an interactionist's view: people, planning, and unpredictability in lars lerup's unbuildable *love/house* drawings

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abstract

This essay examines the unbuildable architectural and interior design drawings of *Love/House* (1984) by architect and professor Lars Lerup. Developed at University of California, Berkeley, and the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Lerup's work is shown to use fictional narratives in drawings to explore certain poetic ideas about the human experience from Roland Barthes's 1977 book, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. His deliberate exploration of artistic, fictional, and unrealisable aesthetic effects aimed to offer a critical revision to the rise of American West-Coast suburbanisation, and the commercialisation of domestic, social behaviours in an increasingly commoditised media culture of the 1980s.

Through a close reading of several of Lerup's lesser known texts from the 1970s and 1980s that foregrounded the *Love/House* project, this essay shows there was more to his work than the somewhat cryptic and idiosyncratic employment of fictional drawings to challenge the commercial rhetoric of late-capitalism. It argues that his largely unexamined approaches to spatial design resulted from a deeper theoretical derivation that human action was irreducibly unpredictable, and unable to be categorised into behaviourist models or functional planning. By unpacking the qualities of his 'interactionist view' of people, objects, and the built environment from his first theoretical text, *Building the Unfinished* (1977), the unbuildable compositional effects of the *Love/House* drawings are shown to have resulted from his earlier attempts to establish the complex and unpredictable nature of human action as the central tenet of spatial design. For Lerup, exploring ideas of poetry and fiction in drawings played a crucial role in cultivating his theory of space that reflects people's unfinished search for meaning.

keywords

unbuildable interiors, architectural drawings, postmodernism, planning, Lars Lerup

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the shadowy, unbuildable world

In 1987, the architect Professor Lars Lerup published a small book entitled *Planned Assaults* with the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal (CCA).[1] This book chronicled the qualities and properties of three of Lerup's architecture and interior projects*: The Nofamily House* (1982), *Love/House* (1984), and *Texas Zero* (1984), with seventy-four of his drawings, sketches, plans, and paintings. In the foreword to the book, Phyllis Lambert, the Director of the CCA, described these projects as belonging to a rarely explored genre of spatial design that is unique because it is unbuildable.[2] Lambert explains that Lerup's projects were not unbuildable in the sense of fantasy or festival architecture, nor unbuildable due to their inclusion of 'technologies not yet available.'[3] Instead, she suggests these drawings were unbuildable because they were 'proposed as critical and philosophical discourse.'[4] Lerup had developed drawings of spaces that could not be built in order to provoke dialogue and debate about the agency of architecture and its impacts on how we live our lives.

What is particularly significant about this theoretical endeavour was how seriously Lerup proposed that exploring *unbuildability* was a substantial method to impact spatial design, and, consequently, the extent to which Lerup's methods expand our understanding of ideas about how we occupy, interact, and ultimately make meaningful connections with real spaces. Lerup's ideas of unbuildability are the subject of this essay. Through a close reading of several of his early and lesser known texts from the 1970s and 1980s, it unpacks his cryptic, underexamined, and highly idiosyncratic use of poetic ideas in unbuildable projects to develop his 'interactionist view' of spatial design, people, and objects. This view would be the foundation for his later ideas of 'vitalism'—as the shared, interactive relationship between buildings' 'material and dweller(s)'—he later explained in *After the City* (2000), and has recently expanded on in his new book *The Life and Death of Objects* (2022) and accompanying Drawing Matter essay, 'Objects That Meet' (2022).[5] By revisiting his early projects that have largely been relegated to an era of architectural drawing concerned with artistic, whimsical, and inconsequential aesthetic effects, this essay shows it was the very impracticality of exploring unbuildable, poetic design ideas that, for Lerup, established new theoretical grounds to humanise architecture in retort to the hyper-conflation of functional planning and economic rationalism of the 1980s.

Turning to the drawings, Lerup's unreserved focus on *unbuildability* appears to have been driven by his unique interest in exploring textual and rhetorical ideas from poetry in spatial design prior to the 1987 publication of *Planned Assaults*. The aim of this was an attempt to explore questions about how spaces can evoke certain emotions and sensory responses in viewers and occupants. As recognised by Lambert, the key to Lerup's novel approach was a coupling of poetic discourse on certain emotional states with imaginary spatial conditions illustrated in the three drawing projects. In her foreword, she observes that these projects depict 'states of being rather than to the physical reality of use.'[6] And Lerup himself, when speaking specifically about the project *Love/House*, introduces the idea that the architectonic decisions for its interior composition and spatial arrangements were based on the poetic description of the emotional state of 'lovers'—a state of waiting—which he developed with an allegory of a waiting lover from the 'amorous figures' of Roland Barthes's 1977 book, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* [Fig. 01.].[7]

Lerup explains that his figures should not be understood as real people able to populate reality. Instead, like Barthes's amorous, fictional figures that describe particular poetic aspects of lovers' emotional states, Lerup similarly suggests his figures should be understood as the 'acceptation'—or general idea—of similar states, yet now transmuted from the fictional pages of Barthes's text to the fictional pages of his architectural drawings.[8] He suggests that, like Barthes's poetic descriptions,

Figure 01.
'Amorous Drift: Enigma of the Night (Amnesia of the Day).' From: Lars Lerup, *Planned Assaults: The Nofamily House, Love/House, Texas Zero* (Centre Canadian d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture; Distributed by MIT Press, 1987), p. 68. Image used with permission from Lars Lerup.

when the qualities of these figures he describes in drawings resonate with our own experiences, we as viewers flesh out their general qualities by indulging their idiosyncrasies.[9] In this way, Lerup's amorous figures can be understood as virtual prompts, never intended to reflect real people but instead act as a kind of poetic narrative of occupying architecture that—in a way similar to poetry's capacity to provoke our emotions—stimulates sensorial effects for viewers when reflecting on their own experiences of inhabiting buildings.

As an exercise in housing these virtual figures, *Love/House* is conceived as an unbuildable place within which they reside, an imaginary architecture Lerup describes as a kind of 'armature' for the qualities and properties of this discourse on poetry, a 'house never to be built, a place for the imagination: such is the scaffold for the waiting lover.'[10] In a similar approach of transmuting Barthes's ideas of figures from text to drawings, Lerup transmutes properties of a real house into a shadowy 'dream house' as a means to conceptualise the qualities of *Love/House's* imaginary design.[11] Within the pages of *Planned Assaults*, his drawings and paintings chronicle this transmutation in images of architecture that manipulate conventional representations of a conceivable building into metamorphic depictions of an unrecognisable structure [Fig. 02].

