

Benjamin H. Bratton  
**The Role of  
Megastructure  
in the  
Eschatology of  
John Frum (On  
OMA's Master  
Plan for the  
Spratly Islands)**

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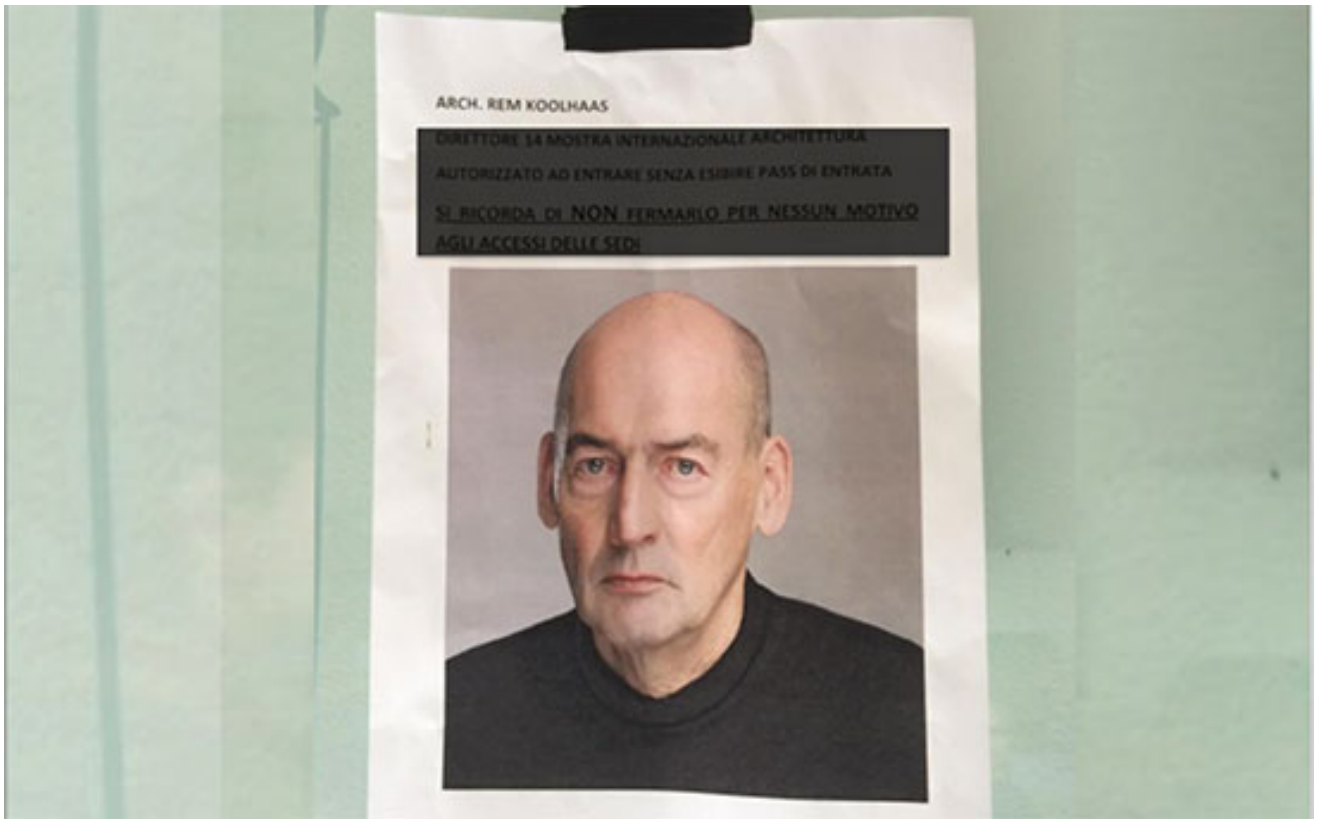
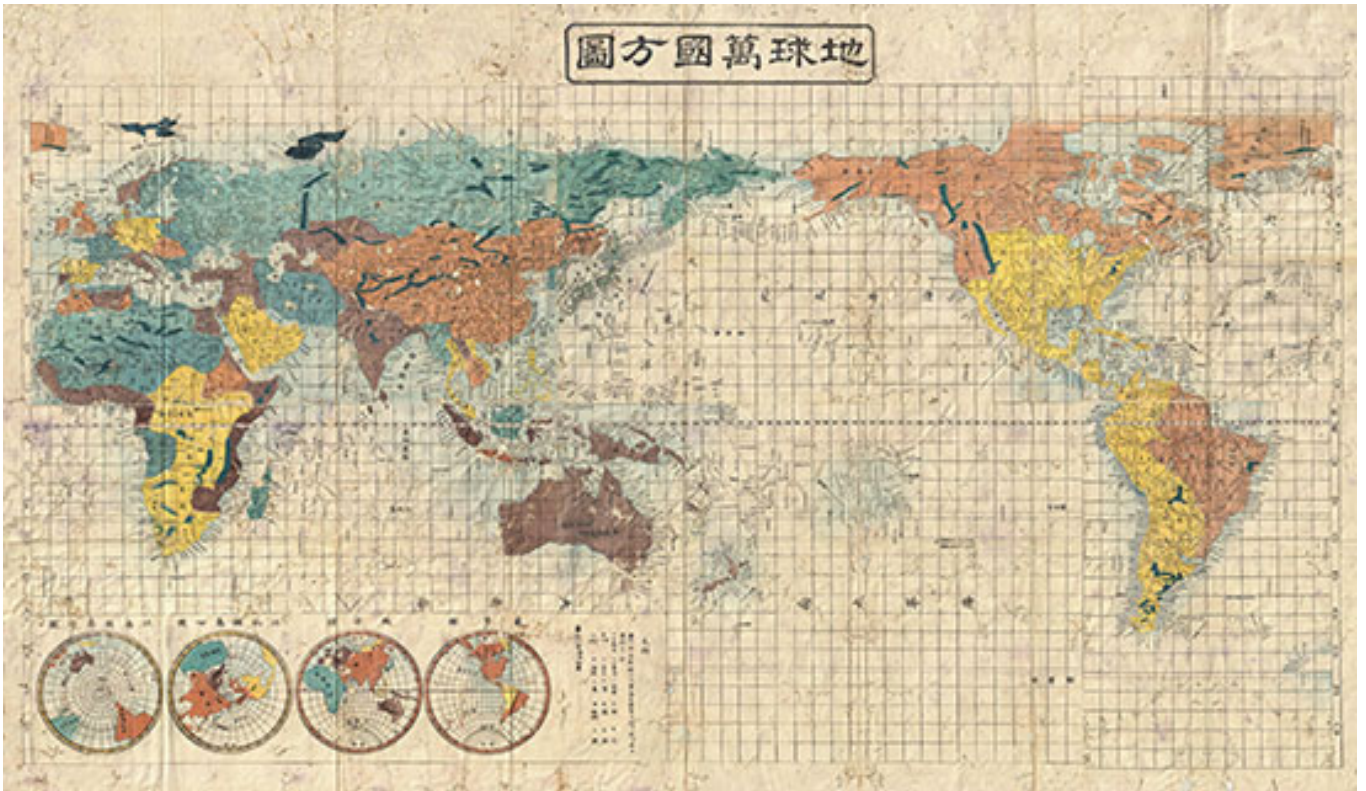
September 30, 2001

