

# Humour in Architecture

An analysis of humorous architectural examples throughout different periods.

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THIS thesis examines the role of humour in architectural design. The research question of the thesis is: ‘What can be learned from the integration of humour in architectural design by looking at historical examples?’ Using literary research and case studies from the 1970s to the 2010s, the thesis aims to provide insight into how humour can play a role in architecture. Psychology research on humour can be summarized as the following: humour is usually a result of a violation of expectations, of which a viewer realises that it isn’t excessive in any way. The way architects implement humour in architecture varies greatly. Architectural humour is often used to critique the architectural ideas of that time period. Humour in architecture is mostly considered a rewarding endeavour, but some architects claim that architecture has to be taken seriously; it takes up space and materials and impacts people’s lives directly. In some cases, the humour used by architects also resulted in some people being offended by it, and that is worsened because buildings are long-lasting. In short, humour in architecture can enhance a building, and it should be explored more, both in research and in practice.

*“Many architecture students experience architecture as a calling, not unlike the priesthood. In this view, architecture is a special mission for an elect group of highly talented individuals. The mission consists of the advancement of architecture, and architects must first serve architecture.”*

*- John Heintz <sup>1</sup>*

- 1 John Heintz, *Attitude - A Calling* (TU Delft: Delft, 2016).
- 2 Stewart Hicks, *All Good Architecture Leaks [5 Point Guide]* (Stewart Hicks, 2021).



A *Al Janoub Stadium. Photographer unknown, n. d. BeSoccer.com.*



B *Overzicht voorgevel. Photograph from J.P. de Koning, September 17, 1998. Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed.*

- 3 Greame Galloway, and Arthur Cropley, “Benefits of humor for mental health: Empirical findings and directions for further research,” *Humor* 12, no. 2 (1999), 301–314.
- 4 Alice M. Isen, Kimberly A. Daubman, and Gary P. Nowicki, “Positive affect facilitates creative problem solving,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52, no. 6 (1987), 1122-1131.

ARCHITECTS often take themselves very seriously. John Heintz - Associate Professor at TU Delft - sarcastically ridicules this view in a video lecture.<sup>1</sup> The architectural practice has been a centre of ridicule more often, for example in a video called ‘All Good Architecture Leaks [5 Point Guide]’.<sup>2</sup> In this video, Stewart Hicks - Associate Professor at the University of Illinois Chicago - makes fun of architects that favour aesthetics over good construction details that don’t leak. Making fun of certain architects or certain parts of the practice is one thing, but is it also possible for architects to create humorous architecture that stands on its own? Can you laugh at buildings?

There are of course examples of suggestive buildings like Zaha Hadid’s Al Janoub Stadium in Qatar (see figure A) or Zhou Qi’s design for the buildings of the People’s Daily newspaper in Beijing. Other examples could be when people give buildings certain names or identities that add humour like for example ‘de pot’ in Rotterdam, designed by MVRDV, or ‘de apenrots’ in Groningen (see figure B), designed by Alberts en van Huut. There are also plenty of cartoons that make fun of architecture, like Saul Steinberg’s Graph Paper Architecture. And nowadays there are also a lot of memes about architecture and the practice, from Instagram accounts like ‘Dank Lloyd Wright’ or ‘Load Bearing Column’.

These examples could be perceived as funny, but the architects probably haven’t designed them that way intentionally. This thesis will analyse a collection of realised and conceptual buildings where the architectural design itself is the cause of laughter.

It is important to talk about humour in architecture for multiple reasons. First of all, as mentioned in the first paragraph, architecture can be a very stiff and serious practice. This solemnity of architecture can be relieved by using humour or satire, which broadens views of architecture and therefore stimulates its advancement. Besides that, on a more personal level, the practice of architecture can induce stress and anxiety, while experiencing humour can help people cope with that.<sup>3</sup> It can also make the general pursuit of architecture more fun and light-hearted, and it can improve creativity<sup>4</sup>, all of which will lead to better,

5 Ján Legény, and Robert Špaček, “Humour as a device in architectural education,” *Global Journal of Engineering Education* 25, no. 1 (2019): 6-13.

6 Caleb Warren, Adam Barsky, and Peter McGraw, “Humor, Comedy, and Consumer Behavior,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 45, no. 3 (2018): 529-552.

but also more enjoyable architecture. Ján Legény, and Robert Špaček,<sup>5</sup> both professors at the Slovak University of Technology, have written about humour in architectural education, and argue that critical thinking, an essential part of universities and the architectural practice, can be initiated by a specific form of humour; satire, which in itself is social critique. That being said, comedy can also have negative effects, if it tries to be funny but fails. As Caleb Warren, Adam Barsky and A. Peter McGraw, researchers at the universities of Arizona, Melbourne and Colorado respectively, argue: “Creating humor is difficult and failed attempts do more harm than good.”<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this thesis is to test both realised and conceptual architecture throughout history on its funniness, and look for similarities and differences. I realize that talking about humour can often kill a joke, but this text will focus less on explaining architectural jokes, instead hoping to find lessons that can be learned from those jokes, and explore humour in architecture more. The research question of the thesis will therefore be: ‘What can be learned from the integration of humour in architectural design by looking at historical examples?’ The thesis will use a combination of literary research on the psychology of humour and historical context and case studies. This way, the use of humour in architecture will be explored, and the thesis will aim to provide insights into how humour can be incorporated into architectural design.

