The Consortium of Fantastic Ideas

RARE NEW SPECIES

Cristina Díaz Moreno
Efrén Gª Grinda
Ben Reynolds
The Consortium of Fantastic Ideas: Rare New Species

A dark oral tradition has it that in the mid-1950s some of the best minds in the world of engineering and architecture – Eduardo Torroja, Félix Candela, Heinz Hossdorf, Buckminster Fuller – initiated a transnational faction based on collaborative innovation called the Consortium of Fantastic Ideas.

Conceived as a creative laboratory to address emerging and extraordinary situations through collaborative fantasy and rigour, the conversations, meetings and communications of this group supposedly fed into much of the public and professional activity of its members.

Sixty years later, the Consortium is reborn in order to explore the potential of the exceptional and specific in a world increasingly homogeneous, monocultural and graspable, with the belief that behind the apparent familiarity of what surrounds us are cultural, productive, social and political emerging realities of an extraordinary and hidden nature – all capable of instigating new rare species of environments without falling into fictional or parallel worlds.

To apply to join the Consortium, students will work in the field of the collective, exploring mundane and ordinary human activities. If in recent years the subject of the work was primarily the space of the counter-routine, this year, attention turns to daily activities and the examination of emerging technological, productive and social conditions in order to articulate Rare New Species of environments that respond to specific and concrete situations from which renewed forms of togetherness may emerge.

More than ever the Consortium of Fantastic Ideas is intensely committed to the project of architecture in its most direct form and believes that in every architectural decision is an opportunity to discuss and propose alternatives to the world that surrounds us. The project thus serves as a vast record of knowledge that addresses the relevance and validity not only of spatial models and inherited languages, but also of the productive, technological and social systems from which they emerge. Architecture, as a result, becomes a critical vehicle fully charged with fantasy, rigor and unexpected qualities.

Arquitectura fantástica again.

Forms of the Collective

Let us cast our minds back almost 2,400 years: Aristotle’s view of the city was established in the first two chapters of Politics as the meeting point for the various oikos, for people from different places and families. The process of creation of the first cities is defined as synoikismos, literally, the process whereby different oikos would form a city by deciding to live together to provide mutual protection and assistance. Cities then became a gathering of people who were not the same or similar, but who accepted they had to coexist under the same system of rules, in reciprocal equality. More than a physically complete thing, the city was a tacit and ongoing process of negotiation and interaction, agreement and disagreement. However, putting aside this concept of the origins of the city and its potential relevance today, modern urban environments are in no way close to functioning as peaceful and harmonious melting pots of diversity in which social identity is built upon
equal participation between different elements. Urban agglomerations are not only home
to difference, but also host and provoke violence, conflicts and inequality. Consensus and
equitable participation are only two of the possible scenarios that can arise from the
dispute between different ways of life. Control, marginalisation and violence are others, as
is the creation of elective communities, such as social groups or subcultures, which argue
against mainstream cultural structures through style and the public exposure of alternative
ways of life. Both direct forms of negotiation and interaction (for example, urban revolts
of discontent) and mediated or indirect forms (public exposure of alternative aesthetics)
are extreme examples of the range of potential manifestations of the constant public
redefinition of social constructs.

Public space ceases to be mechanically associated with emptiness (as opposed to the built-up urban
fabric), or with free and universal access, and becomes the space for a collision between
dominant cultures and new practices that are attempting to discuss them. The process of
being together physically and sharing space, while at the same time collectively building
the scene through public interaction, becomes a process of constantly reviewing and
reformulating identity for a given society, and therefore for the city itself. The pieces that
make up the city work as incubators of alternative ways of approaching the world,
promoting public dissidence and difference and embracing and inducing alternative life-
styles removed from the passive models of consumption. As a phenomenon of
intermediation, public space is then defined not only by the architecture that contains it,
but also by the actions of users and of the people who inhabit it: it becomes a meeting
place for people and objects of all classes and origins – humans, non-humans, biotic
materials, physical and virtual technologies – all in constant interaction.

