RICE UNIVERSITY

CAST OF CIVIC CHARACTERS

by

Joseph Altshuler

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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Gordon Wittenberg
Professor of Architecture, Director of Graduate Studies

Dawn Finley
Associate Professor of Architecture, Thesis Director

Scott Colman
Senior Lecturer, Thesis Coordinator

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I would like to thank Dawn Finley for always challenging me, for questioning and trusting me in a single gesture, and for expanding my library of picture books;

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And the Pajarito for keeping everything in perspective.
The Cast of Civic Characters is a civic complex for Houston that couples municipal service counters with other public amenities including an auditorium, dining hall, outreach center, gym, and pool. Each program is housed in a separate small building that takes on the likeness of an animate creature. The collective “herd” occupies a single city block.

The project posits that creature-buildings intensify architecture’s communicative and storytelling potential; by soliciting a fictional vitality, they mythologize architecture’s agency and enable public institutions to craft narratives about their identities. Each Character’s form is generated from an extruded profile that is broken along a central seam, hinged, and partially rotated according to a shallow angle. This technique conjures an image-able, dynamic figure that is graphic and immediate, but also temporal and modulating from multiple vantage points. The simple act of slightly rotating the elevation condenses both pictorial and sculptural perception into a single architectural form.

While their physical and behavioral quirks may be funny, the Characters are seriously invested in the cock-eyed but calculated politics of making government in the post-public city lovable once again. Characters invite their users to suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in the imaginative notion of civicness. By assuming the likeness and behavior of something outside the domain of architecture, namely animate creatures, Characters invite people to project narratives upon buildings. Above all else, by appealing to the human proclivity for telling and listening to stories, Characters summon architecture to participate in and shape people’s pleasures, rendering the world a more wondrous place.
CONTENTS

11 Once Upon a Time
40 Drawings
62 Department Catalog
74 Photographs: Model
86 Photographs: Final Defense
92 Bibliography
95 About the Type
Once Upon a time, five buildings in Houston stood invisible in the background of our daily lives. While they stood still, all around them, the city was rapidly changing. The economy was booming, the population was exploding, and so too, the bureaucracy and services of the city were bulging at their seams. Houston’s municipal workings couldn’t keep up pace: formerly public institutions and spaces (even parking spaces) were privatizing. Meanwhile, frustrated citizens were polarizing in their political beliefs, yet fewer and fewer people were voting on election day.
The buildings grew restless and could not appear still any longer. Banding together as a gang, the five buildings took on the likeness of animate creatures and assumed the role of characters in a communal story.
Perhaps they were always shaped with such beastliness and had simply been hidden from view.

No one is quite sure.
But what happened next is certain. Fidgety from their dormancy, the Characters gathered together on a city block along a busy thoroughfare, and instantly they knew how to be useful again.
The multiple scales of existing buildings (including homes, strip malls, and towers) that surrounded the block intrigued the Characters, but they had no desire to contextually “fit in” to the neighborhood. To create a curious intrigue, the Characters assumed perched postures and calibrated their bodies to appear a little too big to be houses, but a little too small to be mid- or high-rises.
Motorists zooming down Memorial Drive couldn’t help but slow down in surprise as they noticed the Characters’ strange “in-between” scale and stance. Some people even got out of their cars to experience how the scale and disposition of the Characters’ features compared to their own bodies.
Now confident in their role as collective protagonists rather than individual vessels, the Characters began participating in civic life to better engage with Houstonians. Branding themselves as a Cast of Civic Characters, each Character plays host to a new city office: the Departments of Communal Fitness, Collective Storytelling, Public Provisions, Crowdsourcing, and Social Leisure respectively. Each department combines a transactional clerk’s office (i.e. counters issuing official permits, licenses, and registrations) with familiar group pleasures (e.g. sport court, stage, pub, wishing well, and wading pool), now offered via an explicitly civic framework.
For example, the Department of Collective Storytelling brings together Houston’s historical and social narratives into an accessible public forum and archive. As an extension of the existing County Clerk’s Office, this new office facilitates transactions of business and marriage licenses. The Department is organized around a small chapel for civil union & marriage ceremonies and a storytelling stage that features regular readings, poetry slams, and curated YouTube screenings. Recording booths invite citizens to share personal stories that are broadcast on a weekly radio show, *This Houstonian Life*. 
Constructed in concrete and cast into strange but familiar forms, the Characters are decidedly perched in place, permanent, and perhaps even a bit stubborn.