The South Pacific Ocean (which some call simply “the Ocean”) is composed by an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of geometric configurations with vast planes of salt water in between, surrounding very low carpets of sand. Among these are the Spratly Islands, claimed by no less than seven countries: China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Taiwan. From any of the Spratlys one can see, on the interminable horizon, the upper and lower registers of Chinese hegemony. The distribution of the populations is variable. Twenty thousand migrants and five languages per port, these are the land-bound sociologies; the height of their buildings, from floor to ceiling, scarcely exceeds that of a normal bookcase. One of the occupied archipelagos leads to a narrower chain of micronations, which opens onto another floating plateau of scientific equipment monitoring, in real time, the metagenomics of plankton, each device identical to the first and to all the rest.

To the left and right of the archipelago there are the otherwise identical capital buildings of two defunct kingdoms (one called the “Kingdom of Humanity”). In the left, the appointed legislature was known to work and sleep standing up; to the right, sitting, to satisfy their fecal necessities. Between the two capitals, above ground, winds a spiral stairway, which today sags abysmally overhead in some places and soars upward to remote distances in others, consuming a sunburnt canopy. In the hallway of the overhead stairway between the two, there is a non-reversing mirror that reflects all personal appearances so that its viewer sees oneself as truly seen by others, and not the lateral inversion presented by a normal mirror. Anthropologists have inferred from the positioning of the mirror that the still-ongoing decay of the dual indigenous kingdoms is to be taken as a profound measure of their success (if it were not, why this requirement to make the illusion of reflection more optically accurate?). I prefer to dream that its dirty, fingerprint-smudged surface represents and promises another absolute reversibility, working itself out through an architectural drama of legal authority situated as funereal diorama. Inside the equally dark twin royal chambers, artificial light is provided by glowing plastic fruits that in no way resemble lamps. In each room, separated by the sagging aboveground stairway, there are two of these, transversally placed. The light they emit is insufficient, flickering, and loud.

July 10, 2006

This trip to Java is to collect research for a chapter that I will write for a volume edited by colleagues in London on “transnational theology and political violence.” My contribution will



analyze the 2002 Bali nightclub bombings and whatever I am able to assess as the current state of things in this, the largest Muslim country in the world. My hypothesis, at least as I set foot on the ground, had to do with (1) the pacific effects of Sufi mysticism on Wahhabism's still-tenuous foothold here, and (2) the role and character of the many English/Bahasa Indonesian websites and online forums that operate parallel to the official civic space of the mosques. The editors have managed to cover my expenses with a cultural grant from an official at the Dutch Consulate in New York who grew up in Indonesia in the years after its independence and, therefore, still considers the island chain to be within the expanded portfolio of the Netherlands' diplomatic mission. Tomorrow I will interview some of the remaining relatives and colleagues of the spiritual agent of the Bali attacks, Abdul Aziz, better known as Imam Samudra. I have read a Google-translated version of *Aku Melawan Teroris* (I Fight Terrorists), his autobiography and jihadist manifesto, which became a best seller across Indonesia during his trial. My editors once considered translating long sections of it to include in the volume, but the prose was so arid and self-aggrandizing that to do so seemed like an additional act of violence in its own right.

Today, however, other news has arrived. Beijing's new master plan for the Spratly Islands is to be designed by the Rotterdam-based studio Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), known in China and Indonesia mostly for its iconic CCTV headquarters and its burned-out homunculus, the Mandarin Hotel. Local analysis of the news is fretful. The *Jakarta Post* writes, "the Chinese occupation of the Spratly Islands was never completely unexpected, but as valid territorial claims had been made on them by so many different sovereign states, the sheer scale of planned development must be seen as well beyond the worst case scenarios feared by Manila or Jakarta." The *New Straits Times* adds, "The US State Department loudly identified the conflict over the Spratlys as a potential trigger point for military action in the region as far back as the mid-1980s and did so again with a widely published pronouncement on the danger in 2004." When I was first in Indonesia in the mid-1990s, I learned how unambiguously the Spratlys represented, even as a symbol untethered from real geographical experience – they are seldom visited by civilians – a trembling fear of Chinese regional hegemony, and the physical force thereof. One journalist spoke to me of that force with words that translated as "volcano," "sun," and "earthquake."

The other Americans squatting in Jakarta hotel bars were quick with predictions, but all

seemed to have forgotten that it was our military that divided up the Ocean's islands into provisions and micronations in the wake of the Wars of the Pacific Theater. It was a foregone conclusion that there would be a showdown of some sort, fought on the naval glacies or with the slow martial arts of mixed-use development; perhaps China versus the other six claimants combined. But what about Japan? Should China prevail, it was prophesized, then ultimately no claim on sovereign geography anywhere in Asia would be truly guaranteed. Even with such momentous expectations, none of them could have, and indeed did not, foresee what would ultimately result from China's ongoing capitalization: this megastructure.

