The Politics of Play

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In *Giant of the Senate*[1], Al Franken reveals one of the more disconcerting aspects of his plight over the last eight years: since his election into office, there has been an unwritten rule that in order to display the seriousness of his legislative role in governance, he is not allowed to be funny anymore. Barred of his foundational creative work, he has finally put into words some of the more important challenges that we face as a nation—whether in healthcare, equity, immigration or infrastructure. The problem, as it turns out, is that he has been able to address the gravitas of our unprecedented historical moment with a humor that is only befitting of the current state of affairs in Washington, D.C.

Ironically, Hashim Sarkis has had to undergo a parallel challenge, though maybe its inverse: burdened by an academic ethic that has endured through his doctoral degree, there is a sense that any commitments he would bring to the irreducible protocols of design—that is, through delight, lightness, humor, and perhaps most importantly, through play—would somehow betray the intellectual gravitas of his scholarship. However, a closer look at Sarkis's own intellectual trajectory reveals a great deal about how the agency of design is, for him, the very instrument through which social effectiveness may be achieved. In his own words, a critical part of his project is to overturn the fallacy of architecture's autonomy to its social participation. Extending the footsteps of Roberto Mangabeira Unger, Sarkis demonstrates that to be politically effective, architecture must somehow operate through its autonomy, if only to show how its own techniques, tools, and devices, participate in building an imagination for the world: that is, through the invention of formal, spatial and material systems.

If the autonomy of the architectural discipline were to be misconstrued as a closed system of operative devices, Sarkis dispels any notion of that closure in accepting the idea that architecture is an open source framework, accepting of the many languages that find ways of engaging culture through different, and sometimes more effective, channels. Color, graphics, the written word, technologies, as well as evolving representational and generative protocols, can all become participants in the construction of an architecture. This strategic intellectual slant is also what produces an authorship that evades the signature of a singular identity within the body of his oeuvre, instead it finds consistency of voice through the means and methods of a focused medium within each project: through 'color' in the Fishermen's housing, through 'perspective' in the Chicago Frame, or though the advent of 'graphics' for the Byblos Town Hall. The persistence of a thematic focus in these projects produces a distinct thesis in each case, an 'awareness,' a sense that something is happening that is not exactly natural. Indeed, it may be that all architecture begins with a moment of artifice that jolts us into self-consciousness. The confined vision of these tactics is, of course, motivated by the balance of disciplinary commitments on the one hand, and the force of pragmatism that looms like a dagger over most projects on the other: the thin paint serving to articulate an otherwise undifferentiated construct of housing, the presence of a variegated vision latent in the repetitive grid-iron city plan, and the encrypted presence of legibility within the natural and artificial surfaces of Byblos.

The foundation of Sarkis's work is usually familiar; working with known types, generic forms, and off-the-shelf systems, there is a calculated humility in the work. In what he borrows from Kenneth Frampton as "the necessity of anachronism," the work strives to build a dialogue with history—not only time passed, but also times to come. In this sense, all architecture is inevitably of its time, locked into the technologies and practices of a historical moment, but also in search of certain qualities that are timeless, going beyond the borders of the building's presumed function, program or purpose, as if to establish a meaningful place in the discipline. Anachronism takes shape in specific instances in these projects, where time is short-circuited, and one cannot readily distinguish between that which emerges from the *longue durée* of the architectural discipline and that which is overlaid on to it.

Consider the herringbone pattern that adorns the Balloon Landing structure in Beirut. With a history that recedes back to the Roman era, the *opus spicatum* (as it is known in Latin) is a bonding strategy that is traditionally associated with horizontal and vertical infill surfaces. It gains its traction as a result of the minimal need for mortar in masonry construction and its diagonal pattern producing opposing shear plane faces, increasing its surface area. In the context of this project, the pattern gains latitude by way of multiple associations: allusively extending the crosswalks of the city onto the site through the horizontal surface and developing a dialogue between the wooden lattice work that serves as a screen and the concrete walls for which it 'apparently' serves as formwork; rotated 90 degrees to the conventional orientation, the herringbone establishes a latent connection with wayfinding arrows that are surreptitiously embedded in the grain of the walls. Here, the grain overcomes the traditional opposition between surface and depth, or structure and skin; the thinness of paint, the laminar nature of the wood lattice, and the depth of a concrete pour are brought to both material and sematic equation, as the herringbone becomes inextricably bound to the geological depths of the site onto which it is cast. The linearity of time is lost to the herringbone; its various instantiations insinuate varied forms of legibility, from the associative to the embodied and experiential. Suspended between representation and raw matter, the pattern also constructs an iconographic relationship with the classical drawing, the grain of the herringbone bringing materiality to the diagonal striations of *Beaux Arts poché*.

As we zoom out from the detail, we discover the topography of the landscape in which the project is embedded—a sloped section within which the platform is wedged. We realize that the herringbone is somehow encrypted at the scale of the site, in both plan and section. The constructed landscape offers no level ground, but rather a folded plane; within its reveals we rediscover the presence of the herringbone pattern, the logic of which is the result of balancing the multiple planes to which the elevations coordinate their 'normal' axes. Thus, if the narrow focus on a detail appears myopic, it is actually part of a technique that is emblematic of Sarkis's arsenal of strategies; he commonly zooms in and out of projects, between two vastly different scales, on one end the specification of a motivated detail, and on the other the boundless territory of the geographic.

As the balloon rises, we finally discover that the part to whole relationships of this project cannot be readily consumed. They can only be discovered through the displacement of scale. Allowing the middle scale to be operated on and transformed through the conventions of practice, Sarkis sets his targets on that which we cannot readily measure: the limitless skies, the silhouette of the horizon, and the encrustations of the geological. This is the balloon's ultimate destination, not only an elevation in height, but towards a heightened understanding of the necessary lightness of play that underlies the discipline of design. Up there, just beneath the clouds, in the presence of the sublime, he reminds us of the position of architecture: if perchance to frame something larger than itself, in both historic and physical terms.

1 Franken, Al. *Al Franken, Giant of the Senate.* Twelve; New York; 2017. Al Franken, a former comedian and star of the television show *Saturday Night Live,* became a U.S. senator from Minnesota in 2009.