Concurrent with the manipulation in drawing, Lerup describes a parallel shift in the parameters affecting his decisions about spatial design. He suggests that, for instance, the certainty of physical laws to impact a building's structure—such as gravity—lose meaning and are displaced by the enigmatic properties of dreams that are characterised by the capacity to evoke the 'most tentative of interpretations.'[12] He goes on to describe this new shadowy house as 'the upside-down world of the dream', and by conceiving it as the literal antonym of reality, its invention—for all its unbuildable imaginary qualities—follows a specific logic of designing real architecture.[13] This enables Lerup to endow it with a great level of detail and complexity

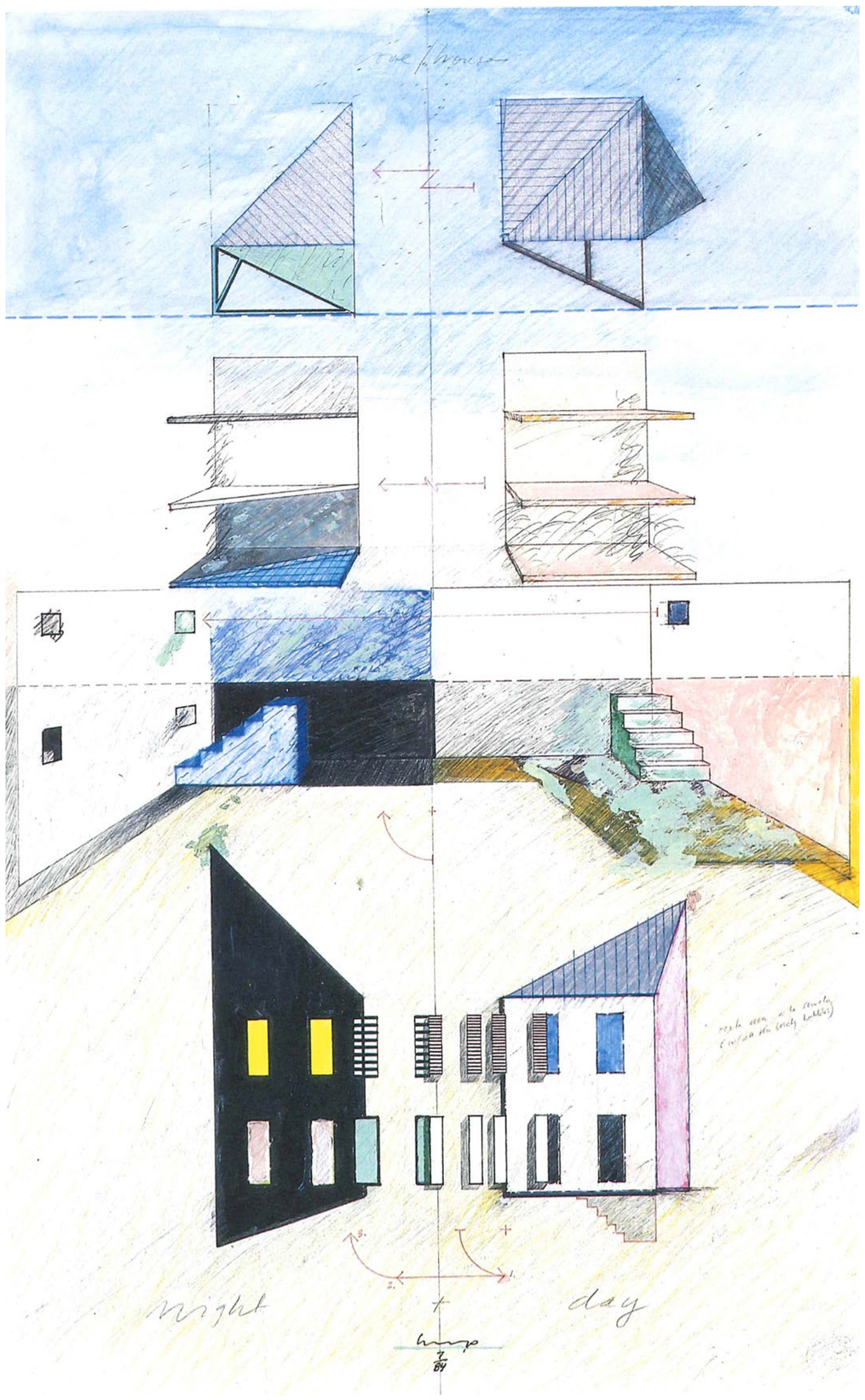

Figure 02.
'Love/House: Transformation (Night and Day).' From: Lars Lerup, *Planned Assaults: The Nofamily House, Love/House, Texas Zero* (Centre Canadian d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture; Distributed by MIT Press, 1987), p. 64. Image used with permission from Lars Lerup.

by systematically inverting the conceivably real elements of architecture into ones that can only exist in the fictional space of the drawing.

Beyond the sentimental exploration of emotive ideas in *Love/House*, the relevance of this method of poetic enquiry is apparent in its attempt to provide insight into the persuasive, rhetorical influence of architecture and its drawings on our perceptions and experiences of inhabiting buildings. In *Planned Assaults*, Lerup establishes the argument that assumptions and social biases about inhabitation are literally illustrated into conventional building plans, and assert indirect

influences on our lived experiences of real spaces once built.[14] He focuses on the suburban single-family house as the typology that most acutely articulates this phenomenon, and unpacking this idea is the central tenet linking these three unbuildable drawing projects. What is particularly unique about Lerup's approach is the emphasis he places on the drawing. Acknowledging that the house plan is a 'graphic abstraction' and 'can never be experienced directly', he suggests its influence on inhabitation is nonetheless 'rigid and finite', and that it defines the 'interior landscape' of the house as the 'primary territory of the American Dream.'[15]

To substantiate this claim, Lerup situates the plan, and its influence on the built form of the suburban home, in a category of 'numerous additional structures of influence' of media and rhetoric of the 1980s.[16] These include, the 'rhetoric of politics and law, ceremonial oratory, the language of everyday life, and various texts and image assemblies, from the codes of behaviour whose sources range from advice columns and advertising to television soap operas.'[17]

In this sense, he situates the drawn plan as operating like the fashion magazine or sit-com of commercial media culture, which presents an idealised illustration of gender roles, cultural norms, and aspirational identities to maintain media-driven ideas of social etiquette and relations that together establish the new 'fundament of order and discipline for the family.'[18] Lerup argues that inhabiting both the physical structure of the house and its imagined social conditions established by the plan produce a grand narrative of suburban occupation, a type of 'morality manifested in form', which he characterises with Michel Foucault's term 'disciplinary mechanism', to describe a system of power in suburban domestic interior spaces that order and control our perceptions, relations, behaviours, and customs in a late-capitalist cultural imaginary.[19]