July 12, 2006

I am awake with jet lag well past dawn, my research notes scattered and plastered across the ornate, oversized hotel room, adding to the neo-miscellaneist decor. I am days early for my first meetings and I find it impossible to focus on my writing, or on mentally reconstructing the Manichean politico-theological zeitgeist of 2002. The Spratly project is an interrupting omen. To clarify, I am able to write these notes because I've just received a copy of the OMA project and proposal book as presented to select members of the Chinese press, and I assume to the actual clients. It must weigh ten pounds. The sender is a former American student of mine who now works in OMA's Beijing office. In a seminar in Los Angeles, we had studied OMA's strategic use of programmatic diagrams as political narrative, particularly the generative section, and he was anxious to pass along this new major example to me, a mentor of sorts. As the enormous envelope arrived at my hotel, and as I signed for the parcel from a courier ominously accompanied by security personnel, it felt like I was receiving secure military documents, or drugs, smuggled cryptographic munitions, secret invasion plans. The thing is, to many here in Jakarta, this giant book may have well have been just that. To my student it was an expert souvenir to show that he had made good.

Despite the fact that this country grows so much of the world's coffee supply, it's difficult to get a good cup, even in an upscale hotel, but I am grateful for the adrenaline anyway. The book opens with a long and precise essay on the anthropological, geologic, and military histories of the Spratly Islands, followed by a comprehensive portfolio of images of other ambitious megastructures, both realized and speculative: Buckminster Fuller, Tatlin's Tower, the Palace of the Soviets, Hoover Dam, Superstudio, Reyner Banham, and, finally, the Great Wall and Foxconn. "OMA's current proposed master plan for the archipelago chain

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of islands must be understood in the context of this history, which this project closely acknowledges.”

The project book goes on, some five hundred oversized horizontal pages in girth, and I am shocked to see that it touches on some of the very same reference material as the research that has currently brought me to Indonesia. I cannot fathom how this data may have factored into Beijing’s ultimate decision to green-light this enormous investment. The second chapter states: “The skull map now on display in Saigon mimics the infamous map of skulls drawn from the Tuol Sleng museum at the former high school in Phnom Penh which had been used as a Security Prison 21 (during the Khmer Rouge reign of terror).” This gruesome installation of anti-Chinese propaganda is dutifully debunked by OMA to underscore their clients’ true sovereign claim, not only on the islands but the entire ecosystem in their midst as well. I didn’t share any of this with the student; that was for a different time.

As the OMA project book makes sardonically plain, Vietnamese claims regarding the islands’ historical habitation from the Le Dynasty to the present are factually baseless. The Le people are not only unrepresented by the current inhabitants, they actually *never existed*. “Regardless of the international community’s policy positions on the ultimate geoethics [sic] of Beijing and Hong Kong’s new developments there, the proposition cannot be seriously entertained that the tens of thousands of supposedly dead and disappeared islanders could have been killed by the Chinese occupation, because it is extremely likely that the islands were actually uninhabited at that time.” OMA’s conclusion: the map of the Spratlys composed with the skulls of those Le people killed by Chinese and Japanese occupations, now on display in Saigon, must be constructed with heads of the dead from somewhere else. This was my hypothesis too. The designers armed the clients with the necessary rationale to deflect opposition, from both those directly affected by their plans and those with exterior cosmopolitan intentions.

Traffic is light today, and the internet seems almost unencumbered. I take the opportunity to execute some lingering errands. I leave the OMA program book locked up at my hotel. The sky is pink and brown, and the waterway smells like old airplanes, the taxis like durian perfume. I feel settled and calm.

July 14, 2006

My contacts who were to arrange today’s meetings with Imam Sumudra’s remaining network send word that everything has been postponed. All bets off, or? “Not to worry, but

don’t tell anyone,” they relay. That night, on my way to dinner in the Petamburan area, I see graffiti, in English, on garage doors, on the sides of delivery vans: “John Frum.” It occurs to me that I’ve also been seeing it in Bahasa but didn’t know it at the time.

The faint parallel lines between my own current assignment, the nightclub bombing, and what I have been reading over the last day in the OMA project book, eventually make me nervous and sad. There are islands and there are islands, but the two are often confused. This confusion drove the whole Dutch East India project, you could argue. Alone at my table overlooking the street, I remember feeling more than a bit ambivalent, conflicted, eventually drunk on Bintangs. “It is extremely likely that in one hour,” I say out loud to no one, “the conclusion that I have long imagined will prove that the real cause of the Bali bombing was not anti-Americanism, despite the apostolic claims of its perpetrators, but an anti-Chinese hostility that, on Java, mixed local ethnic rivalry with day-to-day civilizational eschatology.” Over tea, I review my own notes, written weeks before, on the main opposition movement to the Chinese mobilization of the Spratlys:

Which doesn’t invalidate interest in the New John Frum Party that has made these retroactive irredentist claims, but rather amplifies it: an inverse messianism seeks to repeal a South Pacific occupation in the name of island culture that quite literally never physically existed ... The Party has long since spread from its “cargo cult” origins on Vanuatu around World War II ... Isaak Wan Nikiaw Jr.’s presence in Pacific politics has made February 15, the old John Frum Day of his immanent return, synonymous with anti-Chinese populist sentiment from Macau to Midway. How many different recipes are there for the tragic history of marginalized, colonized peoples to mix ad hoc geopolitics with populist spiritualism to service the specter of pre-Colonial original culture? Not that many? ... The origin of origins. The body of that specter is a culture that can be venerated as “purified” only through such convolutions, as a projective plan for another post-post-colonial political constitution ... The convolutions of the present say “we shall be what we once were.” Atavism as telos ... But what other examples are there of the irredentist projection and formation (and in the case of Skull Map, literal counterfeiting) of a peoples that are neither subjugated nor annihilated by genocide, but who,

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archaeologically speaking, never existed in the first place?

