

THE CONTINUOUS MONUMENT AND THE BROWN STONE SPIRE: RADICALITY IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF NIGHT VALE

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INTRODUCTION

In June 2012, writers Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor released the first episode of the twice-monthly podcast *Welcome to Night Vale*. Each episode of the podcast is produced as a community radio show broadcast from the fictional town of Night Vale and hosted by local presenter, Cecil Palmer. An isolated desert community, Night Vale regularly experiences super-natural events and its inhabitants are under constant surveillance by local authorities. Fink and Cranor's writing casts these aspects of life in the town as constituting the mundane in order to produce a comic effect. Often parodying real companies in mock advertisements dispersed throughout the "broadcast," the podcast offers a critique of free-market capitalism, while avoiding easy alignment with any specific political ideology.

Welcome to Night Vale is not, first and foremost, a podcast about architecture or politics. Nevertheless, the architecture of the town and the governmental and corporate powers controlling this community remain central to the narrative structure of the show. The podcast avoids detailed descriptions of the town's architecture, with key buildings within Night Vale and its surrounds instead used as a series of recurring landmarks. Without suggesting any direct links between the podcast and earlier modeled, performed, collaged, drawn and written works by the Italian radical architecture project during the 1960s and 70s, the following paper places *Night Vale* alongside this earlier work, raising questions about the podcast as a medium for the conceptualization of architecture and the city in non-visual terms.

Night Vale

Generally speaking, we might think of the architecture of Night Vale as falling into five broad categories: commercial spaces, municipal infrastructure, large-scale development projects, housing and, lastly, temporary mystical structures. Across each of these categories, the architecture of the town operates as a spatial network, largely described through its approximate location in relation to other structures, as well as the forms of governmental, corporate and mystical powers that are active within these areas. The commercial architecture of Night Vale includes both local businesses, such as the Desert Flower Bowling Alley and Arcade Fun Complex or Big Rico's Pizza, as well as recognizable chain stores like the Arby's restaurant or Ralphs grocery store. Although Cecil does mention people who have been spotted shopping in the Ralphs, both the grocery store and Arby's restaurant are incorporated into the story of Night Vale largely through events that occur either above or beside both spaces. Cecil describes the mysterious lights that appear above the Arby's in a number of episodes, and the vacant lot beside the Ralphs has been used as meeting places and sites for ritualistic ceremonies across the series—perhaps most notably the terrifying ceremony held there for boys from the local scout troop who had achieved the rank of "Eternal Scout" in episode twenty-three.¹

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The municipal infrastructure of Night Vale includes the Council Dog Park and the Night Vale Public Library. Although street names are not typically used in the description of Night Vale's architecture, in Cecil's opening monologue within the pilot episode of the series, he announces the opening of the new city council dog park, "on the corner of Earl and Summerset, near the Ralphs."² Through this project the audience also begins to understand the mysterious nature of the council, as Cecil goes on to remind his listeners that no dogs or people are allowed within the facility, which contains hooded figures surrounded by an electrified fence. The Public Library is also a potentially dangerous place within Night Vale, in part due to the fact that librarians are considered to be highly dangerous, having been responsible for a large number of deaths in the town. Later, it is also revealed that the library building has no entrance, when Cecil announces that the building will undergo renovations so that "we will no longer have to enter by waking up between two shelves in a dizzy haze, unsure of how we got there, and then wandering around, trapped, until we wake with a start in our own beds, covered with sweat, and with a few books we checked out on our nightstand."³

In addition to these first two categories of commercial and municipal architecture, newly completed and proposed large-scale projects, such as the new residential development of Desert Creek, the Night Vale Harbour and Waterfront Recreation Area, and proposed Night Vale Stadium are also mentioned within the podcast. The harbour development and stadium, both initiatives of the Night Vale Business Association, are introduced in the first episodes of *Welcome to Night Vale*, explaining the highly unusual approach to new development in the town. While, as Cecil observes in the pilot episode of the podcast, "there is some concern [in the town] about the fact that, given we are in the middle of a desert, there is no actual water at the waterfront,"⁴ the Business Association's explanation that the development will be a boost to the town's tourism industry seems to be largely accepted. Also, in episode three, the planned stadium is described as a 50 000-seat theatre beside the harbor-front development that will only open once a year, on November 10, for the "annual parade of the mysterious hooded figures."⁵