Within this context, the unbuildable drawings of *Love/House* operate as a critical revision of suburban occupation. They 'assault' the grand narrative of the suburban house by interrupting the underexamined order and discipline of its structural and social forms.[20] Inhabiting the shadowy space of lovers is the impetus for this assault. Lerup suggests the poetic, emotive experience of lovers has been excluded from the grand narrative of the suburban house and, by attempting to design a place for Barthes's fictional amorous figures, *Love/House* transgresses the limits of accepted suburban behaviour.[21] Like Foucault's heterotopic 'other' space of the mirror, that 'invert[s] the set of relations [it happens to] reflect', the shadowy, unbuildable drawings of *Love/House* operate as a 'counter-site' to critique the suburban home through exploring the properties of lived experience it excludes.[22] With this approach, ideas of what is real and unbuildable are drawn into question, as the authenticity of emotive experience, captured in poetry, questions the legitimacy of commercialised, suburban reality.

Lerup's assaults on late-capitalist built environments with poetic ideas of unbuildable, shadowy 'other' spaces appears to have been part of his broader critical commentary on the failings and limitations of late-twentieth-century cities he was developing throughout the 1980s—before his later well-known texts on the subject, such as *After the City* (2000). For instance, as a critical review of the new additions to the Stockholm subway system by Michael Granit and Per Reimers, Lerup wrote a short article in 1984 for the University of California, Berkeley, journal *Places*.[23] This was the same year that the original exhibition for *Love/House* was shown at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) gallery, also at UC Berkeley.[24]

In this article, Lerup established an opposition between the construction of buildings in the above-ground world of Stockholm and the production of its new subterranean interior spaces. He paints a picture of Stockholm as maturing into an uncomfortable and derivative type of late-modernist urban rigidity, 'governed by an increasingly turgid and standardized attitude, leaving all innovation stranded on the shores of rules and regulations.'[25] He contrasts this

condition by describing a 'newfound liberty below the surface', which he characterises as a type of poetic, creative space in 'the depths of the bedrock that forms the datum of the city' [Fig. 03].[26]

Like his architectonic explorations in the drawings of *Love/House*, Lerup similarly employs the idea of transmuting real spaces into shadowy unreal environments, though here at an urban scale. To describe the conception of this new subterranean interior, he uses the imagery of 'blasting the rock' that was required to create the spaces for the subway as a metaphor for blowing up the dominant modernist narratives concerning the city's functional planning.[27] He describes how as the 'very grammar of the "real" world has been altered for a freer and more inspired structure in the depths', the objects displaced from their established positions in the grand narrative of the city above are transmuted into a field of disassociated things in the shadowy, subterranean interior with no dominant code to decipher their meaning.[28] The literal process Lerup is referring to was the decorative strategy for the subway's interior that left large surfaces of the subterranean rockface exposed and adorned its surfaces with artistic, historical, and popular references from the city above, such as large paintings, murals, and historical statues that were either cast as copies or directly emplaced. With poetic sentiment, Lerup describes the scene of fragmented and colliding artistic references in the subterranean interior as a kind of *field* of detritus:

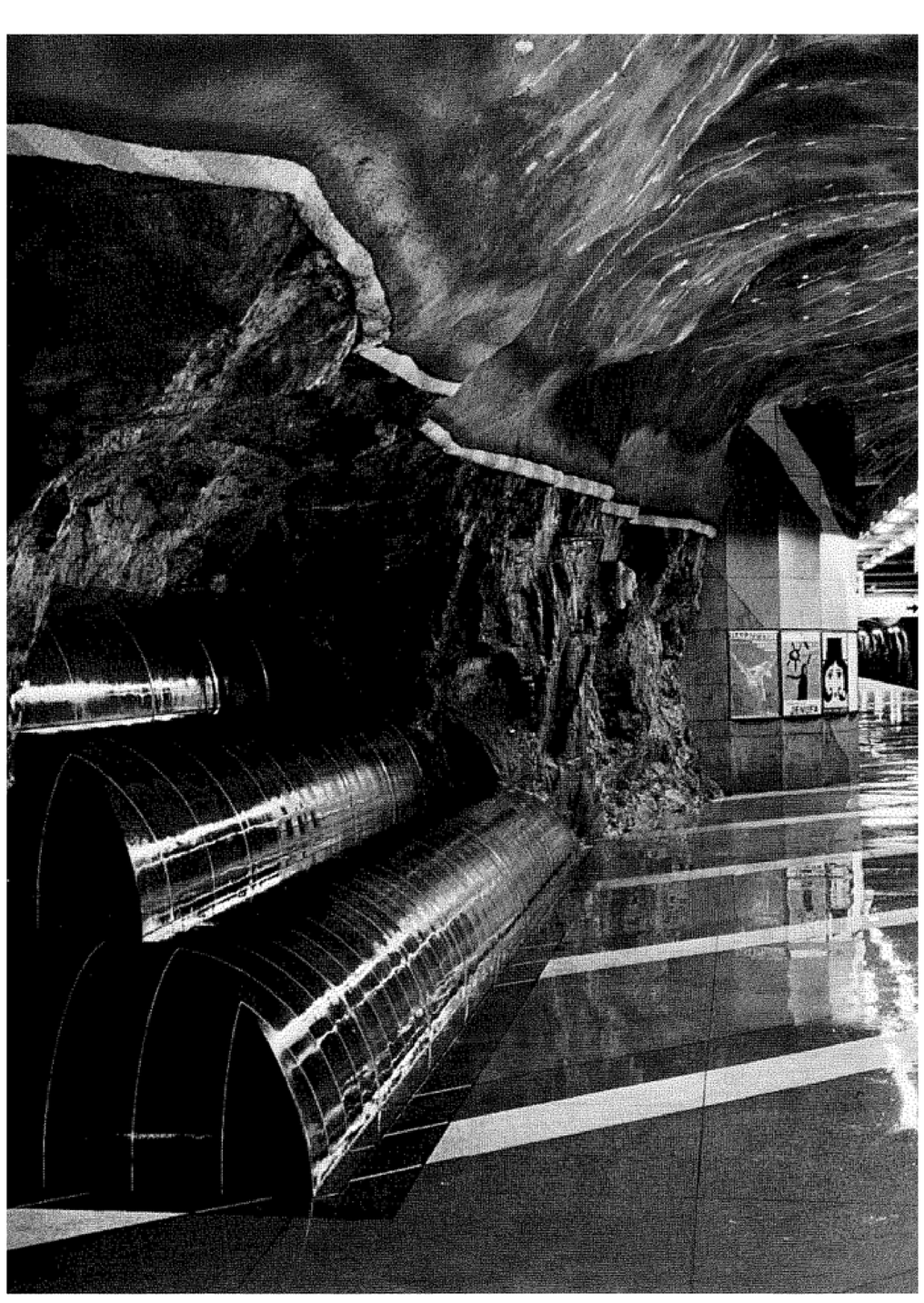

Figure 03.
'Half-cylinders form an artificial waterfall; in the back, opera events are posted on a giant pilaster.' From Lars Lerup, 'Below the Surface', *Places*, 1.3 (1984), pp. 3–9 (p. 3). Image used with permission from Lars Lerup.