This year’s students will project places, landscapes or constructions that could have an inexhaustible
capacity to make people come together, to congregate. There are a limited number of
physical spaces within this special category. Usually associated with cult and religion, they
have a public condition that extends far beyond the basic sphere of human activity,
attaining a higher state through being invested with a set of meanings by a concrete social
group. In many cases this ‘publicness’ is generated not only by a series of activities or
rituals but by the meaningful use of certain features – language, ornamentation,
materiality, iconography, the role of the objects – which evokes the beliefs or values that
are shared among the group. Consequently, these are not universal and generic, but
aesthetically and culturally grounded spaces.

Routine vs Counter-routine

“Here we are all crazily excited about countless projects of social reform. There is hardly any intellectual
who does not store any personal concept about a new commune in his vest pocket.” This is not the
description of the current scene in Berlin, Paris or San Francisco, but a report that the American poet
Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in 1840 to Thomas Carlyle. Through magazines, books and television we are
permanently informed about the experiments that nowadays are being carried generally by young people
aiming to find new forms of coexistence, both in the old and the new world. But, we have recently realised
that in the nineteenth century North America constituted a true Eldorado for the foundation of
communes, which were called utopian by virtue of the fact that they took their goals not from “the sphere
of what already exists, but [from] the sphere of what might be”.

3
In the period between 1800 and 1900 there were in North America some one hundred utopian communities with around one hundred thousand members between them (the whole of the US in 1850 had a population of only 23 million). The smallest of these communities, Fruitlands, contained nine souls, and the largest, the Shakers, 6,000. Some of them survived only for a short period, while others (only the religious) managed to survive for more than a century.

From Liselotte Unger and O M Unger, Kommunen in der Neuen Welt: 1740–1971 (1972)

As a continuation of the main targets of Dip5 during recent years based on the notion that renewed forms of public space can emerge from the space of the counter-routine, the Consortium of Fantastic Ideas will focus this year on the space of daily routines, on the ordinary life.

The work of the unit will simply examine how from the usual and everyday activities related with production, trading, leisure, inhabitation, education, archiving or healthcare, can arise spaces where collective forms of being together based on collaboration, interaction and interchange among different agents can be developed.

After examining how public space can emerge in the space of the non-productive, something that is radically opposed to the usual productive world and discusses the common and everyday forms of being in public, this year the unit will examine the apparently grey and flat world dominated by the everyday life and the common mode of being in the world, with the conviction that alternative and renewed notions of public space based on everyday activities can be developed. This year the space of the collective will be connected with production, education, inhabitation, trading, leisure - understood as daily palliative to the world of production - or other usual and everyday forms of activities, with the conviction that new forms of everyday collaboration can build a fertile ground to inquire into the nature of the common and propose alternatives to the usual forms of being in the group, and by extension alternative lifestyles and their associated spaces. The target, therefore, is to generate a space of the common (or public) as a renewed notion of what we usually call building, linked to activities and forms of the everyday life, which raises a radical alternative to what we mean by public space today. We will cultivate dissent being the “Ghost in the machine” and critical insiders introducing alternative forms of being in the world as Red Candies: “Market logic parasitizes any material, regardless of where it comes from. But as with rats, cockroaches and other gluttonous parasites, there’s a way to deal with it. All we have to do is put camouflaged doses of poison in its food: proposals that suggest how things could be done otherwise, that trigger arguments about what goes on – seductively attractive pills full of a lethal drug: a project for an alternative material future”