While the stadium and harbour front projects are linked to the Night Vale Business Association and—through the presence of hooded figures—the Night Vale City Council, the recently completed Desert Creek residential development appears connected instead to the larger, mystical forces present in the town. Specifically, the development, situated behind the Night Vale Elementary School, contains within it a house that does not exist. Cecil introduces this house in the pilot episode of the series, when it is revealed that the new scientist in town, Carlos, has been studying it with his research team. As Cecil advises his listeners, the house is "between two identical houses, so it would make more sense for it to be there than not. But, he [Carlos] says, they have done experiments, and the house is definitely not there."⁶ Other houses mentioned in the series also appear to be connected to these larger forces; Old Woman Josie's house "out near the car lot" is connected to the presence of angels in the first episode of *Welcome to Night Vale*, while the Apache Tracker's house disappears when this character vanishes from the town in episode seven of the series.⁷

The last broad category of architectural projects described within *Welcome to Night Vale* mentioned here are the mystical structures that appear throughout the town from time to time, often vanishing without explanation. Temporary structures such as the large, talking pyramid that appeared in the Beatrix Lowman Memorial Meditation Zone in episode nine, as well as the series of old oak doors that become visible throughout the town from episode fifteen, point to the presence of powerful forces outside of the City Council or Sheriff's Secret Police. A recurring landmark is the brown stone spire,

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often seen in the distance and a monument that may be the same structure as the lighthouse described in a number of views through the oak doors and by missing intern Dana. The advertisement that aired within episode twenty-four suggests that the spire was “built in the night several weeks ago by unknown agents, or aliens, or animals, or just our collective imagination.”⁸ In later episodes, subway entrances also appear temporarily throughout Night Vale, as well as the “condos”—actually a vast series of black cubes—in the live episode of the same name.⁹

Radical Night Vale?

In addition to the spatial network created by the architectural landmarks of Night Vale, the town’s built form is also communicated in relation to political and corporate power. Of particular importance in this regard is Strexcorp Synernists Incorporated—a corporation that assumes control of the town as the series progresses. Eclipsing the power of the City Council, Sheriff’s Secret Police and The Vague, Yet Menacing, Government Agency, the company and its representatives become an increasingly threatening and controlling presence within Night Vale and the surrounding region, communicated through the increasing censorship of Cecil’s program by Strexcorp-controlled Station Management. Strexcorp is distinguished from these other powers largely through its purely corporate ideology, setting up a destructive logic based on vague notions of productivity and efficiency—due to the fact that Strexcorp does not seem directly connected to the manufacturing of goods or provision of services. If Strexcorp might be seen to operate here as capitalism in abstract terms, then turning to an earlier moment involving a critique of capitalism through the refusal of the architectural object may provide a tool for the examination of architecture within *Welcome to Night Vale*.

Despite the temporal and disciplinary distance separating the work of *architettura radicale* and *Welcome to Night Vale*, and unlikely as it may seem, a comparison between the architectures of these works may not be completely uninvited by Fink and Cranor. In fact, a moment of radical action within the podcast serves as our entry point into this discussion. In “Parade Day”, episode forty-six of *Welcome to Night Vale*, Cecil reports on an attempted takeover of Strexcorp headquarters by a “band of well-read middle schoolers” led by fugitive 13-year old, Tamika Flynn.¹⁰ In their attempt to put an end to Strexcorp’s “dystopian corpocratic regime,” the group takes control of a number of the company’s helicopters. During his broadcast, and while urging Night Vale citizens to take action to help overthrow Strexcorp, Cecil reports that the teenagers “apparently learned to fly the helicopters by reading books. Specifically, they learned by reading Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, and a collection of Shirley Jackson short stories.” Moments later, when Cecil notifies his listeners that Tamika Flynn has been arrested by Strexcorp security officers, he also reports that she was seen waving “a heavily-notated copy of Bertolt Brecht’s *Life of Galileo*.”¹¹ While the somewhat sinister rituals that take place in the small desert community of Night Vale undoubtedly recall those of the village at the centre of Jackson’s 1948 short story “The Lottery,” the episode’s slightly more cryptic references to Calvino and Brecht point to a much weaker (but nevertheless interesting) connection between *Welcome to Night Vale* and modes of post-war Marxist thought.¹² There is much that could be written about the broader connections between these literary figures and Italy’s post-war New Left, but of particular interest here is the presence of Calvino’s text within the podcast.¹³

First published in Italian as *Le città invisibili* in 1972, *Invisible Cities* presents a mode of thinking about the city that is, broadly speaking, dependent on two opposed but inter-related concepts: individual moments within the city and the grid as an ordering device for the city as a whole.¹⁴ Within

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this work, the tension and overlap between these concepts play out through the story's two main characters, Marco Polo and the emperor Kublai Khan. While Polo sees the city largely in terms of individual, organic moments, Kahn's understanding of the city as a game of chess invokes the logic of the grid.¹⁵ Both approaches tend towards an abstract notion of the city that offers critical reflection on the operation of urban form in more abstract terms, while also arguably being linked to the specific contexts of Venice (Polo) and New York (Kahn).¹⁶ Bound up in the same moment as Calvino's writing in *Invisible Cities*, the work of *architettura radicale* was also preoccupied to some extent with the city as a site of confrontation between the abstract and familiar, the limited and the limitless.