> Giant cola tabs are represented on the floor next to equally flat, but almost real, fossils. Cast cement figures occupy almost-niches in the walls. All these fragments from the world above have been brought underground, but the 35 meters has disfigured, transformed, and displaced them. Almost insubstantial, both painted and cast objects have lost not only some of their form but also their meaning.[29]

This descriptive imagery of a dissociated, meaningless field of fragmented objects echoes popular compositional studies from the period that significantly impacted postmodern discourse on architecture at this time. Manfredo Tafuri's groundbreaking analysis of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's plan of Campo Marzio (1762) engraving, for instance, describes similar effects of the bricolage collision of Rome's historical monuments in a fictional urban plan of the city, and its impacts on dismantling dominant narratives of history and syntactic structures of meaning.[30] Indeed, Lerup himself acknowledges the relationship between the disruptive compositional effects in the drawings of *Love/House* and discourse of a 'postmodern era.'[31] He describes the dominant narrative of the single-family house as an 'aesthetic play on modernism', and suggests his assaults are attempts at the 'undermining of dogma, be it modernism, historicism, or behaviourism', by similarly collapsing the syntactic structure of the house plan that holds these dominant narratives together.[32]

In the article on the Stockholm subway, Lerup frames this new subterranean interior as deriving from the same processes of dismantling dominant narratives that resulted in *Love/House*. And, that its similar transmutation of elements from the city above into the shadowy, subterranean interior—like *Love/House*—appear to equally operate as 'corrosive forms of antihistoricism.'[33] However, his further description of this process in the subway goes beyond the postmodern dilemma Tafuri identifies as 'the reduction of space to a tangle of *things* that question one another's meaning interchangeably in an impossible colloquy.'[34] Instead, he extends the metaphor of transmutation from the overall space of the subway to the new artworks that ornament its rocky walls. Referring to the works of Ulrik Samuelson, for instance, Lerup describes how his Harlequin paintings and sculptures take 'operatic references' from the world above, and transmute them into the 'shadow world' of Kungsträdgården Station, to '[establish] a set of symmetries between the park and the institutions above.'[35] He observes:

> Their petrification has given them new life, radically contradicting their insubstantiality. Harlequin's tights have gained new force, their rude flattening has burst the seams so that his body has been fully erased—the references to the opera above fade away; liberated, the cloth of the buffoon is no longer a mere wrapping but rock itself.[36]

The critical shift in Lerup's thinking about these shadowy worlds, from their perception as negative commentary on the late-modern city to the constructive exploration of new spatial ideas, occurs in relation to his use of the term 'flattening.'[37] When first referring to the symbols of 'giant cola tabs' and 'fossils,' he implies that within the process of transmuting these elements from the world above to the world below, they have been reduced to images and objects displaced from their meaning as insubstantial representations.[38] However, when discussing the references to the Harlequin figure, Lerup suggests that in the process of flattening it into a fragment, an opportunity arises to produce new meaning between the observer and the painted image, or, in the case of sculpture, between the subway's inhabitant and the physical object. In the process of transmutation, similar to the dismantling of the real house for the shadowy *Love/House*, Lerup suggests that—in as much as these objects are freed from their meaning that is defined by the historical and commercial narratives of the rigid, modern city above—they are also freed from the systems of knowledge that govern our way of perceiving them. And so, they are able to become something new [Fig. 04].

Important to this critical shift is the construction of new meaning through an engagement with the 'rock itself.'[39] By acknowledging the material experience of these displaced images and objects in the subterranean interior, Lerup suggests that—beyond their implied description as detritus—they hint at a new, and complex, interrelationship between their immediate presence and inhabitant's search for new meaning. In this challenge to the limits of late-modern ideas of functional planning, the shadowy, virtual world of *Love/House* and the Stockholm subway interior articulate new interests in the space of perception and interpretation in the gaps between things. The complexities of this gap, and its capacity to contest functional planning through compositional strategies for unbuildable architectural and interior designs, can be understood by examining key ideas that emerged in Lerup's first theoretical text on architecture, *Building the Unfinished*.

building the unfinished

Articulating a theory on the space between people and objects is the central theme of Lerup's book *Building the Unfinished: Architecture and Human Action* (1977). Published ten years before *Planned Assaults*, this book 'cast new light on the relation between people and the built environment' by establishing and sharing a new understanding of the 'complexity and evasiveness of the relation between people and things.'[40] Apparent in Lerup's research from this period is an uneasiness with the suggestion that one can predict and control how

Figure 04.
Harlequin's tights painted onto the exposed rock and concrete surfaces of Kungsträdgården subway station, Stockholm. 'Kungsträdgården Metro station, Stockholm. West entrance/exit' (2014). Arild Vågen CC BY-SA 3.0

designed objects are used. Even in Lerup's most pragmatic texts from the period, he alludes to an unknown complexity between objects and their use. In another of his early written texts on transit systems in pedestrian environments that appears to preface several ideas explored in *Building the Unfinished*, for instance, he foreshadows his future interest in this area of spatial design by compellingly describing this complexity as something 'intimate and highly inter-dependent', and worthy of great consideration.[41]

This interest in the relationship between people and objects appears to have been shaped by a desire to question the pragmatic narrative between user behaviour and the physical environment indoctrinated through ideas of functional planning. In *Building the Unfinished,* Lerup describes this ideology as a 'super-functionalist' and 'behaviourist' theoretical model that attempts to govern human action with architectural form.[42] Arguing against the implementation of such ideas in 'modern mass housing' he suggests that,

> The desire to reduce architecture to a tool, in service of people's utilitarian needs only, is both arbitrary and unreasonable. Arbitrary because utility is traditionally the minor function of architecture, unreasonable because architecture by nature performs this function poorly.[43]