On the back of my newspaper, I draw out my own sketches of what the OMA project will look like when complete, based on the initial descriptions in the project book's essay. I wonder how different this will be from the official renders I have deliberately avoided examining. From the *Jakarta Post*: "While Brunei will keep its dozen or so Exclusive Economic Zones, and Vietnam will retain fishing access across a nearly 50,000 sq km area, China's consolidation of these satellite holdings will be essentially complete." In essence, OMA confronts the territorial spread of the Spratlys' 750–1000 islands and sea mounts and, instead of attempting to "resolve" the geographic and jurisdictional complexities of the islands, they will instead directly merge them into an artificial mega-archipelago. The islands themselves are already spread across three different natural archipelagos, not formed by a single geologic breaking of the Pacific surface, and so the sprinkling of land above is matched by a fragmentation of the foundation beneath.

I outline figures, numbers, calculations, one on top of another, seeing if it adds up, even on its own terms. Beneath the water, above the water. The scheme is both brilliant and absurd. By characterizing the annual disappearance of low-lying sea mounts, and the eventual subtraction of much of the land from the map due to climate change-induced sea rise, OMA claims expertise drawn from the Netherlands' national history of territorial production and defense, and uses original Dutch terminologies. The project will essentially invert the figure-ground tableau of pebbles floating on water with two essential moves: (1) further carving the already small islands into equal-sized, standardized units, in some cases giving the rocky interiors of the now deeply striated terrains back to the ocean, therefore making their nodal arrangement more flexible and manageable, and (2) linking these units into a multidirectional grid both under and over the rising sea level. This scaffolding will provide, it is hoped, a kind of oceanic canopy through which the new production and distribution initiatives can draw on the islands' considerable but inaccessible oil and gas reserves, serve the freight, cruise, and sea-steady traffic, and also effectively house the hundreds of thousands of new inhabitants to be imported from the mainland. This strategy is in marked contrast to those of the other competing proposals that, each in their own way, attempted to address the seven-headed claims of sovereignty over the Spratlys with either an architecture of polynational equanimity (a sort of seaborne United Nations chamber-in-the-round)

or one of absolute Chinese consolidation. (The Beijing-based studio, MAD, would have fused Sin Cowe Island and a close neighbor with a several-kilometer-long concrete peninsula that would invoke Tiananmen Square itself, as portraits of Mao may have done during another time. Unappeasable.)

My room is black and blue and the pillow feels so cold and dry on my face. The work will have to find its own way, as usual. I assume my editors will not only understand but will also welcome the new directions. More than they paid for, if they can step along with it, and even see where they are going. The muddy light of the wall-mounted lamps leading toward and up the paired staircases was the same as in the beginning. Both head down into the same Ocean but from different entry points, both lead back up but toward different exits. There is no reason to assume one has to be the other. This is what made it possible, over all these hundreds of years, to formulate something like a general theory of the formless and chaotic nature of the islands' intricate and shallow political stakes. Every sensible line is not a straightforward statement, and there are leagues of senseless cacophonies, symbolic jumbles, misunderstandings, unadorned brutalities, and incredible violence; none of it and all of it is encrypted, and it is still right there without veil or explanation or justification. The light is formulated by the dead, who, one supposes, could be staying at the hotel at this very moment, viewing together the slums that will become a parking garage and then a slum again later this year. Writing the present state of humans and things and phantoms, in the districts where young men would once again prostrate themselves, is what they do. Kissing pages and turning in certain directions at certain times, there is nothing really for them to decipher, per se. That's the wrong word, as it turns out, maybe. It is all the epidemics, fake heresies, and warlords from the television. Perhaps I am just old enough to deceive myself, but I think the whole lot is about to be burned alive without the archive enduring. It is utterly corruptible. The same ideas and images as before, just as I dreamed that its fingerprint-smudged surfaces can point to another absolute reversibility, working itself out through theaters of authority's set pieces and stage sets, and through shadow puppetry in the twin chambers illuminated still by fruit, with all the rooms divided by elevators and stairways, the grinding hum they emit like the sound of people talking.

