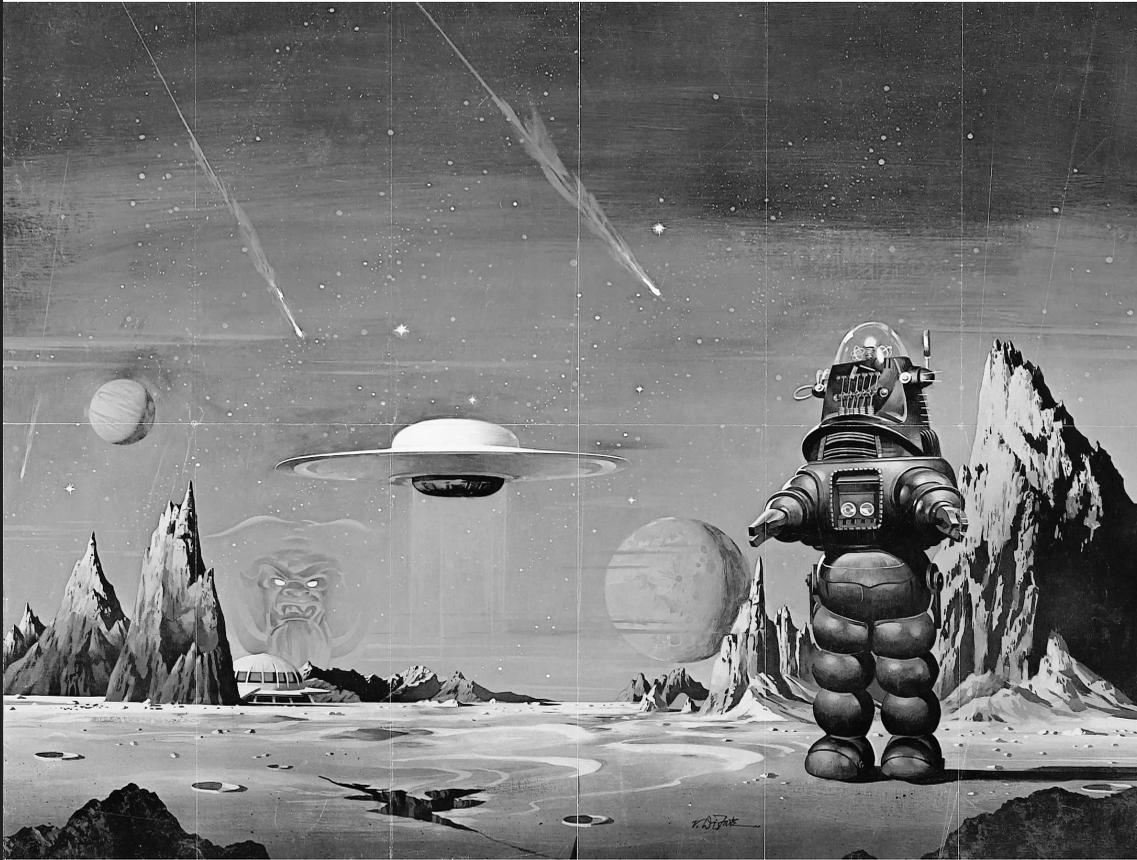


# UNFORBIDDEN PLANETS: FORM, THEORY, VACANCY AND ROBOTS

A dispatch from Baltimore

By Fred Scharmen and Michael Stanton

In the terrain vague of the streets of Baltimore, Fred Scharmen and Michael Stanton got together to discuss their take on several theoretical dilemmas that challenge criticism today. Representative of two different generations of American theoretical debate, they find common ground in a few key areas: the immediacy of form, the value of speculation, and the mobile agency of theory.



The mechanical super-ego and the Id monster: poster from *Forbidden Planet* (1956).

**Michael Stanton** I finished graduate school in 1984 and Fred more than two decades later. After that we both worked in architectural offices of some of the most astute theoreticians of our respective eras: Fred with Keller Easterling and I with Mario Gandelsonas and Diana Agrest. There we witnessed ideas and shapes, figures and forms, intertwining. We thus represent generational difference rather smoothly and have a lot to talk about. When we do talk, we seem to find immediacy in the topic of form. This may seem rudimentary. Of course form! It is the bottom line of what we do. A datum. It disengages itself from our intentions and confounds our desires. It assembles and disassembles at the urban scale and shapes the intimate. Yet, for many reasons, form has either been pilloried or championed to the point of its potential extinction, an impossible outcome. For, as with abstraction or signification, form can approach purity but, like Zeno's Achilles, will never achieve such an end. The formal tortoise will always outrun any absolutes.