**Constructed Environments (What we used to call buildings)**

Students are required to envision and to project buildings understood as questions, more than solutions or mere factual realizations. Paraphrasing Wagensberg: “If building is the answer, what was the question?” The concept of what is considered a building must be rethought in our culture. As finite, given entities buildings - as we know them - is a species belonging to the past; old, slow giants with obsolete modes of production and reception. Therefore, the students will be required to rethink what building means today, in a society of global cultural homogeneity, dotted by small niches of critical resistance and difference, where the ubiquitous computing and information technologies allow to virtually share data and space and construct a network connected to the most remote places. More than ever, the role of buildings needs to be redefined from their value as real estate investments, as recipients of
meanings associated with a collectivity, as constructs that reflect a particular state of the technology or spaces of interaction, as huge financial investments and objects with periods of financial material and cultural amortization, as receptacle and means that facilitate a range of actions and associated functions. But also as receivers and emitters of critical content, as devices that exceed the mere requirement for production needs, as entities that far from being static, evolve over time…

**Stages**

The different possible steps for the project can be read as both a phase in development, but also a stage is on which to manifest/present the different and conflictive natures of every proposal. The pre-determined to be followed ones for this academic year will be (in order of development): Umwelt(en)/ Actors / Site / Collective phenomenology / Constitution / Rare New Species / Organizational / Linguistic / Adjusting Resolution / Radical Media / The Final Manifesto-Constitution.

Every student is advice to follow strictly every single proposed step to accomplish the targets established by the brief and the calendar. Every student is advised to strictly follow every single step to accomplish the targets established by the brief and the calendar. Our work will be to open new doors to the unknown which remain in a state of constant development and evolution throughout the different terms. Each student must firstly follow every single step preparing documents that respond to each of the briefs and secondly check the permanent work over the weeks, connecting the consecutive steps each other and recreating the previously executed documents. It is really crucial to review, develop and complete the documents for every review, pin-up and jury, as a necessary comprehensive task of definition of the nature of the project.

**Umwelt(en) [in despite of it]: the world(s) around us.**

Due to the ubiquitous computing technologies, shared data networks, global media and techniques of control and surveillance at the scale of the entire planet, our world seems increasingly uniform, monocultural and generic. This appearance of growing homogeneity hides differences and heterogeneities at a small-scale which manifest themselves as resistant discontinuities or emergent phenomena in that seemingly continuous field. The rare new species that the students will define must respond to these emerging concrete economic, productive and technological phenomena. Rather than a mechanism of reaction which specifically offers a solution to a situation, projects will be developed "in spite of it". Consequently, the projects will take these phenomena as a particular umwelt in which they will operate and will produce an alternative to it, a critical insight, or affirmation or a way to escape from them, rather than a mere solution or a partial improvement.

For this reason, we need to identify to which concrete context the emerging Rare New Species are referred to. The goal of each student is to define the umwelt in which each project operates through a series of steps. First, identifying one of these concrete discontinuities and studying it in depth. The world there outside, despite the apparent ordinaries and normality hides surprising and disturbing phenomena. Our task is to identify those extreme emerging phenomena that lie around us beneath a layer of apparent normality, revealing and analysing them to raise them to their true category of strange disturbances.
Then we can realize what could be the immediate contexts of the project, identifying a social and a cultural context in which the project can be installed and at the same time respond to, as well as the physical location of it, specifying a physical site, and therefore defining the environment that the project faces or reacts to. Consequently, the construction of each particular umwelt is a creative task that takes as data the raw and most extreme reality at different scales, and composes a new situation through the triad phenomenon/culture/site. Then, each particular umwelt will assemble in a conflictive way extreme realities in a new compound, analysing and studying these extraordinary materials from the real world, connecting them with each other and with the rest of the things of the world and reinforcing the logical spaces between them.

The new technological, economical and productive environments and the increasing and global control techniques have expanded the limits of what consider previously as the city, expanding it until the last remote pocket of remoteness. The contemporary urban condition is not only new and non-previously known due to the exponential growth of the urbanization and the expansion of the city limits, but because nowadays everything is directly or indirectly affected by its material and non-material processes. Therefore, this new scenario where every single subject and object is linked to numerous others, give us the chance to think about remote places that were not considered linked to the city as part of our environments, and then considered as subjects of our interventions and therefore belonging to the extensive network of links that nourishes the new expanded megalopolis. On the one hand, the “city” is sprawling to the most remote places in the globe (through a renewed process of colonization) and at the same time the city itself can be seen as a wild territory, the last frontier to be explored and conquered as a new category of untouched nature -in this case an artificial nature- that as the original, is spontaneous, self-organized and yet to be discovered.