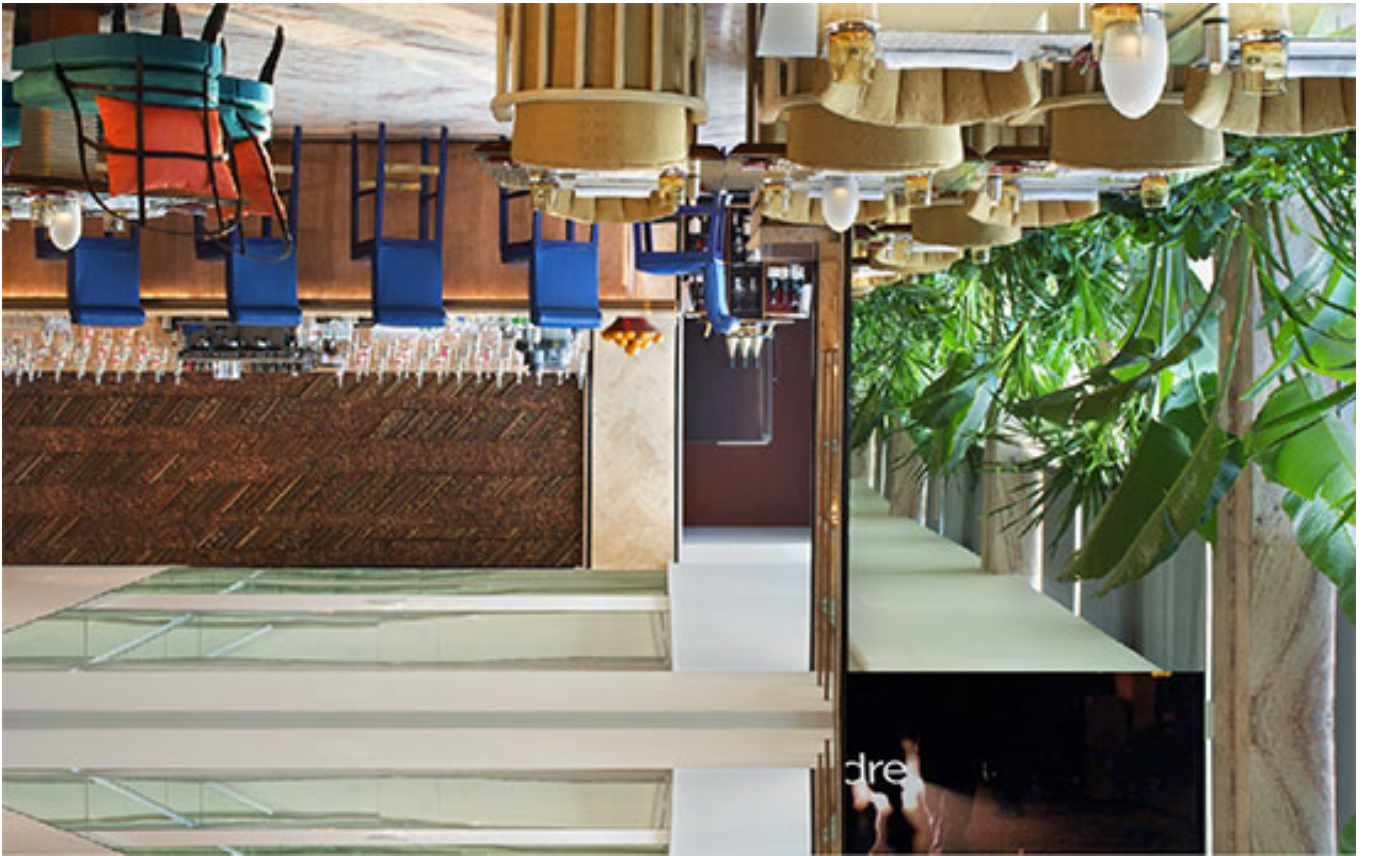
July 15, 2006

Today's New John Frum movement has never actually threatened to use bombs to disrupt Chinese development of the Spratlys, but

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has explicitly linked this choice to their opposition to the French nuclear tests that first brought them to the world's attention. OMA's own analysis also makes a succinct and linear correlation between Frum's history, the "bomb" tactic, and the planned future of the island chain. OMA presumes that the namesake, John Frum, must have been one of the many American infantry who occupied Vanuatu during World War II and who may have had an important role in the clearing of the island, in building the many cargo and troop landing strips, or, as has been suggested, in the actual distribution of real cargo to troops or islanders, as if he had some mastery over their appearance. "John From" Kansas or wherever. However, given the extensive "cargo cult" landing strips that the Vanuatians built after the war, ostensibly to coerce the skies to land more cargo and which might require "John Frum" to return in order to manage the sacred logistics, the alternative hypothesis is that "Frum" was not a Westerner at all (unlike in the Prince Philip cults) but was himself Vanuatian and appeared well before the war began, promising not a return of American or Japanese bounty, but a cleansing of all outsiders from the island. Only then would the islanders be able to amass their own true wealth. The bounty brought by the Americans suggested that this was immanent, even if it meant suffering their presence for a while. Today the Frum graffiti is directly tied to a potential bombing campaign, which the movement articulates in rich prophetic detail, but never explicitly links to the Spratlys, as this would get them included on official lists of terrorist organizations. "Bomb" is instead presented as a symbol of the Frum political theology of irredentist cleansing, which in turn is how the Spratlys problem is framed by the movement for its widespread audience of sympathizers. No direct threats are made, but the chain of pedantic association is unmistakable.

Instead of playing down the Frum threat, as other competing studios did in order to calm the nerves of Chinese officials who had indiscreetly let it be known that they saw the scope of the development as a security risk, OMA instead played it up and used it to their advantage. The flat lattice would connect the hundreds of regularized specks of land into a vast network, having the effect of increasing inhabitable space by several orders of magnitude. It was, they argued, the only way to establish a development capable of sustaining the scale of logistics programming that the project demanded without also providing clear monuments, symbolic icons, and critical choke points that, if bombed, would provide the New John Frum Party (or indeed any other anti-Chinese entity, from Taiwanese

independence groups to Open Internet activists) a clear point of leverage. ("Defense through obscurity, and obscurity through decentralization.") OMA repeats, without typical irony, the apocryphal example of early to mid-1970s US internet, which linked points between California and Utah, and the SAGE air-bomber early-warning system architecture on which it was based, as a network topology that would provide massive redundancy if ever attacked. The story goes that if the Soviets were to bomb any one node, then the surviving nodes could handle the rerouted traffic. The principle is basically sound, and is as true of neural networks as it is of shipping lanes, but their historical example is inaccurate. Nevertheless, OMA explicitly applied this defensive topology for the master plan and, in doing so, assured the Chinese that they could continue to build and expand the development as they wished without fear of terrorist attack; not because it was an impenetrable bunker, but because no single tower fallen would strategically or symbolically affect the claims that the Frum party might hope to claim with such an attack. It would be a centerless city with no absolute critical points, and one which can easily subtract attacked zones from its self-healing program, effectively making the "Bomb" visions of the New John Frum Party preemptively irrelevant.

It is startling to think that this rationale may have helped to finalize the allocation of tens of billions of dollars to construct an artificial archipelago in the South China Sea. It is disturbing for its jaundiced and schematic view of history, and for the hubris and cynicism with which it assigns a role for architecture in the governance of these processes. Unlike the Bali bombers, the New John Frum Party's initial interest in the Spratlys was not rooted in the regional politics of countermanaging China, or in China's bullying of its neighbors. As indicated, it became visible as a leading voice in the outcry among South Pacific nations over France's 1995 atmospheric testing of nuclear bombs near Tahiti (~6,000 kilometers east of Vanuatu, itself another 6,000 kilometers east of the Spratlys). The OMA project book does mention this, and its citation of this event in this particular context is both surprising and provocative in ways that raise the stakes on what is to be won by their megastructural intervention. It is not just about defensibility. The "bomb," small or large, has been a technique of the state – of its formation and its deformation – for centuries. In my own research for the essay I came here to write (Did my student read this work? Did I mention it to him? It's pretty impossible), I have linked the Tahiti nuclear tests to moments in the Janus-faced career of the bomb as a means for state

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authority to carve itself into space, as well as the otherwise uncontrolled, violent refusal of that authorization.