**Fred Scharmen** It's tough to get away from, isn't it? As you quoted Kooolhaas earlier: "For me [writing] is very brutal and primitive, because for me architecture is an intellectual discipline and for me writing is the privileged communication of our intellectual disciplines. So writing is absolutely without question necessary. We abuse the alibi of the otherness of our profession [...] You cannot write if you don't have ideas. I think there is still a very strong section in architecture that somehow hopes that there can be architecture without ideas."<sup>1</sup> He arrives back at empty form; form without ideas, and suggests that to be a proponent of form without ideas would be to exist

in a state of error. I have this working theory of Baltimore, which is a city that is two-thirds empty. We're known – through *The Wire* and other media – as a city with a high rate of vacancy. If you walk around in Baltimore, as I know you do all of the time Mike, you begin to realize that there is really no such thing as a truly vacant lot in the entire city. If a plot of land or a building is apparently 'empty', it's because someone wants it that way. It's by design, whether it is the design of an absentee land-owner taking a strategic loss in order to avoid taxes elsewhere, or the design of the City itself, the largest owner of 'vacant' buildings, while they play out a longer-term plan to assemble small plots into larger ones, more attractive to development initiatives.

**MS** Yet many spaces in Baltimore are the epitome of Ignasi de Solà-Morales' notion of *terrain vague*, of a space without territorialized absolutes, either public or private and thus pregnant with potential. That's why this city is so much more exciting than 'healthy' ones.

**FS** Even if we don't see these conceptual structures existing, as Keller Easterling says in *Organization Space*,<sup>2</sup> we can see a lot of activity, illicit or otherwise, that colonizes and activates these seemingly empty spaces and forms of the built environment. Architecture, too, tends to get adaptively reused by ideas. Even if there were no ideas in the form at its inception, the form won't remain empty for long.

**MS** One cannot discuss theory without encountering its contrived other – 'formalism'. Easy juxtapositions of theory on one side and formalism on the other have framed a discourse-lite within our self-conscious discipline. But in this case it was



Plaza de la Biblioteca Nacional, Buenos Aires

a more complex tri-polarity, since 'social concern' and its subset, sustainability, proclaim a virtuous 'good' in opposition to whichever idea or form is 'bad' and 'ugly'. Nevertheless, in contemporary criticism the strange notion that formalism is anathema to the social in architecture and must be eradicated stands directly opposed to the equally bizarre elevation of form to a sort of total procedure beyond which there can be no elaboration. To extract the signifier from the sign has been a perpetual endeavor, almost an obsession since the advent of the Modern, usually with the agenda of solidifying new or simplified 'signifieds', exacerbating an anguish (taking the word *angoscia* from Tafuri's twist on anxiety) that seems to have risen at the moment of that first utterance, with language itself.

Within architectural discourse we often dismiss the critical work of others as 'incorrect' since it did not fully or conventionally interpret seminal extra-disciplinary texts and thus brings them into our discourse in a poor or messy manner. Examples include Deleuze's reference to 'the fold'<sup>3</sup> and the consequent literal adaption of that form by architects. His concern was originally spatial and ludic and, to a certain extent, a discourse on power relations. The fold's importation as literal folded material or Lacan's 'gaze' becoming a visual phenomenon although it likewise refers to hegemony and control, are clearly simplistic or self-serving interpretations. But, on the other hand, the presumption that incorrect means irrelevant is obviously flawed since, in the end, we are making

things by all means possible and misinterpretation, already convincingly underwritten by Harold Bloom<sup>4</sup> among many others, is as viable a method toward formal hermeneutics as any other. By nature influence and speculation adopt the protocols of a game of 'exquisite corpse'.

FS What's great about this method of misinterpretation is that at some point, we can stop pretending it's an accident. Deleuze writes about the fold, and about lines: Yes, it's political, and yes, it's also a line, right there in front of you. A Gothic line in a carving of a leaf, for example, we can see as a social gesture of extension and escape, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest; as an index of a force, as Ruskin sees Gothic lines; and as a descriptive geometry, as Greg Lynn might say. This is why I like this word 'speculation' alongside theory, it's about doing more than creating a framework; it's actively using that framework to test things out.

MS I really like your substitution of 'speculation' for 'theory'. Speculation comes from Latin *specere*, meaning 'to look at'! It implies a physical act of observing, and of a subject observed; it is visual but also an engagement. It refutes the notion so popular with Deconstructivism that theory runs parallel to design, never touching. Speculation implies involvement by looking at a thing or idea, but also a notion of imagining as well, proposing, extrapolating but always through observation.

