

This could be an architectural catalog.

The architectural catalog has a long history; it has been a means of representing disciplinary tools that define an architectural epoch. From those with clear formal repercussions (classical orders, or today's *Elements of Architecture*) to those with more existential propositions (Vitruvius's *Ten Books* or Le Corbusier's *Five Points*), the inventories architects create in each case attempt to distill the discipline into a polemic made from a set of existing items. The catalog suggests, at its most basic, that through recategorization we might redefine the roots of the discipline, and from new roots grow into a new space for architectural design. Yet if we extend this metaphor we might recognize that too often the catalogs we produce are not as complex as a root-system would promise; they simplify—they chop the tree at its trunk and then expect branches to grow from it.

The best catalogs are those that complicate their own existence, and it is these that we must rely on to create more inclusive version of architecture. The binaries must be grayed, the spectrums expanded. For what is just as important to include in a catalog are those things that can never be labeled; whatever breaks the system is always crucial to identifying the system itself; it is the “other.” The categories cannot be so clearly divided once the self itself is recognized as inherently contradictory—when our synthetic being must be split and divided to make sense of the world around us. To claim any amount of validity, the catalog must anticipate its own disruption.

To explain the foundation of this project, I will begin with the history of the catalog. The first known catalog of books was found in the ancient Sumerian city of Nippur and was nothing more than a simple listing of sixty-two literary works on the face of a clay tablet. The list already suggested order and arrangement, an architectural quality assigned implicitly to sets of information. The collection was relatively small, and the format of its representation (of course, constrained by the material limitations of items made and surviving from two centuries before the common era) insisted that the series might not be easily added to, subtracted from, or otherwise reordered. The catalog was static, and therefore quickly outdated. We might relate this to the architectural manifesto, which catalogs elements to create a set of rules which, although interesting, are always already artifactual—they mark a past when they cannot accommodate for a future.

The card catalog traded the object of the list for the expandable stack, a set of papers that might not only be added to and subtracted from, but also rearranged ad infinitum. With drawers full of cards, library collections could integrate new information into their existing systems of organization, making sense of new texts as they were filed between representative dividers. When systems of organization inevitably failed (Thomas Jefferson first organized the Library of Congress according to an esoteric geographic system that was soon replaced by a more conventional topical alphabetical system, and then finally by the familiar Dewey Decimal Classification), the cards did not need to be rewritten or replaced, but could simply be remapped according to the new system.

This system of cards is perhaps the most akin to the approach architects have and to catalogs today. The patent drawing, a clear inspiration for Rem Koolhaas's cheeky drawings in *Content* and more vaguely represented by Atelier Bow-Wow's *Made in Tokyo*, operates like a card catalog in its suggestive ability to shuffle. Exhibition catalogs, when not simple Sumerian lists, sometimes also venture into the format of the stack, allowing visitors a role in the

negotiation of information arrangement. This open format seems to provide room for new identities, and yet we still feel constrained by its labels. The drawers that group, enclose, and hide specificities cannot contain those that find no comfortable similarities. And so the system is continually and haphazardly reorganized, we move cards from one drawer to the next, and the task of drawing from the pile an new understanding of the world becomes unwieldy. The project of comparison is too difficult.

With the advent of the computer, the library catalog was digitized. The fastest way for a computer to sort information is through a series of binary decisions. If a computer, for instance, is to arrange a catalog alphabetically, it will take the first card in its metaphorical stack and will decide if the first letter on the first card is between A and M or N and Z. This decision is fast because it is simple, and the computer can quickly sort all of the cards into two stacks—one for the first half of the alphabet, and the other for the second half. The process is then repeated, but with the halves each separated into two stacks to represent four quarter divisions of the alphabet, and the number of stacks multiplies exponentially until all twenty-six stacks represent the first letter of every card. Then the process repeats for the second letter.

This is where our visual imaginations begin to fail us. If it is hard to imagine sorting cards into twenty-six separate piles on a small table, it is harder still to imagine that each of these twenty-six piles must then split into twenty-six more, ad infinitum until each card no longer relies on a pile but is represented only by itself. The move towards specificity confuses the spatial clarity we might imagine, and immediately in our minds we want to stack the set—to restore perceivable order to the collection. But this is not such a clear association in the mind of the computer, because it is you who have assigned that the pile of A-M was to your left and N-Z was to your right, and it was you who assumed that sequence was necessarily implied by juxtapositions.

To be so successful, the catalog must differentiate just as well as it compares. All items must be allowed to contain specificities of their own, not intended to be simplified by their relational values. Instead of a stack, the digital catalog is an expanse; it overwhelms us in its magnitude when we do not allow sequence to exist. The computer does not simply reorder; rather, it resists ordering—it can find what you have typed into the search bar immediately not because it knows where the information exists in relation to others but because each item exists in a space that is uniquely its own. Comparisons are not assumed but created when necessary, for otherwise the expanse of information does not rely on them (and is at peace without them). This self-sufficient spatial identity of the catalog entry found in its digital instantiation already foddors new ways of imagining catalogs, but we can first continue this analogy into a speculative future. Computer sorting operates on binary logics, so their sorting systems (as complex and expansive as the systems might be) are ultimately accomplished through simple comparisons.

If we would like to further confound our architectural imaginary we might entertain the possibility of library cataloging via quantum computing, which undoes the very necessity of constructing binaries to create comparisons. A qubit, the basic element of quantum information, does not transfer information through the logic of opposites, but rather through probabilities. Rather than being discretely either off or on (0 or 1, negative or positive) the qubit is only either *probably* off or *probably* on. It does not need to claim an identity but is able to transfer information based solely on its likelihood of existing in one state or another. The qubit resists definition completely and yet is still able to convey information.

If it is possible to imagine an architectural catalog that exists without set definitions, it might be possible to allow room within it to absorb all genders, all sexualities, all races, all

ethnicities, all those differently abled, and all those otherwise excluded from the categorizations we assume. We might make room for cataloging without the impossible prerequisite of *understanding*. The catalog can be overhauled by the feminist techno-metaphor, by the admission of our synthetic selves and surroundings. If we allow *identity* to be replaced by *probability*, if we differentiate as equally as we compare, if we constantly undo ourselves and admit any system's fallibility, then the new architectural catalog can be useful to us in our quests. The well-done catalog can embrace the multitude before the individual, reseating disciplinary power in each of us. Cataloging does not pretend to be an act of architectural genius, rather it is an act of love and hard work.

The catalog I created is only *probably* a catalog. Each definition alludes not only to an architectural scale but also to the possibility that a certain element might be defined by a certain narrative. Through microfictions, the "elements" of the catalog are compromised, becoming both gendered and nongendered, sexualized and asexualized, and otherwise contradictory or not so easily contained by their titles. This complexity promotes inclusivity, allows an escape from the confinement of categories.