The non-traditional architectural output of many *i radicals* (as they referred to themselves) raised significant questions about architecture's isolation from and relationship to its wider context.¹⁷ Collectives such as Superstudio, Archizoom, 9999 and UFO that formed in Florence during the late 60s, while possessing distinct attitudes about the politics of their architectural work, emerged in reaction to the societal unrest that characterized this decade. They modelled their interrogations of architecture and its wider post-war socio-political context in Italy on the anxieties heightened by the transformations of the period in relation to both new technologies and urbanisation under late capitalism. Shifting between various media and modes of representation, *i radicals* sought to understand the city in terms of abstract patterns of production and consumption overlaid with the individual architectural moments that represented the city's more tangible form. While the presence of Calvino's *Invisible Cities* within the narrative the podcast as a key source for those undertaking radical political action does not seem purely accidental, this moment within *Welcome to Night Vale* serves here as a prompt to consider architecture within the podcast in relation to the terms of the Italian radical architecture project before it.

Ad Infitium Town: No-Stop City

The modeled and drawn studies of Archizoom's No-Stop City depicted an urban logic completely stripped of any singular or figurative architectural elements—that is, the city as an unlimited site of consumption in the form of office and domestic cell-like interiors, car parks and commercial spaces (ie the supermarket)—taking the *operaista* (workerist) theorist Mario Tronti's concept of society as a factory to extreme conclusions in revealing the ideological character of the urban environment.¹⁸ As Pier Vittorio Aureli has observed, the models and drawings depicting No-Stop City were concerned with “a radicalization *per absurdum* of the industrial, consumerist and expansionist forces of the capitalist metropolis in the form of a continuous city.”¹⁹ Within Fink and Cranor's *Night Vale* the town's architecture, in resisting definition in terms of both its overall form and individual architectural moments, operates as both the expression of control by various powers (increasingly Strexcorp) and a tool for embedding this more abstract network of power and consumption within the familiar setting of a small, rural community.

In this sense, *Night Vale* is both small town and infinite city—a polemic rendered absolute by the medium of the podcast. Listeners understand the individual architectural moments that make up the town (the library, the elementary school, the local pizzeria), but these moments are not described in formal terms, allowing the buildings to primarily be treated as nodes of activity within a spatial network. Despite consistent references to *Night Vale* as a bustling or even quiet little town, as well as locations “at the edge” or “outside of” town, the size and—by extension—limits of *Night Vale* are deliberately unclear. The presence of mystical structures within the town, in particular the appearance of oak doors leading to vast new landscapes and structures that a number of the town's inhabitants find

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themselves occupying, points to the role of architecture and architectural elements in maintaining this tension between the small town and the unlimited city.

Like No-Stop City, *Welcome to Night Vale* presents an environment of consumption that is devoid of primary production. Where the supermarkets, car parks and cell-like interiors of No-Stop City were presented as an endless series of repeated, non-figurative structures of consumption, Night Vale also operates without any clear source for the products the town consumes. The recurring character of John Peters, a local farmer reveals Fink and Cranor's intention to deal with production in Night Vale through its conspicuous absence (or, perhaps more accurately, its invisibility). As Cecil explains in an episode entitled "Wheat and Wheat By-products," given the desert location of Night Vale, Peters has never successfully grown any crops. Rather, he survives on a "half a million dollar annual subsidy for imaginary corn, which has been one of Night Vale's greatest exports."²⁰ Here again, the podcast points to a carefully curated tension between the logic of a small town (as an entity defined by modes of agricultural or industrial production), and a limitless landscape of consumption where it is possible for products and objects to appear—and disappear. Similarly, the architectural containers of No-Stop City existed primarily for modes of consumption, but the unlimited repetition of these elements left no room for the primary industries that would sustain such an urban condition.

Tensions between the defined and the limitless urban conditions implied in Archizoom's work and *Welcome to Night Vale* were also a key feature of the two-dimensional mixed media works completed by another Florentine collective, Superstudio, from 1969, entitled *Il monumento continuo* (The Continuous Monument). The project was described through a series of collages and comic strips as a megastructure-like grid of neutral cubes stretching parasitically across existing landscapes and cities. Unlike No-Stop City, which appeared on paper largely in plan drawings, *Il monumento continuo* was represented solely through perspectival views, creating a completely externalised relationship to the project and emphasising the structure's apparent relationship to the natural environment and existing urban centres.