This two-fold critique is compelling in both its simplicity and its ambition to refute pragmatism in spatial design. By arguing against an inherent, proscribed, or even easy relationship between

people and objects, it challenges the unifying idea of functional planning based on performance. And simultaneously—by describing architecture's value as historically being greater than its function—it alludes to the presence of an unseen and more meaningful relationship between both things. With this critique, Lerup both acknowledges the failings of functional planning *and* identifies the need for a 'new view of the interplay between people and the physical setting' beyond pragmatic and practical limitations—establishing the foundation for his later foray into the impractical and capricious exploration of poetic and unbuildable ideas in drawings.[44]

Lerup titles his new approach to the interplay between people and objects as an 'interactionist view', a term he appropriates from the concept of *Symbolic Interactionism* by philosophers and social theorists George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer.[45] Interestingly, he begins to describe this view by considering the relationship between objects, their meaning, and their context in a manner that resonates with his later description of the Stockholm subway as a shadowy field of detritus in 1984, and his illustrated dismantling of the house plan's syntactic structure in the 1987 *Love/House* drawings. He states, '[e]ach building is a stage with an assortment of props on, in and with which the dwellers live out their dramas.'[46]

This conceptual image of the built environment as a field or stage of fragmented and disassociated objects is a significant conceptual frame for Lerup, and first appears in his visual surveys of use patterns in urban settings from the early 1970s. In 1972, for instance, in an earlier study of Kungsträdgården, Stockholm, twelve years before his analysis of its subway station, he introduces the idea of the urban space as a stage or backdrop on which unrelated and disassociated objects are placed and on which moments of human interaction and experience occur.

> The public space is the arena where these many acts of freedom can be pursued, and from the user's perspective, it should support this need. The built environment is the support structure, the scene and backdrop where these acts can be performed.[47]

Later, in the same article, Lerup describes his observations of human activity as, 'irregular, spontaneous, and erratic', and with an equal amount of disassociation from the built environment.[48] These observations of people and objects at Kungsträdgården conjure imagery of a fragmented microcosm, a spectrum of indeterminate human actions and experiences playing out on an open stage, with little governing structure to order their unrelated trajectories [Fig. 05].

Importantly, upon this stage, Lerup suggests meaning is derived from a 'congruence' between the variable states of people's actions and their engagements with the objects in the urban setting.[49] The term congruence is a significant descriptor for Lerup, and he quotes William Michelson's use of the term in order to convey its conceptual relevance:

> Thus the model I suggest is not of determinism or the dominance of one system over another, but rather one of congruence of states of variables in one system coexisting better with states of variables in another system than with other alternative states.[50]

Despite his appropriation of Michelson's use of the term, this description acutely reflects Lerup's conception of his interactionist view. Congruence refers to a state of momentary agreement between the attributes of an object and a person's intentions. Unlike modern aphorisms such as 'form follows function' that suggest a discrete and linear relationship between an object's conception and its use, congruence implies objects have no fixed use or implicit meaning, and only constitute one half of the object/people interactionist coupling. The other half of the coupling is people's 'experience, their bias and temperament' they bring to objects, making them useful and meaningful by how they intend to use them.[51] One example Lerup uses to

demonstrate this idea of congruence is Marcel Duchamp's ready-made sculpture *Trébuchet* (1917): a simple coat rack, which when removed from the wall and placed on the floor by the artist operates as a trap to catch prey.[52] Importantly, he goes on to explain that the meanings and uses people assign to objects are not fixed but in a state of 'constant self-reflection and persistent interpretation'.[53] This fluidity of meaning and use, based on people's interminable questioning of identity, significance, and need appears to only condense towards a momentarily static state when people interact with objects for whatever purpose they intend to achieve through the interaction.

Lerup identifies the important role of the stage itself—as the built environment we populate—in these congruent interactions of people and objects. Describing the built environment as an extension of objects—like the way a chess board is an extension of its pieces—he states, 'the physical setting is the anchor of the interaction and self-reflection',[54] and that people 'bring their lives to these stages', and in doing so assign meaning 'to the stage and its props, in a constant interaction between past experience and new'.[55] He goes on to describe the congruence between people and the stage of objects as 'a dialectic between the internal and the external [where] the meaning of space is momentarily confirmed'.[56] Rather than assuming space is a neutral, inert, and stable phenomenon, he argues that people's production of meaning through 'self-reflection and interpretation', 'causes the meaning of the physical setting to become highly unpredictable'.[57] For Lerup, space itself, or a discrete and unified perception of our built environment, is only part of the fleeting experience of congruence between people and objects.

This reconfiguration of space, and its meaning, as a relativistic phenomenon was an approach to conceptualising built environments that was apparent in postmodern discourse at the time. Robert Venturi, for instance, in 1966 and later in 1977 introduced the idea that the complexity and