Yet they look like they might get up and start walking around. By providing new animate architectures and programmatic plots for multiple municipal offices to re-invent their identities, the Characters assure the public of the vitality of a new contemporary civic realm.
While varying in physique and pose, the cast maintains genetical resemblance. Like reconfigured puzzle pieces from a finite set of tangrams, each Character’s exterior massing conforms to consistent geometric modules, radial inflections, and angles of incidence. The module at play involves only simple geometry: straight lines and a quarter-circle arc. Like tangrams, this module is combined and reconfigured to generate a family of profiles that conjure images of animate creatures—that is: profiles that may solicit interpretations as exhibiting limbs, appendages, snouts, and other features that are familiar as animate but not indicative of any specific animal.
These strange but familiar profiles are subsequently extruded and endowed with a particular bias. Each extruded profile is broken along a central seam, hinged, and partially rotated according to a shallow angle. This technique produces a dynamic figure that is graphic and immediately recognizable, but also temporal and modulating from multiple vantage points. It renders the object neither purely frontal nor in-the-round. The simple act of slightly rotating the elevation condenses both pictorial and sculptural perception into a single architectural gesture.
Beyond this formal intrigue, though, the hinged extrusion also produces particular perceptual and organizational effects. It beckons people to circulate around and within the Characters. It’s fun to discover how the profile, posture, and perch of individual Characters and their relation to other Characters changes as you circle around them. From one vantage point, a Character might seem to be precariously balancing on a single limb, while from another, that same Character might appear strolling on two.
Flickering back and forth between familiar and surprising, it pulls you around and under, in, and up. It renders architecture as a kind of game that can be played by simply occupying and wandering around in public space. All along the way, the modulating figural stances suggest multiple personalities and attitudes.
Additionally, the hinged extrusion produces chevron-like footprints in plan that challenges the expectations for civic buildings to have discrete front, back, and sides as found in conventional extrusions. This amplifies the opportunities for multiple building-characters to relate to one another as any one Character can be directed toward and seemingly “face” multiple others. By being co-located on a single site, the Characters tease each other and implicate each other in spheres of influence that are greater than their individual virtues.
Offset emanating turf lines, paver patterns, small changes in ground level, and constantly shifting and looming shadows further amplify the hinged extrusions and render the ground plan a kind of gameboard in which different zones are granted joint ownership by various permutations of Characters. Athletic lines emerge from one Character’s footing while a radiating lasso of bollard-benches couples two opposite Characters into a provisional alliance.
The figuration facilitated by hinged extrusion is also reinforced by a graphic strategy. Like a street gang donning matching outfits, the Characters heighten their kinship through corresponding color treatment and perforation. As if being toasted in the sun, similarly-facing surfaces among multiple Characters receive similar color accent, privileging their graphic identity as a group.
Moreover, it blushes the complexion of surfaces that would already be perceived as darker by shade and shadow; heightening the ongoing flicker between reality and imagination.
To complete the familial affect, each Character is perforated according to a consistent logic of an even gradient. At ground level, the perforations are identical, but as they proceed upward, they morph into different shapes for different Characters, rendering their attitude consistent but their affects particular.
On the interior, the contours of the each perforated shape generate an immersive wall pattern appliqué, which in conjunction with the dappled light facilitated by the openings, render each interior distinctive but of the same sensibility.
The Characters are informed operatively by Hejduk’s various masques and formally by R.E. Somol’s graphic expediency project. Conceived as actors in a play set in the city, Hejduk’s masques were a troupe of architectural objects that conflated the identity of a building with a fictional individual—effectively rendering buildings as subjects themselves.
Each masque was named, scripted, and crafted as an uncanny assemblage of highly articulated parts that, in aggregate, evoked images of shelters, machines, and animals. The idiosyncratic differences of the various masques provided a poetic means to figurally narrate the coexistence of many separate individuals.
The Civic Characters share their Hejdukian grandparents’ ambition to position buildings as active subjects that use references, nomenclature, and strange but familiarly image-able forms to instantiate a pleasurable suspension of everyday life. But unlike their grandparents, the Characters aim to conflate a building with an emerging civically-engaged collective rather than an individual. The Characters’ monolithic forms and evenly-treated perforations therefore privilege their exterior sameness and familial kinship over their differences.
Formally then, the Characters build upon Somol’s theory of graphic expediency. Like Somol’s shapes and logos, Characters capitalize on a saturated profile whose imagability might gather and coalesce new collectives that didn’t previously exist. For Somol, shapes must be “vague, but precise,” “imageable but without reference,” and seemingly arbitrary to be free from critical reading.
In contrast, with their hinged extrusions, tritone coloration, and idiosyncratic articulations, Characters are emphatically animate, a bit goofy, and prone to multiple references. If Somol’s logos insist on their otherworldly power, then Characters invite an imaginary-worldly access. Buoyed by mischievous play and deeply versed in children’s picture books, Characters produce new worlds that are penetrable and friendly.
While their physical and behavioral quirks may be funny, the Characters are very serious. By coupling a figurally solicitous architecture with singular programmatic condensers, each Character encourages cooperation and conjures dynamic images for what civic life could look like.
The Characters are invested in the cock-eyed but calculated politics of making government lovable once again. Characters invite their users to suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in the imaginative notion of civiiness. By assuming the likeness and behavior of something outside the domain of architecture, namely animate creatures, Characters invite
people to project narratives upon buildings—stories that might instantiate a momentary suspension of everyday life. Above all else, by appealing to the human proclivity for telling and listening to stories, Characters summon architecture to participate in and shape people’s pleasures, rendering the world a more wondrous place. **FIN**
Down At The Heels
One Leg Up
Keep Your Feet On The Ground
Down On Your Knees
Two Left Feet
Best Foot Forward