The rain stops, or perhaps it stopped a while ago. I search for and reread the relevant sections from my drafts. “On July 25, 1995, a small handmade bomb ripped through the St. Michel RER station killing several, and turned the center of Paris into a temporary triage zone. Responsibility for the attack was ultimately claimed by several Islamist groups in retaliation for the French cancelation of the 1990 election results in Algeria, which saw religious fundamentalist groups defeat the French and military-backed civilian parties, but which disallowed them from ever taking power.”

I compare the two documents. The project book states that, “the bomb [in Paris] represented an attack not just on the specific French state to meddle in affairs of its former African colonies, but upon the authority of any state – as opposed to religious law – to legitimately organize the affairs of a society.” This could have been lifted from my own text. “To attack the authority of secular governmentality itself, the bomb was placed in the center of the Center, the middle of Paris, the capital city, a violent profanation of the secular sacred space of the state.” But the trajectory of terrorist architectonics works equally for the state as against it. OMA also links the RER bombs to the nuclear tests. “Almost simultaneous to this employment of micro-explosives as a technology for the spatial erasure of the French state was the deployment of macro-explosives for the reiteration of that state’s authority to possess authority and inscribe itself upon the terra.” Blah blah, and then they connect it up. “Later in the fall after the Paris bombs, between September 1995 and January 1996 to be exact, in a particularly nasty return of the Gaullist project of Francophone nuclear sovereignty, the waning Mitterrand regime exploded several nuclear test bombs over the Mururoa atolls in the South Pacific.”

OMA then goes on to quote the New John Frum Party’s own breathless analysis of the French explosions, which is still published, in a weird translation, on the movement’s website, dated 1997: “The role of the bomb to authorize both of governments and the true soldiers – from Hiroshima to the WTC – contain multiples of contradictory functions. In the name of defending of the military discreteness of the western state, which in another forum trips over itself in its haste to dissolve into Eurocapital [sic].” They mean to refer here to the 1993 WTC bombing, to be clear. The 1995 atomic tests were met with protests in the Pacific from across the political spectrum and nearby Papeete was

rocked by week-long waves of riots. But in France the nuclear tests were covered in the French media by perfunctory, matter-of-fact announcements in both public and privately controlled media. The message of the tests was a straightforward declaration of the right of the French state to make declarations on its own behalf, of its independence and singular capacity to act as a state, as a collective agent in a world governed by states, as opposed to corporations or religions. The uneventfulness and taken-for-grantedness was the point. Meanwhile, at the same time, on September 29, 1995, Khaled Kelkal, the twenty-one-year-old Franco-Algerian suspected of being the bag man in the St. Michel/RER bombing, was gunned down, kicked, and shot again on live television, many times if one counts the incessant replays.

July 17, 2006

I answer a knock on the door: my breakfast on a huge, loud tray, underneath a giant tablecloth topped by the *International Herald Tribune* like a flat bow. I see that another public decency trial spellbinds Singapore, another mail bomb has gone off in Kuala Lumpur, again in a travel agency, and that somehow and for possibly sinister reasons, bacon has again been added to my order. Who is the wholesaler of bacon in the largest Muslim country in the world? There’s another knock on the door, and I think about not answering it. The porter hands me a huge stack of newspapers. I must have asked for these at some point to check on the coverage and reaction to the Spratly project, but I don’t remember. I check my e-mail and find a long, weirdly informal letter from my former student:

You have to understand that Rem completely understands how this project is being received in Jakarta. You must be reading some scary things ... You have to understand that he practically grew up in Indonesia. He moved there when he was like seven years old, which must be 1952 or so ... So he saw the country being born after its independence from the Dutch which meant his own father ... Imagine how that would affect your thinking about the world if you were a little kid. I think it has really shaped him and this project, whether you can believe it or not, is part of dealing with that and doing what has to be done anyway ... I don’t know what the Chinese think, and definitely Rem is suspicious. I mean, come on ... This project may seem too ambitious, but really it’s not. It will work in ways that I am sure the people who are so scared can’t possibly imagine now. Look, sometimes he goes too far – he’s the first one to admit it.

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He goes on repeating everything I already know from reading the project book, and even draws analogies between certain maneuvers and ideas that he first encountered in my writing, apologetically, enthusiastically. Then he repeats himself in regular centripetal patterns until the letter ends. My stomach sinks. As an add-on, he nonchalantly discloses something that I didn't know and I'm certain is not widely known, regarding an earlier late-1970s incarnation of OMA and their involvement in a planning project that was sponsored in some way by French-Algerian financiers backing the Khmer Rouge and brokered by the infamous Thai-French attorney, Jacques Vergès. He hints at this and moves on. It's all too much. It's not a conspiracy; it's a revelation of childhood abuse. The e-mail ends with an invitation for me to attend the groundbreaking ceremony in the Spratlys as a supervising dignitary. If you can keep your head when others are losing theirs. The skull map. I close my eyes, and press my fingertips into my eyelids, watch the spiky flickers trickle and trail across the warm insides, breathing slowly, concentrating on them as they move closer and further away in their own miniature cosmos. I hope to fall with their zigzagging descents.

*July 18, 2006*

10/13

I can barely sleep at all for the third night in a row. I dream of elephants staring up at me as I hover above them like a helicopter, waves of tall green grass blown violently all around them. There is still no word from my supposed contacts. I decide to allow myself to fully unfold the oversized map of the project's artificial archipelago, because it is a hot pink dawn again, and so I slide everything off of the dining table in my hotel room onto the carpet. The massive network of curves stretches from one end of the South China Sea to the next – circulation patterns of permanent inhabitants, temporary workers, temporary executives, the data packets flowing through the structure's huge-capacity fiber-optic cables, the logistics of real goods, internal and external transportation, the tracking of paper dollars and yuan through near-field communication systems – everything – is modeled by complex fluid dynamics measurement equations.