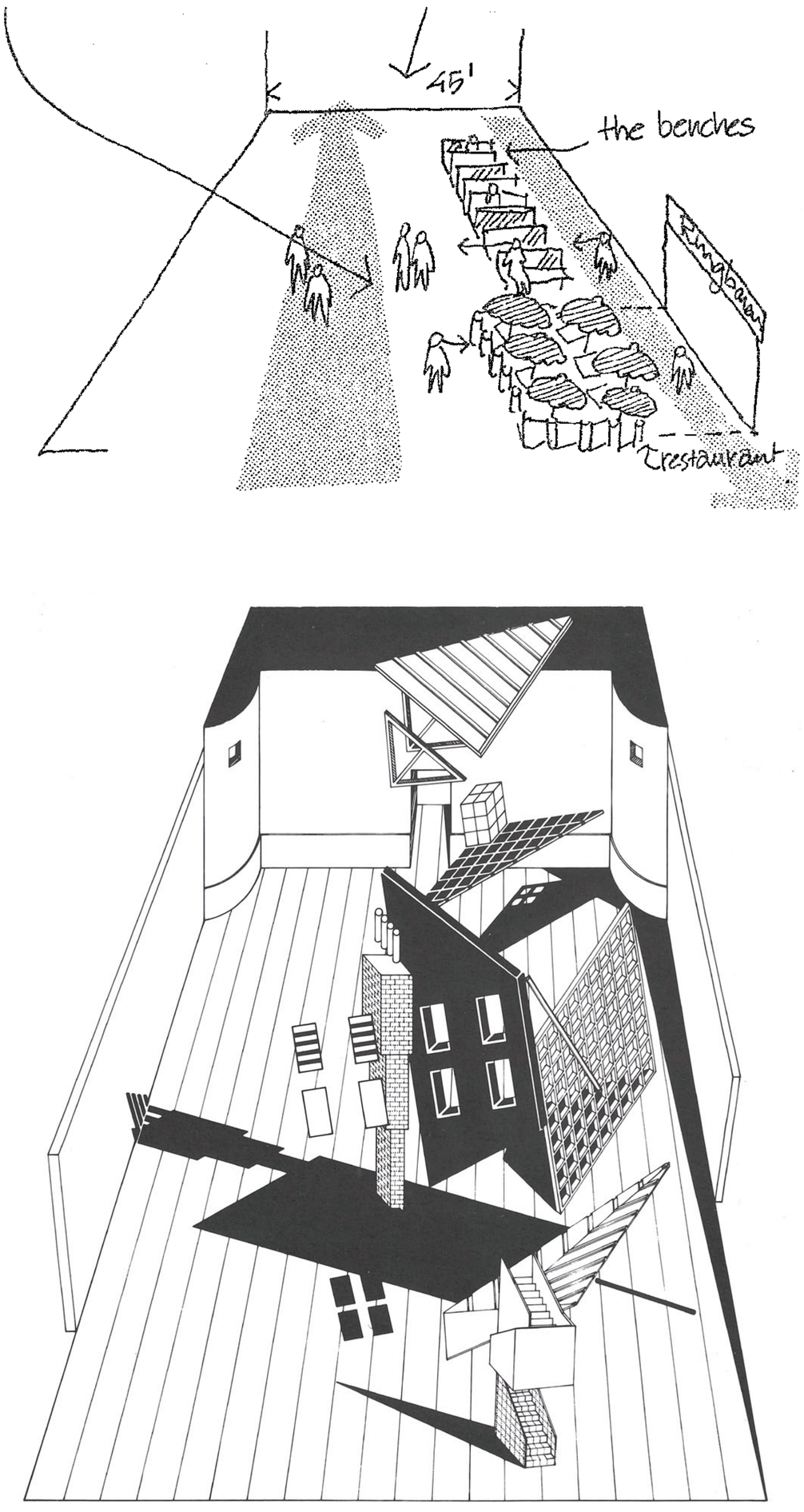

Figure 05.
Comparison of Lerup's illustrations from people's irregular movement on a 'fragmented stage of objects' at Kungsträdgården (1972), and his later unbuildable illustration of a 'fragmented stage of objects' depicting the shadowing interior space of *Love/House.* See Lars Lerup, 'Environmental and Behavioral Congruence as a Measure of Goodness in Public Space: The case of Stockholm', *Ekistics*, 34.204 (1972), pp. 341–58 (p. 350); 'Love/House: The Final Transformation', from Lars Lerup, *Planned Assaults: The Nofamily House, Love/House, Texas Zero* (Centre Canadian d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture; Distributed by MIT Press, 1987), p. 80. Images used with permission from Lars Lerup.

contradictions in the compositional configurations of Christ Church in Spitalfields and St George church in Bloomsbury, London, impacted people's perception of the consistency of space in the built environment, noting, 'This is especially true as the observer moves through or around a building, and by extension through a city: at one moment one meaning can be perceived as dominant; at another moment a different meaning seems paramount.'[58] Similarly drawing from poetry, Venturi frames the importance of people's experiences in this idea of spatial relativism through Cleanth Brooks's analysis of 'paradox and ambiguity' in poems, and the significant role of the reader to unify a poem's meaning 'into a new pattern.'[59]

In relation to this discourse on spatial ambiguity and relativism, what is most significant about Lerup's interactionist view is the greater emphasis he gives to maintaining the complexity of people, rather than the compositional configuration of the built environment. Instead of reducing people's behaviours to assumed needs, he gives agency to their unpredictability and indeterminacy. And he uses this agency to critically shift the power structure in built environments from architects to occupants. Describing how 'people are not *responding organisms* but *active individuals* who in their approach to things produce meaning', he argues that inhabitants should not be subjected to 'architectural ideology' such as 'functionalist' and 'behaviourist' models that attempt to determine the value of the physical environment by simplifying occupants' use and actions.[60] Rather, with the congruence of object and meaning, each inhabitant determines their own value of built environments.

The foundation for this emphasis on people's complexity first appears in Lerup's writings on architecture in 1973, when examining the role of the architect.[61] In an article that proposed the centrality of anthropocentric values as the foundation for social and cultural meaning-making in the built environment, he suggests such centrality was forgotten during industrialisation due to the separation—by the architect expert—of the architectural object from the people who inhabit it.[62] By emphasising the agency in people's unpredictability, Lerup later uses this idea to wholeheartedly conclude that 'functionalism' is 'absurd', 'shaky', and 'vulnerable to criticism', and goes on to suggest the role of the architect must be reconsidered to 'relinquish control of the meaning making to occupants themselves.'[63]

Examining these origins of Lerup's interest in complexity is significant, because, like his later assault on the grand narrative of the suburban home in *Love/House,* his interactionist view describes a similar disruption of the underexamined order and discipline of structural and social forms in architectural design. In *Love/House,* Lerup appears to aggressively reject ideas of functional planning by attempting to open discourse on the complexities of the relationship between built objects and people's emotive experiences. Similarly, Lerup's interactionist view destabilises the same principles, not because his interactionist view is an aggressive or destructive assault, but because it demonstrates how the principles of functional planning—by not addressing the complex agency of users and inhabitants—were flawed to begin with.

In the context of destabilising the pragmatic and practical narratives of spatial design, Lerup introduces his title term 'unfinished' to reframe design practices through the lens of his interactionist view.

Human action, in the perspective of interaction, is a complicated matrix with unknown combinations—the result of which is considerable unpredictability, a marvelous unfinishedness and openness. When this fact is brushed aside, ignored or forgotten, the importance of architecture becomes simply utilitarian, design itself becomes dull, repetitive and mechanical.[64]

With this description, the impact of conceiving the built environment as 'unfinished' significantly impacts common perceptions of architecture and interior spaces and the role of people to determine their value. For instance, implied in a simply pragmatic reading of the idea of 'building the unfinished' is the suggestion that architecture and interior spaces are participatory, and should be delivered to their inhabitants literally unfinished, leaving opportunities for people to finish the design through their own occupation. Yet, based on the idea that the destabilising force of functional planning is an agitated and unending search for meaning in the human experience, 'unfinished' here appears to describe something entirely different. With this term, Lerup suggests objects, architecture, and the built environment are always unfinished because people are unfinished. Building the *unfinished* is a proposition that, as long as the search for purpose in the human experience is the central focus of design, the meaning we make with objects we build will remain in a perpetual state of progression.

the bridge

After establishing the search for meaning in the human experience as the central mechanism in his definition of 'unfinished' architecture and interior spaces, Lerup returns to consider the role of objects in this process. Now disassociated from the practical and pragmatic grand narratives of functional planning, Lerup questions what properties objects may have in themselves to affect the process of meaning-making in the interactionist coupling.