Therefore the beginning of the personal brief will start with three consecutive steps to determine the concrete Umwelt to which every project is referred: I. Identifying an emergent situation (Productive /Technological /Financial/Legal / Scientific); II. Connecting it with a Social / Cultural / Political emergence; III. Selecting an specific site for the project.

Collective phenomenology (space)
Space can be defined as something which takes place between entities of different origins that coexist physically in a given place. Space, then, is not a thing, not a physical reality that happens out there, but is rather a set of relations which are being constantly redefined as these entities interact with and transform each other. Space is a typical phenomenon of physical interaction and mediation that defies the categories of subject and object: in space, everything is at the same time subject and object of the (inter)action, and everything participates in their definition.

Space, in this modern understanding, is deeply medicalised, linked to hygienic practices, and implies the reduction of the physicality and materiality of architecture: air is mostly a flow that passes right through architecture, penetrating its almost non-existent and invisible boundaries, cleansing it of any trace of biological activity and producing a clean and unpolluted medium. But there is an alternative tradition of understanding space, which
perhaps started with Leibniz’s ‘relational space’. In his correspondence with Samuel Clarke, Leibniz discussed and dismissed Newton’s notion of absolute space as a kind of divine sensorium, a non-material substrate of matter. For Leibniz, space is ‘nothing but an order or set of relations among bodies’. Leibniz’s notion of relational space would later be taken up and developed further by Jakob von Uexküll, with his notion of the surrounding environment or Umwelt.

In opposition to the modernistic white, hygienic, clean, medical and scientific sensorium, we would like to propose a dirty, noisy, decadent, smelly, carnal, mundane and libidinal artificial paradise, converted into a chamber of political and social discussion, and formed out of the collisions between constructed environment, everyday acts, aesthetic affirmations and public behaviour. Space is the experience of being part of (immersed in and at the same time building) a system of relations with other entities – human and non-human. It is perceiving yourself as part of a community or assembly that is permanently under construction, built with the actions of all members, forming a network of constantly changing interrelations and interdependencies.

In this light the term space no longer denotes a kind of empty and vast space, a blank canvas on which to inscribe individual symbolic contents. Instead, it could be defined as a gigantic library of links and annotations, an immense register of crossreferences that suggest connections and discoveries through which the social contract could be modified. Space can therefore be defined as a scene of discussion, dispute and conflict out of which collective identities are forged constructed in public and through collective processes of interaction. The experience of identity or feeling of belonging has to be understood as an uprising of an active phenomenon of collaboration, engaged in a certain range of activities.

**Actors**

If collective space can be defined as a space of interaction in which different individuals from different backgrounds can connect and build a way of being together that accentuates or solve directly or indirectly their disputes and differences, then, before anything it is necessary to know who the actors are, who are the guests, who at the same time are subjects and objects of interaction in this changing set of interconnections. Therefore, to define that space surpassing the categories where we as humans are usually incorporated in architecture (such as client, user) or in other disciplines of knowledge or of political action (crowd, people, class...), each student has to precisely define the protagonists of this set of interactions, as a decisive step in the definition of the space of the collective. Which species will congregate each space, which groups or subgroups and their culture, which objects and technologies and meanings are embedded in them, which origin have all these actors and which technical and material culture may be associated with human groups, will be fundamental to characterize the proposal.

The Consortium of Fantastic Ideas is intensely interested in the integration of different human and non-human species as a fundamental issue for the construction of the collective, understanding that the space of interaction that we pursue is not exclusively of a human
nature, but that the transformation of the environment also concerns and encompasses the field of interaction between human and other species.