FS Deleuze and Guattari speculate in writing, Ruskin speculates in drawing, Lynn speculates in geometry, all with different approaches to similar objects and forms. This is not quite like misinterpretation in the sense that Bloom implied. I don't know if any of these practitioners

would accuse any of the others of offering an ‘incorrect’ speculation about the Gothic line and its utility. All of these speculations, and an unknown number of others not noted, can exist alongside one another in the same space.

**MS** What about ‘after theory’? We are so quick to pronounce dead the various evanescent phenomena that define our trade: Modernism, Postmodernism, Functionalism, the Avant-Garde, and finally theory itself. I have always presumed that this is simply Freudian, the need to kill the father, or to attain maturity in the manner of the *bildungsroman*; to annihilate history like Odysseus with the suitors; to mask rather than obliterate immediate influence; to carve out creative *lebensraum*. The problem, of course is that the ‘post-critical’ may be taken seriously by students and readers and perhaps by the authors themselves, as often happens when a provocation is recited often enough. ‘After theory’ may no longer be viewed as an essential investigation of theory and its discontents, an opening of new portals, but that it is a rejection *tout court*. This may seem as absurdly obvious as suggesting that discourse must address form, but, like that suggestion, it responds to the actual, to a condition much more extreme than any possibly imagined. The fact is that form and theory can be dismissed although the former is ever-present and the latter as inevitable as thought itself. Theory is further stigmatized by association with politics – left-wing in particular – and with intellectualism, a commodity viewed with great suspicion in this hemisphere.

**FS** This always reminds me of the way people still talk about computation. We see important architects like Michael Graves and James Wines<sup>5</sup> using ‘the computer’ as a negative rhetorical device. Do you know the movie *Forbidden Planet* from 1956?

**MS** Are you kidding? It inflamed my ten-year-old’s psyche.

**FS** It was the first science fiction movie with Robby the Robot. Chesley Bonestell painted all of the landscape backgrounds. There’s a sequence at the end of the film where the protagonists discover that their experiences – through a device called a ‘plastic educator’ – have all been shaped by this vast dormant machine under the surface of the planet. The matte paintings for the machine put the characters in these intricately worked out geometric spaces. The main character is a Prospero figure, Morbius, and at one point he says that the machine can project matter ‘in any form’. This singular giant machine is what I think of whenever I read anyone writing about the deleterious effects of the computer on drawing or education. The machine was able to educate the main character, Morbius, and he in turn builds Robby the Robot. In the film, Robby has the chance to kill the monster, at Morbius’ orders, but he doesn’t because he recognizes it as a projection of Morbius himself.

The creators of the film had so much invested in designing and building the Robby the Robot prop that they kept reusing it in other movies and TV shows. You can see Robby in *The Thin Man*, *The Addams Family*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Lost in Space*. He plays all sorts of roles in different plots, but he’s almost always called Robby. Real computation is not singular like a massive underground machine; it’s multiple; it’s part of our daily lives, and serves multiple tasks. It’s like a helper robot whose specific role is always changing, but whose basic

identity and mode of operation is always recognizable. Maybe there’s a way to use this template for thinking about theory, too. There’s not only this singular edifice that requires a series of critical software upgrades and patches – from Modernism to Postmodernism and so on; theory is also a mobile agency all its own, able to have its own life after the movie is over. It doesn’t have to exist only in order to make ‘any form’ with the right input, it can just be there to help if you need it, in multiple ways.

**MS** One difference Fred – my historical concerns primarily address the past; yours project the future. My students look at their history classes as just as irrelevant as the overly-technical classes that are also required. This brings me, and I suspect you too, to the importance of history. Its warp and weft, diachronic and synchronic, shapes a fabric into which our speculations can nest. Yet this simple problem is usually poorly articulated. It is also the fact that accumulated material, be it in or outside our discipline, forms a vast archive in which we constantly research, consciously or not, and it is there that the demiurgic impulses that may drive our design decisions are factored. Elements of that material and their constant interaction with other elements in a waltz contingent with emergent behavior constitutes the frame in which the raw stuff of history collides with political economy; with which we must all come to terms.

- 1 Rem Koolhaas, ‘Why I Wrote Delirious New York and Other Textual Strategies’ In *ANY, Number Zero*. Ed. Cynthia Davidson. (New York: Anyone Corporation, 1993)
- 2 Keller Easterling, *Organization space: landscapes, highways, and houses in America*. (Cambridge: MIT, 1999).
- 3 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. T. Conley, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988).
- 4 Referring to: Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 5 Michael Graves, ‘Architecture and the Lost Art of Drawing’, *The New York Times*, September 1, 2012; James Wines, ‘Drawing and Architecture’, in *Blueprint*, September 30, 2009.