In order to explore the role of objects in detail, Lerup introduces the analogy of 'a small foot-bridge'—as a de-contextualised thought experiment—in the presentation of his ideas in *Building the Unfinished*.[65] He describes our first interaction when viewing it from afar, suggesting that in these initial moments the bridge 'asserts itself to us.'[66] He goes on to suggest that in this assertion something about the bridge itself 'gathers our attention.'[67] Interpreting the phenomenologist philosopher Martin Heidegger's 'κατηγορία' (category) of assertion, Lerup describes our sensation of the bridge in five ways: its 'quality', referring to the nature of the bridge's material appearance; its 'extent', referring to its scale and proportion in relation to the size of the body as a unit of measure; its 'relation', referring to its distance from the viewer and position in reference to other objects in the field; its 'place', which he describes as the significance of its position to the viewer; and its 'time', which he infers as the extent to which it occurs to us in the 'here and now.'[68]

Importantly, Lerup explains that these five categories are the 'domain of the designer' and only outline the designable choices for the bridge's construction that are visible and physical.[69] They say nothing of the shift in the role of meaning-making with those who use it. And, 'no physical science, no reduction into categories' can identify or explain qualities of this interactionist experience.[70] Lerup's introduction of philosophical ideas from the field of phenomenology to explore this space of interaction was not an unprecedented approach to theoretical exploration in architecture during the 1970s. As described by Jorge Otero-Pailos, for instance, the exploration of aesthetic experiences in various approaches to spatial design was a key method to shift from modernist narratives that new technology and scientific advancement would underpin social betterment.[71] And, the 'search for authentic, original human experiences' was one major theoretical foundation for the expanded practice of artistic architectural exploration during the postmodern period of the 1970s and 1980s.[72] Lerup's interest in phenomenologist theories appears to subscribe to similar circumstances and, in this respect, his later exploration of the persuasive capacity of objects and spaces to evoke certain emotions and sensory responses in his *Love/House* project appear to emanate from this interest in wanting to understand our interactions with the immaterial qualities of things, apparent in this unbuilt analogy of the bridge.

Lerup goes on to suggest that poetry is one such method that may 'come close' to exploring people's interactionist experience of the bridge's presence.[73] Alluding again to Heidegger, Lerup proposes

that poetry is a means to explore the real and identifiable effect of a thing's presence, in spite of the immateriality of its 'nature and essence.'[74] He demonstrates this idea in Chapter Two of *Building the Unfinished* by exploring the qualities of a series of real bridges from Smögen, Sweden [Fig 06].[75] Rather than critically analysing the spatial condition of these bridges, Lerup presents his exploration as a fictional narrative of walking through the bridged landscape. The imagery of these bridge structures scattered over the barren, rocky shoreline of Smögen resonates with his later descriptions of Stockholm, and the *Love/House* drawings as fields or stages of fragmented and disassociated objects. Without analysis or conclusion, this fictional approach cultivates a prolonged provocation of an imagined experience of these bridges. Poetry and narrative, like his unbuildable *Love/House* drawings for Barthes's amorous figures, enable Lerup to evoke virtual experiences that sustain the immaterial presence of these bridges in the imagination, and through our own memories and reflections on bridges we've experienced in our own lives, co-create the emotive meaning and value of these largely pragmatic and practical structures.

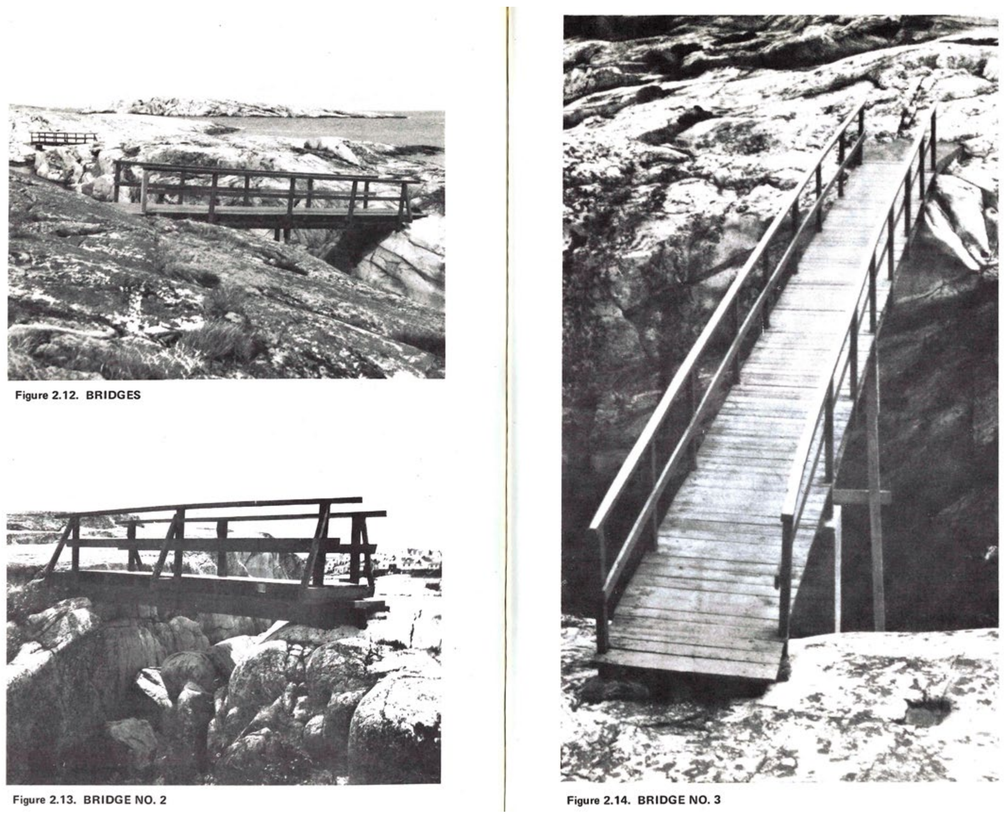

Figure 06.
Figures of the bridged landscape of Smögen, Sweden. See Lars Lerup, *Building the Unfinished: Architecture and Human Action* (SAGE Publications, 1977), pp. 40–41. Images used with permission from Lars Lerup.

Freed from the suggestion of a dominant narrative of functional meaning, these bridges—like any object reframed by Lerup's methods of poetic enquiry—gather our attention, and, through the exploration of their unbuildable qualities in narratives and drawings, are sustained in our imaginations, enabling us to configure their meaning with our own experiences. Ultimately, we can use that meaning to make momentary sense of our built environment from an inconsequential stage of dissociated things.