For Superstudio, the monument was devoid of design and an internal program, consisting instead of a blank cube repeated over and over again in the pursuit of a monumental structure. The self-imposed exile of this structure, moving above and around existing environments seems to leave both nature and the city free from its own robotic, endless and repetitive growth. Nevertheless, this set of relationships is an illusion and, in fact, everything contained within the perspectival images of *Il monumento continuo* has been redefined by the "total urbanization" of the scheme.²¹ The dead architecture of the monument mimics the rationalised logic of unchecked capitalist growth, but is a "non-space" that works to obscure the urbanisation of those elements of the compositions that appear familiar.²² Taking Superstudio's resistance to the architectural object further, the non-visual medium of the podcast casts the small town identity of Night Vale as an equally insidious tool for disguising forms of unlimited and unchecked growth. Not unlike *Il monumento continuo*, moments of confrontation between the rationality of pure forms (the "condos", the pyramid) and the "formlessness" of the town (as a series of events and relations of power) reveal opportunities for critiquing architecture's relationship to its broader context.

Superstudio and Archizoom's architecture resisted any clear design qualities through the abstract, drawn, collaged and modeled content of their works. The disappearance of the individual architectural object and absence of design qualities in this way attempted to overcome the commodity status of these objects (and, as such, push past their desirability) in order to reveal architecture's relationship to

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its wider political and economic context. Architecture in *Welcome to Night Vale* is arguably able to more completely reject design content through the non-visual medium of the podcast. Using this lack of visual content, Fink and Cranor have deployed architecture in *Welcome to Night Vale* as a non-figurative spatial network clearly implicated in sustaining the tension between Night Vale as small town and as unlimited landscape of consumption and control. Placing Night Vale's architectural content alongside earlier works associated with *architettura radicale*, raises broader questions in relation to the intent behind *Welcome to Night Vale* and the potential for architecture to operate critically through the podcast medium. Specifically, can radical architecture be present in contemporary non-architectural works, and what opportunities might exist for describing architecture in relation to its wider social, political and economic context through the podcast?

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- ⁷ Ibid.; Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor, "7-History Week," *Welcome to Night Vale*.
- ⁸ Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor, "24-The Mayor," *Welcome to Night Vale*, podcast audio, June 1, 2013, <https://itunes.apple.com/au/podcast/24-the-mayor/id536258179?i=162142593&mt=2>
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- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery," *The New Yorker*, June 26 1948.
- ¹³ For example, Gail Day's interdisciplinary study of this moment, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory* (2011) positions the work of both Calvino and Brecht within this discourse. Gail Day, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory*, Columbia Themes in Philosophy, Social Criticism, and the Arts (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
- ¹⁴ Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili* (Torino: Einaudi, 1972). The book first appeared in English in 1974. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974).
- ¹⁵ For example, Polo describes the city he's searching for as "discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed." Kahn's interest in chess, meanwhile, sets up his mode of understanding the city. As Calvino writes, "Ignoring the objects' variety of form, he [Kahn] could grasp the system of arranging one with respect to the others on the majolica floor. He thought: 'If each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire, even if I shall never succeed in knowing all the cities it contains.'" Calvino, *Invisible Cities*.
- ¹⁶ Kerstin Pilz, "Reconceptualising thought and Space: Labyrinths and Cities in Calvino's Fictions," *Italica* 80, no. 2 (2003).
- ¹⁷ Refer Marco Biraghi et al., eds., *Italia 60/70: Una stagione dell'architettura* (Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2010).
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Archizoom associati, "No-stop city, residential parkings, climatic universal sistem," *Domus*, no. 496 (1971). Also, more recently, Roberto Gargiani and Archizoom associati, *Archizoom associati, 1966-1974 : dall'onda pop alla superficie neutra. Documenti di architettura* (Milano: Electa, 2007).
- ¹⁹ Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011). 19.
- ²⁰ Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor, "Wheat & Wheat By-Products," *Welcome to Night Vale*, podcast audio, Nov 15, 2012, <https://itunes.apple.com/au/podcast/11-wheat-wheat-by-products/id536258179?i=162142607&mt=2>
- ²¹ The sub-heading for *Il monumento continuo* as it appeared in *Design Quarterly* 89 was, in fact 'An Architectural Model for Total Urbanization.' Superstudio, "The Continuous Monument: An Architectural Model for Total Urbanization," *Design Quarterly* 89(1973).
- ²² As former Superstudio member Cristiano Toraldo di Francia has noted in relation to *Il monumento continuo*: "during those same years [1969-70] we realized that society could no longer be identified with the rational-

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mechanical model of the all-production factory, of early capitalism, but that we were well on our way to another model, the supermarket, a place of consumption, a faceless, anonymous container within which goods were displayed and moved without requiring Architecture in order to be represented." "Continuous Monument," Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Accessed August 31, 2014, <http://www.cristianotaldodifracia.it/superstudio/05.htm>

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