**Rare New Species. After-Urban typologies.**

In the classic meaning of typology, based on texts such as the Quatrèmere de Quincy and revitalized in the seventies through texts such as *Architettura de la Cittá* or *On Typology*, the term typology referred to an abstract entity that brought together the main common characteristics of a series of concrete and actual examples of buildings that share an organizational nature. As such, it was an extension of the etymological origin of the term, literally the study of types or categories that classify into a number of specific subjects and that somehow, serve as a mirror against which to compare and classify them according to their similarities with those. In architecture the displacement of the term moves towards abstract types that allow to classify certain buildings by their similarities, usually by the spatial organization, i.e. in the type of spaces and the way in which they are positioned and interrelate to each other. According to this concept, the term typology also has a historic projection. According to this idea the similarities between the examples come from a refinement and decanting process of different solutions into families over time, up to converge in a solution of ideal nature. Therefore the types are produced through a process of idealization of the solutions that distill them up to their essence in a process of evolving nature. Therefore they refer to each specific solution produced over time and have a marked historical character. These ideal solutions serve as a catalogue of abstract organizational solutions that can be applied to different concrete cases and situations, losing their idealized features while being adapted to them. Therefore, they are updated in real time and space in specific situations. The types have a marked character of a catalogue of idealized solutions belonging to the common, built throughout history and therefore impossible to construct as such, but that can be updated through processes of adaptation and specialization to specific situations, losing some of its secondary features. They are recipients of a common knowledge deposited throughout history and therefore, as architects we can adapt them, but hardly invent them, since a long process of distilling is necessary.

The Consortium of Fantastic Ideas is convinced that prior to this period of historical distillation that supposedly precipitates in abstract types, there is a necessary process of mutations, evolutionary experiments and failed attempts in which the definitions of new environments demand not previously known answers. Rather than a progressive process which distills in species perfectly adapted through a slow and routine process of implementation of a known and inherited knowledge, there are periods of convulsive beauty in which species of radical novelty not meant to be repeated brusquely emerge. This world of Rare New Species, of beautiful evolutionary monsters that respond to new wild environments, is what the Consortium aims to explore positioning students in front of these emerging umwelten.

The Consortium will explore the mode of production of these species initially understanding analogies and modes of natural evolution of species to produce differentiation. This analogy will help us to understand the forms of production of novelty in each aspect of the project, overcoming always the initial analogies. The most extraordinary species – those
that have fewer individuals and are more local- are the most abundant on the planet, while those that have the largest number of individuals and are widespread dominant- usually invasive and considered pests - are really a few.

The Consortium of Fantastic Ideas is intensely committed to the search for alternative and radical forms of beauty in which intellectual exuberance, impure imagination and the use of different languages does not deny or exclude abstraction, precision or accuracy. A new beauty intensely and intrinsically based not on dialectical models of opposition or imposed restrictions, but on a carnal, holistic and celebratory sense of openness, precision, appropriation, creative transformation and symbolic creativity.

During the first semester the students will collectively develop and work in the definition of an encyclopedia of Rare Species of Buildings as a guide and manual. The spaces will be those that once constituted typological experiments based on the collective and which could be taken as close examples of a typology, of an abstract entity that brings together shared features. Each student will identify 10 spaces throughout history and will exhaustively document them, not only from the material point of view, as built artificial environments describing the organizational, spatial, or tectonic conditions, but also specifying the connections with their material, social, economic and cultural contexts. Each student will prepare analytical drawings that will rigorously describe the conditions that make the examples belong to the category of Rare New Experiments and afterwards will compile the examples in a volume that will serve as the historical context of the proposed collective space.