Incomprehensible math annotates the fractal soap bubble composition. I read that all flows – human and inhuman – have been simulated with Lagrangian and Eulerian equations to an unreasonable and absurd level of confidence and predictive granularity. Any and all of these design issues are largely initial state



problems, and so this degree of simulated prediction and control cannot possibly be real. On the page, it is math as heraldry. Architectural programs are both strictly partitioned and promiscuously interwoven, Euclidean and hyperbolic geometries collapsing upon one another: container sorting, manufacturing and assembly, long-term asset storage, banking and data services, all coexist with resorts and prisons. They are arranged with an inspired and desolate combination of maniacal algorithmic precision and totally arbitrary cynicism.

The artificial archipelago's fuzzy topos is based on research in global internet packet routing by Dmitri Krioukov. His work models hyperbolic distances in packet routing across the earth's surface and confounds commonsensical relationships between nodes in the tangled lattice of cyber-infrastructure and traditional national geography. Sometimes the shortest distance between two points is determined by a smart packet heading in what appears at first to be the opposite direction from its intended recipient. Legacy networks essentially required putting a kind of "map" of the entire internet address space into every router, such that each believes itself to be aware of the entire network at once. The address tables require constant updating, and, as a whole, each router is asked to perpetually overthink the optimum path of every packet entrusted to it. Krioukov devised an ingeniously simple method of giving a sense of *direction* to the lowly individual packet itself, such that even the simplest unit of information doesn't need to know its ultimate career in advance of being sent, and no gateway needs to recalculate the itinerary of every message it shuttles. Packets move in the general direction of their destinations, however global or local that generality may be when they are far away or nearby to it. The result of these two modifications (hyperbolic versus Euclidean distances and building "greedy pathfinding" into individual packets) could realize perhaps an order of magnitude increase in global data throughput, should such ideas be fully and properly implemented. As it stands today, only a fraction of publicly accessible networks use these methods to their potential, though most large corporate infrastructures (including Google's own internal networks) have been based, at least partially, on Krioukov's methods for some time. I myself know next to nothing about it.

OMA's essential insights are:

(1) To treat the master plan for the Spratly artificial archipelago as a regional scale mega-network capable of intensive amputation and regrowth.

(2) To treat the distributions of human

program and nonhuman program as interchangeable packet layers.

(3) To imbue packets with a precise quantum of sovereign mobility.

(4) To privilege the geometries of hyperbolic distances in all ways practical over Euclidean distances.

(5) To elevate this privilege to an ordinal principal of militarily defensible physical and political geography.

More knocks, more breakfast. More newspapers, more bacon. No word from contacts. The Bali bomber's remaining confederates are not enthusiastic to account for themselves in an interview, I guess. The court cases are too complicated and they are already turning on each other. Uniformly fragmented island atolls are rendered by dynamite into standard-sized unit positions in a grid and installed into another new ordered oceanic surface. Hotel shower and hotel toilet, hotel sink, hotel bed, and in the South China Sea, plankton are captured and their genomic evolution modeled in real time against the master image of climate variation. The project's most iconic images are of Poincaré geodesics and half-plane models: those fractal soap bubbles again scaling infinitely dense or opening upon whatever edge they are pressed. Now there is "third-order heptagonal tiling" where before there was only ground plane and water and old military maps with naive naval zones crisscrossing the island spread. As the ethics of material and materialism, this grid is absorbed and reprocessed into what it had been all along, undernoticed, that is, an ambition less for the line than for the knot and its avoidance.

July 28, 2006

The stupidly methodical tasks of writing and of editing distract me from the present state of things and from how they are designed and governed for real. I am certain that everything I might try to communicate would quickly negate itself or turn its subject matter into a pun. I read the words on my page: "I know of places where young men prostrate themselves before old buildings and kiss their surfaces in an unsettling manner, but they do not know how to open a single door. Outbreaks, sarcastic heresies, peregrinations which inevitably degenerate into sophistry, have decimated the populations there. I try not to spend too much time writing about suicide bombing, more and more frequent with the years, because others have so jealously staked it out as their territory for interpretation." Perhaps a postponed but inevitable exhaustion confuses me, but even if the human species is about to be extinguished, the project supposedly will endure: illuminated, solitary, geometrically infinite, perfectly motionless in its speed,

equipped with precious volumes of useless inaccessible secrets. The new international terminal at Soekarno Airport is quiet and sunny, an enclave of abstraction and the serene mobilities it promises. Like all enclaves, it is a version of utopia. Pre-boarding for departure is announced and we self-segregate according to our relationship to the mode of mobilization, ceremoniously repeating, in miniature, the procedures of the outside world to which we owe our presence.

Into a new blank document file, I have just written the word “impossible.” I have not pulled this adjective out of rhetorical habit, but looking back from some perspective on its ultimate demise, is it illogical to think that the world is itself impossible? Those who would advertise counterarguments about Being are also those who postulate that, for all the places close at hand, the corridors and stairways and axonometric hexagons cannot justify us even to ourselves because they are too faraway and too foreign and not of the here and now. Those who make such claims are much, much worse. And then what? Is it possible that the number of combinations of these systems has no limit, that a site condition has no ultimate ecological purchase? I hope to plot a solution to this some day. Instead to ask, is the Turing machine heavier than an airplane of immanence, neither unlimited nor cyclical? If a perpetual tourist were to cross it by ship in any and all directions, after centuries he would see that the same architectures were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order – perhaps *the* order?). My insomnia is soothed by this hope.

Just before taxiing onto the runway, I scan one last e-mail from my former student. It includes clippings from a Beijing-based website documenting spectral appearances of “Koolhaas” at the construction site, wrapped in dark glasses, hidden behind officials, barely visible to cameras. In later posts he is shown in whiteface, arms waving above his head in incantation. In fact many such figures are lined up, one after the other, each in a white suit, in white face paint, in black sunglasses, and posing with the workers. Is this Frum? My student continues to speculate on Koolhaas’s childhood in Indonesia, his possible daily routines, hobbies, traumas.

