refrigerator, and all over the floor. The *campaign* is their dominant subject, and the collection includes the diaries and biographies of guerrilla fighters, novels and reports on the guerrillas that faced Napoleon and Charlemagne, the guerrillas against Morocco in the Western Sahara, the equestrian guerrillas led by the Cuban Ignacio Agramonte

against Spain, the resistance against France and Belgium during the anti-colonial wars of Africa. There is an abundance, as should be expected from this list, of books dedicated to the Vietcong. Mr. Graham is amassing the best of the best regarding these tacticians of invisibility, maestros of asymmetrical war, and triumphant figures of Saigon.

The walls of his efficiency are painted red and covered with alarming articles cut out of the local newspaper. A story about overpopulated schools and the sudden matriculation of children that had never before been accounted for has been tacked up in such a way that it feels particularly prominent. The story relates: “*students attending classes in spaces that are too small or simply inadequate, in certain cases in closets intended for sports equipment or janitorial supplies; an incapacity on the part of the school to provide the necessary classes for students to graduate on time, with all their requisites fulfilled; different grade levels sharing a classroom; not enough materials for the students or books, forcing their parents to purchase them; friction and altercations in the hallways between classes—all leading to the very real possibility that the school will loose the high academic levels that it is known for.*”

The description of a classroom in article seems like it could be the description of an efficiency: desks in the closet! Mr. Graham’s prophesies are proving right: the efficiency generates a pattern that affects other structures; it puts demands to all the things around it—infrastructure, schools, etc. On wall that butts up to the one lined with newspaper articles, there are hundreds of photographs of illicit additions to houses that Mr. Graham took himself and printed at the local Navarro Pharmacy. Some are a bit dark or blurry, obviously quickly framed and shot. Others contain images that recur very often—these can be of exterior walls with duplicated electrical meters and breaker boxes, or bedrooms equipped with their own kitchens shot through the window. They are irrefutable evidence of the existence of multi-family usage in the houses throughout the area. Mr. Graham has, in fact, taken things further: he has images of proven zoning violators and of others whom he is pretty sure may be heading in that direction. These portraits are mostly taken straight-on. Although there are also some profile pictures obviously taken very quickly or from far away. The back of Mr. Graham’s front door is papered by other faces and figures—those who he thinks may be tenants, strangers who without any reason go in and out, through hedges and fences, or visit at very strange hours. All these visual materials are linked through arrows, notes, drawn trajectories, and large circles drawn by hand.

It’s an enormous diagram that in its complexity and size has become a wallpaper. Inside Mr. Graham’s small room this wallpaper represents only an infinitesimal part of the expansive phenomenon he is staking out. But on this *tactical wallpaper* that Mr. Graham has devised, a pattern takes shape, an explosion of modular principles, plethoric zones of reflection, of resources of duplication, of contagions. The wallpaper’s morphology is also drastically altered and marked by the efficiency in which Mr. Graham has chosen to entrench himself. The reduced walls, closing in more and more, swallowed by all the information he is pinning to them, make overlaps, twists, and spirals necessary. Mr Graham’s efficiency itself, as existing architecture, as a collection of artifacts, is part of the diagram. Not as a representation, but as a force, as metrics, as a tangle of overlapping functions, and in conflict with a set of limitations. This complex graphic universe, on the verge of exploding at the seams to take over the entire neighborhood, has only been seen by another pair of eyes that are not Mr. Graham’s.

Fifty meters from Mr. Graham’s front door, behind the overgrowth, motionless like an iguana in the sun, an emaciated and very tense old man entrenches himself every day in the stairwell of his efficiency and keeps an unwavering eye on the inspector’s door. A thin mustache and the aged graphics on his t-shirt betray him: he is an experienced member of the Alpha 66 movement—a guerrilla that has spent years training in Miami, in the barren fields of Homestead, waiting for that perfect moment to invade Cuba and pry it from the hands of the communists. This morning, annoyed by the lyrics of the techno song that is being played over and over, the sounds of his enemy, the veteran is waiting for Mr. Graham to return from his Saturday stroll so that he can shoot a glance for a second time into the interior of the room when the inspector opens the door. ■

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Pattern on the cover was created by reusing Felix Beltrán symbols.