Concluding on the relevance of poetry in establishing this 'life-object' link, Lerup explains the principal purpose of his interactionist view is to address questions on the nature of the human experience. He suggests that, due to the link between people and their designed world, questions on the nature of objects is an avenue to raise questions about the nature of being human:

> Of course the fundamental question is, "What is a thing?"; a basic question asked by philosophers time and again. Embedded in this question lies its double: "What is man?" Because life and object are interdependent, one question implies the other. This interdependency, implying the entire interactive process, is volatile, dynamic, hard to capture and impossible to domesticate (if domestic means fully predictable).[76]

Here then we find the foundation for his later exploration of poetry in the unbuildable *Love/House* drawings. In as much as the authentic experiences of lovers is excluded from suburban domestic behaviours, Lerup argues that so too is the suggestion that human action can be categorised and commoditised. This position is not an unexpected or unprecedented resistance to the maturation of corporate architectural design cultures and the commercialisation of social behaviours in media during the 1980s. Yet, by looking at the foundations for these ideas in Lerup's work over the preceding decade, we find it was a deeper motivation to respect the fact that human action, at some level, will always be uncertain and unpredictable that led his later enquiries into the ideas of his interactionist view. And,

in as much as 'functionalist' and 'behaviourist' models attempt to abate our anxious, distrusting, and cynical concerns about the future, Lerup's work suggests such concerns will only be exacerbated when these models inevitably fail. In this respect, despite being unbuildable, Lerup's explorations through drawings, art, poetry, and narrative of our emotive interactions with objects and the built environment establish a space for debate on the capacity of predictive spatial design methods to determine our actions, be it functionalism, behaviourism, or the commodification of suburbia. It puts the claims of positive impact and social betterment—often attributed to spatial design—back into the hands of the people who actually inhabit built environments by optimistically arguing there is always some part of our actions that remains complex, irreducible, unpredictable, and can never be controlled.

conclusion

The impossibility of domesticating Lerup's interactionist view of people, objects, and their environments in many respects explains his unbuildable assaults on the 'disciplinary mechanism' of the single-family house.[77] Rather than vandalism, these assaults can now be understood as an attempt to sustain change in his theories and practices of spatial design after rejecting dominant and rigid modes of functional planning to define human action. In Lerup's theory of the unfinished, the predominantly postmodern idea of fragmentation is saved from the endless shattering of meaning by making the relationship between people and objects the purpose of this action. In this respect, his idea of our built environments as forever remaining unfinished appears less as an antagonism against pragmatism and more an adjustment of values. It critically shifts the focus of spatial design onto questions about the necessarily uncertain nature of people's experiences as they continually face unpredictable change.

In the process of this shift, Lerup's poetic exploration of the shadowy, fictional spaces of unbuildable architecture and interiors is justified. These 'other' spaces consigned to drawings, paintings, and the imagination are highly valuable tools to enable him to break the apparent logic of spatial design for new discourse on our actions and experiences. Through the poetic drawings of the unbuildable *Love/House,* Lerup attempts to sustain the immaterial experience of lovers, and—like the narrative descriptions of the Kungsträdgården subway station or the Smögen bridges—encourages each of us to make meaning with these ideas in our own ways. Fragmentation and his rejection of imitating reality in drawing make his unbuildable explorations of spatial design so useful in creating moments to gather our attention and extend discourse on questions of meaning. His work reminds us that if we are looking for accuracy in the predictive power of our built environments to bring about better futures, perhaps we should look for how accurately the art and poetry of spatial design moves us to make our own meanings with today's fragmented reality, rather than aspire to emulate the appearance of an ossified era.

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notes

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8 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, p. 69.

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10 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, pp. 69, 73.

11 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, p. 73.

12 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, p. 73.

13 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, p. 73.

14 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, pp. 15–16.

15 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, p. 15.

16 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, p. 16.

17 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, p. 16.

18 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, p. 15.

19 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, p. 16; Lerup acknowledges the use of Michel Foucault's term 'disciplinary mechanism' in the 'Sources' section of *Planned Assaults*. See, Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, p. 99.

20 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, pp. 16–17.

21 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, pp. 18, 59.

22 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. by J. Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), pp. 22–27 (p. 24); Lerup makes no direct reference to Foucault's theory of heterotopic space in *Planned Assaults*, though in addition to citing Foucault's general influence on the ideas of *Planned Assaults*, Lerup also refers to his influence in a short article about *Love/House* from 1984. See: Lars Lerup, 'The Eye in Place', *Places*, 2.2 (1984), pp. 39–42 (p. 39).

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24 See exhibition catalogue: Constance Lewallen, 'Lars Lerup: MATRIX/BERKELEY 76', *University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive* (1984). <https://bamlive.s3.amazonaws.com/MATRIX_76_Lars_Lerup.pdf> [accessed 20 July 2024].

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27 Lerup, 'Below the Surface', pp. 4–6.

28 Lerup, 'Below the Surface', p. 6.

29 Lerup, 'Below the Surface', p. 7.

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32 Lerup, *Planned Assaults*, pp. 15–17.

33 Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, p. 53.

34 Author's emphasis. See, Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, p. 50.

35 Lerup, 'Below the Surface', p. 5.

36 Lerup, 'Below the Surface', p. 7.

37 Lerup, 'Below the Surface', p. 7.

38 Lerup, 'Below the Surface', p. 7.

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46 Lerup, *Building the Unfinished*, p. 20.

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49 Lerup, 'Environmental and Behavioral Congruence', p. 344.

50 Lerup, 'Environmental and Behavioral Congruence', p. 344.

51 Lerup, *Building the Unfinished*, p. 20.

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54 Lerup, *Building the Unfinished*, p. 20.

55 Lerup, *Building the Unfinished*, p. 20.

56 Lerup, *Building the Unfinished*, p. 20.

57 Lerup, *Building the Unfinished*, p. 20.

58 Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (Museum of Modern Art, 1992), p. 32.

59 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, p. 20.

60 Author's emphasis. See, Lerup, *Building the Unfinished*, pp. 18, 20.

61 This article was originally published in *Ekistics* in November 1973, and later republished with a modified title and content in *Journal of Architectural Education* in 1974. See, Lars Lerup, 'The Designer as Co-learner', *Ekistics*, 36.216 (1973), pp. 340–43 (p. 340); Lars Lerup, 'Changing Roles in Environmental Design: The Designer as Co-learner', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 26.4 (1974), pp. 100–109 (pp. 100–101).

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63 Lerup, *Building the Unfinished*, pp. 20–21.

64 Lerup, *Building the Unfinished*, p. 21.

65 Lerup, *Building the Unfinished*, p. 22.

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