**Constitution**

In a bodily sense Constitution captures structures and volume. In "Timaeus" it is described how the first constitution was written to welcome anyone wanting to live in the city with others. Every student will define throughout the year a Constitution that must define the spatial conditions, location, extreme new Umwelt to which the project is referred, purpose, social and cultural background of the project and its location, trying to establish every single aspect of the project. Its content describes the specific aspects of the future project and must be related to abstract issues described in advance.

This set of desires, strategies, rules, conditions and puzzles will be followed by the student as an explicit agenda of the project and its redefinition will be part of the development. The content of the constitution defines the spatial conditions, climate and programme in relation to a physical place, along with any other aspect that builds the future project. This includes a discussion of abstract issues, set out with an eye to intellectual clarity and ambition. The constitution determines any feature of the project. It is not a simple description, but an initial test of the conditions to be constructed, formed out of convictions, intuitions and materials extracted from different fields of knowledge. It is a stream, an evolving list, capable of storing history and defining the main characteristics of the project while being developed. It can be defined as a proviso, a kind of contract, or a manifesto. As a radical media, every single student has to adjust content and form to convert it into a form of inquiry about the project and should be subjected to permanent revision along the year. The constitution is the tool to assess the work everyday, and it will
be constantly reviewed throughout the year, confronting the daily tasks with sets of rules, to redefine and critique the work. Along the year the constitution has to be gradually transformed into the final one, which shape, format and content has to reflect the final state of the project and to be converted into the basis for the oral public presentations.

**Adjusting Resolution**

The second term will be dedicated to the definition of this set of techniques, understanding that our Rare New Species are based on concrete conditions that are materialized through specific and culturally based techniques linked to their social context. For the Consortium there is no culture without associated techné. Therefore, the techniques associated with the project are central to the advancement of the modification of reality which is the project and are a set of culturally based practical knowledge. They are neither tools nor resources but culturally constructed and transmitted operational modes to represent the world and to manipulate it. The techniques associated with particular cultures are sets of practical knowledge of inter-mediation with our world. Not only are direct manipulation techniques, but any kind of practical knowledge that allows us to activate both the control and the fantasy of this set of manipulations. Therefore, cartographic systems- that allow us to physically and conceptually position ourselves, as individuals and as a society-, systems of representation-to help us form a mental image of the world-, analytical tools-of quantification of reality through analog and digital systems –geometry and atmosmetry- that help us measure the world and its atmosphere-, and intentional manipulation of perception can be the central subject of this set of techniques. For us these techniques are also cultural materials. For us, there are not proper or inappropriate techniques, consistent or advanced techniques. The social and cultural appropriateness of the techniques and the discussion on which technique or which combination of techniques is developed is a crucial part of the development of the project.

**Radical Media**

The representation of the world and in particular the links that things establish with the world around us is in fact the reconstruction and reenactment of that world. It is about constructing simplified models where the absence of certain elements or the magnification of others constitutes a decision that is deeply influenced by the way in which we understand (and manipulate) the world around. This mode of representation is intense and inextricably linked to the nature of the project, its environment and the model of transformation of its umwelt that it proposes. Therefore, the mode of representation and the content of the project must be necessarily linked to an argument and must be central in the understanding of the conditions of the specific context that the student has established.

For the Consortium of Fantastic Ideas representation techniques are not innocent, but must be extremely consistent with the logic of the proposal and the model of beauty that the project proposes and must pursue the maximum conceptual rigor and the most extreme beauty. They must be experiments of transformation of the world around them, from the techniques to the subjects addressed and the extreme quality and precision with which they should be carried out. In parallel to the project the means of representation must contain a critical spirit and a radical message and must add layers of knowledge and levels
of reading to the proposal in a way that everything is inextricably linked. The proposals must avoid the trends in use or inherited models and enhance the richness of the discourse, with the conviction that the exploration of traditional models of content (and even format) mixed and hybridize with new technologies is a fertile territory for the desired convergence of content and media, richness and criticality. The invention of new hybrids and therefore of new Radical Media is an objective indivisible of the quality of the proposal for the transformation of our environment.