July 28, 2007

This carnivalesque satire of the belly of the architect is not the only form of grotesque realism that the project would endure or enforce or withstand or perpetuate. Its mania and rigor could not immunize it from being reframed by counternarratives. You are familiar with the “documentary” film *Archipel Kepulauan?* Besides

the obvious, the film has another unusual and uncomfortable link to the messianic irredentism of the New John Frum Party. Frumists claim that some of the workers shown in the film – crushed underneath collapsed building sites, thrown off boats into the sea, stacked like fish in floating prisons/hospitals, dismembered for sport by bored, drunk construction teams – are descendants of the long original Le islanders. Would that it were so. In fact most of the laborers depicted (variously working, smiling, or dying) are from the territories of Sarawak and Madura, as the film reveals despite itself. Frumist websites freely use collaged snippets from the film as source material in the creation of fantasy terrorist attack scenarios, edited into often lavish short videos and distributed openly on American and Russian social media sites. These sorts of quasi-fact, quasi-fictional fantasy attack plots (a hack genre known as “Bojinka”) make extensive use of *Archipel Kepulauan* as cornerstone source footage. So while the film makes no reference to Frum theology, and in fact the filmmakers have now disavowed any association, the film nevertheless is a canonical resistance text for the movement, and continues to circulate through informal networks of hand-traded flash drives. Or so I am told. I didn’t encounter any such thing myself, but I am possibly the last stranger in the city who is likely to be entrusted with the reception of such a thing.

Except for the dozens of new and old airstrips striating the sporadic open lands, and the largely symbolic megasculptural troop barracks that Brunei has used to ensure its EEZ claims, the Spratly Islands look much like they have for decades, and in most areas, as they have for centuries. Despite the violent scope of the project plans, today the archipelago is still remote and largely lifeless and empty of buildings. Renders from OMA’s master plan already adorn the covers of new Mandarin-language tourist guidebooks and fill up multiple different user-generated layers on Google Earth. The now iconic hyperbolic lattice system, both submerged and above water, has already been repurposed in Second Life, the new criterion of architectural cliché. The Skull Map of the lost Le people on display in Saigon, however surely counterfeit, is at least tangible and physical. It is a real fraud, not a fraudulent real. Construction on the OMA project has been delayed for three years as of now, and it is uncertain when, indeed if ever, the project will be fully undertaken and completed as planned. Baseline projections on sea-level rise with a high degree of predictive certainty all but assure that 10–15 percent of the island land will be underwater by the end of the next century, while the more extreme projections

that presume the exponential climatic effects of multiple positive feedback loops amplifying one another would put that closer to 20–30 percent. China’s absorption of the Spratlys into a new logistical exo-continent, along with OMA’s synthetic topology, may only succeed to the extent that they can also provide for adaptation to ecological transformations that cannot be realistically predicted before construction begins. An initial value problem once again. If this is so, then the project may be an ingenious solution to a very different situation than the one it was originally assigned. Or equally possible, it can be recommended on its own account, even before its completion, as an exotic ruin of failed governance and regional superpower overreach. Nevertheless, it has already succeeded as a geopolitical ploy, through the sheer presumption of momentum, to silence the competing sovereign claims over the Spratly Islands by neighboring countries. Malaysia has even formally recognized the entire chain as part of China’s extended territory, based, in essence, on the presumption that the OMA plan is the inevitable future of the archipelago. And so even before the megastructure is built, it already is so.

August 11, 2008

I did eventually meet with the acquaintances of Imam Sumudra, introduced to them indirectly by contacts made with Frumist groups interested in having their side told through me, a channel they mistook as a Dutch journalist. We disappointed each other, I am sure. At that time it was also hoped that some insight into basic mysteries of the social – the archaic origin of the state and of the time of geography perhaps – might be found. It is or is not coincidental that these grave concerns could be demonstrated as and through architecture. If the language of the stone is not sufficient, then the multiform plan or the solemn grid will have produced the diagram. Since the Japanese surrender on board the USS Missouri, nearby designers, politicians, and terrorist functionaries have contested the plan. There are official actors of sorts. Supposedly utterly unrelated in purpose, but before, during, and after my interviews with them they all present themselves to me in the exact same way. They are opponents who have become one and the same through the friendship with their inverted, interwoven paranoias. I have witnessed them in the commitment of their purpose: they appear exhausted by their work, they recount, by way of endless footnotes within footnotes, renewed commitments to personal and collective purification, and to communities and insurrections to come that will, by way of their divine anonymous violence, resolve the constitutional contradictions of the ongoing

stalemate of an unbuilt project that may hold the key. They talk with their admirers of good works to come, and sometimes they spend hours picking aimlessly through their feeds looking for some bit of information that will inspire and inaugurate their next move tomorrow morning. They scan for critical events. Obviously, no one expects people such as this to build anything or tear anything down, and yet there the project is, at least partially finished by now.

As was to be expected, mania is followed by flamboyant depression. Some means, some practical violence of the state, or against the state, for the project, or against the project, somewhere somehow, would turn the tide in their favor, they each invariably conclude. In the end a small, blasphemous Frum sect originally from Midway Island suggested that the opposition should cease and that all Islanders, including the Chinese engineers and the Dutch, British, and American architects, should jumble the plan until they have constructed, by the probabilities of fate or chance, another megastructure that would absorb the intentions of Beijing as well the eschatological promissory aspirations of the New John Frum Party into one. “Can this not be Babel?” they ask optimistically, in not-so-many words. The Chinese issued damning orders on them, as did the mainstream Frum resistance. This sect, the last of them, disappeared – at least from my view. On occasion I have seen what I take to be their scribbled graffiti wasting away in the public comments sections of the project’s waning journalistic coverage. Despite their sense of doom and defeat, in many ways this is their true solution, at least to what is most important to them, which, in reality, has prevailed. Their composite Tower will be built, and with time, theirs will be that which is honored by decay.

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*This text is an excerpt from Benjamin H. Bratton's theory-fiction book Dispute Plan to Prevent Future Luxury Constitution, published recently by Sternberg Press.*