Arch Of Your Foot Perched Lightly Tread Tippy Toe Hind Legs

Stoic Proud Affable Eager Playful Retrospective Earnest Grouchy Earnest Loquacious Haughty Stolid Hospitable Impatient Restless Loquacious
Earnest Grouchy Earnest Retrospective Eager Playful Proud Stoic
Arrogant Cocky Obsequious Wary Loyal Jealous Attentive Slothful
Tenacious Patriotic Gentle
Sneaky Tense Clumsy
Charming Rude Mischief Chatty Confident Suspicious Focused

X
“...his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around...”
“And now,” cried Max, “let the wild rumpus start!”
DEPARTMENT CATALOG

THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNAL FITNESS

“Philip”
MAXIMUM OCCUPANCY: 53

THE DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC PROVISIONS

“Preston”
MAXIMUM OCCUPANCY: 116

THE DEPARTMENT OF COLLECTIVE STORYTELLING

“Stella”
MAXIMUM OCCUPANCY: 128
The Department of Storytelling

“Leela”
MAXIMUM OCCUPANY: 128

The Department of Crowdsourcing

“Kramer”
MAXIMUM OCCUPANY: 72

The Department of Social Leisure

“Leela”
MAXIMUM OCCUPANY: 98
The Department of Communal Fitness opens at 4am daily, welcoming redeye travelers, early risers, and insomniacs alike to put their wide-awakeness to productive bodily use. As an extension of the Health Department, this new office facilitates 5K run registration, Houston B-Cycle sharing, and kayak rentals for the nearby bayou. Its everyday fitness programs are staffed by volunteers who work a modest number of hours per week to earn their membership. The Department’s mezzanine-level squash court legendary for its seasonal neighborhood tournaments. Fitness goers “clock-in” their exercise hours on an electronic timecard, which the city uses to calculate the cost-benefit analysis of tax dollars to urban health and to lobby for new fitness ordinances.
The Department of Public Provisions sports a hearty appetite for bringing people together with food. As an extension of the Consumer Health Department, this new office issues licenses for mobile food units: both push carts and food trucks. The Department also boasts overnight storage for street vendors’ carts and a commercial kitchen for rent. The wafting aroma from the bakers’ ovens seeps into the inclined open dining hall. The tiered communal tables terminate at the Provisions’ Public House. Pub trivia and local beer tastings take place every Thursday night. Hops-sippers receive one free drink when they donate canned goods to the Department’s food depository dropbox.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 15, 2014
The Department of Collective Storytelling brings together Houston’s historical and social narratives into an accessible public forum and archive. As an extension of the County Clerk’s Office, this new office facilitates transactions of business and marriage licenses. The Department is pleased to issue marriage licenses free of charge annually on Valentine’s Day. The Department is organized around a small chapel for civil ceremonies and a storytelling stage that features regular readings, performances, poetry slams, and curated YouTube screenings. Recording booths invite citizens to share personal stories that are broadcast on a weekly radio show, This Houstonian Life. An audio and visual archive preserves these stories alongside records of municipal licenses and milestones.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 15, 2014
The Department of Crowdsourcing supports fundraising efforts for emerging community enterprises. As an extension of the Finance Department, this new office handles applications for organizations seeking non-profit status. At its physical core, a building-scaled coin funnel entices passersby to donate their change. A monthly contest awards the earnings from this contemporary wishing well to a worthy local organization. Safety deposit boxes that line the opaque walls provide a public safekeeping alternative. A phone drive call center hub occupies the Department’s uppermost level. A partnership with the Department of Collective Storytelling helps stage and screen Kickstarter videos.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 15, 2014
The Department of Social Leisure is an oasis of play amid everyday hubbub and the daily grind. As an extension of the Recreation Department, this new office issues permits for city festivals and special events. On scalding hot Houston afternoons, nothing beats a refreshing dip in the Department’s rooftop wading pool and public bath. Leisure seekers interested in teasing their brains might engage in the civic chessboard and more kinetic personalities might meet up with a friend on the municipal swing set.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 15, 2014
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R. E. Somol, “Indifferent Urbanism or Modernism was Almost Alright,” in Ilka and Andreas Ruby, eds., *Urban Transformations* (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2008), 326-33


“Taiwan Pavilion Round Table Discussion” YouTube video, posted by “Taiwan Pavilion | Township of Domestic Parts,” July 8, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjYLp9Oh_XE

ITC Caslon 224 was designed by the American typographer Ed Benguiat for the International Typeface Corporation in 1983. One of several modern-day interpretations of the sixteenth century English typeface designed by William Caslon I, ITC Caslon 224 has a large x-height and a high contrast between thick and thin strokes. In lectures, Benguiat reports that he chose the number 224 because it was the address of the building where he did most of his work.

**BARON NEUE** is an uppercase display typeface designed by the Dutch typographer Frank Hemmekam in 2013 and distributed by the Fontfabric type foundry.