The thesis consists of two major parts; the first of which will consist of literary research about humour to try and create a definition. The second part of the thesis will use this definition to analyse examples of humorous architecture, organized in smaller sections by decade. Afterwards, conclusions will be made based on the findings.

TO BE ABLE to understand what makes things funny, literature about the psychology of humour will be analysed in this part of the thesis. But first, a few definitions have to be made regarding the terms used in the paper. Humour can be divided into three components; comedy, humour appreciation and sense of humour. The definitions of these components have been taken from a literature review on humour and consumer behaviour by Caleb Warren, Adam Barsky and A. Peter McGraw.<sup>7</sup> Comedy is defined as “a stimulus that elicits laughter and amusement.” This can be divided into three subcomponents; successful comedy, failed comedy and unintentional comedy. Humour is defined as “a psychological state associated with laughter and amusement.” Sense of humour is defined as “an individual difference in the tendency to laugh or to amuse others.”

- 7 Warren, Barsky, and McGraw, “Humor, Comedy, and Consumer Behavior,”

According to Warren, Barsky, and McGraw, humour is difficult to examine, because of “the dramatic variability in what is perceived to be funny across cultures, situations, and individuals.”<sup>8</sup> The three researchers reviewed over 20 existing humour theories, to attempt to create a consensus on the psychological conditions necessary for humorous situations. They concluded that a lot of different situations can lead to humour appreciation, but that certain elements are common among different situations. These elements are violation appraisal, benign appraisal, and simultaneity.

- 8 Caleb Warren, Adam Barsky, and Peter McGraw, “What makes things Funny? An Integrative Review of the Antecedents of Laughter and Amusement,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 25, no. 1 (2021): 42.

*Violation appraisal* is “anything that subjectively threatens a person’s well-being, identity, or normative belief structure.”<sup>9</sup> This can be literal physical threats, but also mental threats. In a sense, it is a violation of expectations of any kind. Architecture has always followed certain norms and beliefs throughout history, and architects constantly question those ideas. An example could be whether form should follow function, or the other way around. Because of this, the boundaries of architecture are constantly being pushed, and this can interfere with people’s belief structures. Buildings are also sometimes quite personal in being a part of people’s lives, sometimes even in such a way that a building could threaten someone’s physical well-being or identity. This means there are different opportunities for architects to violate someone’s expectations through their buildings. A religious building built in an untraditional way for example, could be perceived as an identity threat, which could be one of the antecedents of a humour reaction. A violation of an architectural style could be perceived as funny, at the time of that particular style. However, these violations or experimentations of architectural style often lead to new architectural styles, which would reduce the comedic aspect over time.

- 9 Warren, Barsky, and McGraw, “What makes things Funny?,” 49.



C Mantua, Palazzo del Tè, Architrave.  
 Photograph from Marco Rabatti & Serge Domingie, 2004. AKG-Images.

An example of this is the Palazzo del Tè, built in 1534 by architect Giulio Romano. As seen in figure C, a close-up of a façade of the palace, Romano placed some triglyphs slightly lower than others, violating classical tradition. The triglyphs traditionally are structural elements for beams that carry the load of the roof, but in Giulio’s design, the triglyphs are purely decorative, and he mocks this by slightly dropping them. Because the elements are traditionally structural, this could also be perceived as a physical threat to the viewer. The building appears symmetrical, but at a closer look, it becomes apparent that there are small violations in the symmetry as well.

10 Warren, Barsky, and McGraw, “What makes things Funny?,” 51.

The second element that can be important for humour is *benign appraisal*. “A benign appraisal refers to the subjective perception that something is sensible, acceptable, harmless, or okay.”<sup>10</sup> A violation of expectations should not be excessive in any way, and there are different ways these violations can be perceived as less severe. Warren, Barsky, and McGraw have listed these different ways as the following:

11 Warren, Barsky, and McGraw, “What makes things Funny?,” 51.

“*Resolution* refers to the process of making sense of something that initially seems illogical, misleading, or incorrect.”<sup>11</sup> When relating this to architecture, an example that will be discussed later in this thesis comes to mind, the Venturi House by ARM Architecture. It seems like a blatant copy of Robert Venturi’s design, but when you realise it is built according to a distorted copy of the original Venturi House, you understand the reasoning and can feel resolution.

12 Peter McGraw, and Caleb Warren, “Benign violations: Making immoral behavior funny,” *Psychological Science* 21, no. 8 (2010): 1141 – 1149.

“A related reason that a behavior can be appraised as benign is that it seems correct, acceptable, or appropriate according to an *alternative norm*.”<sup>12</sup> In architecture, the notion that certain styles follow certain rules can be dismissed when looking at architectural examples of the post-movement of that style. A violation of modernistic ideas can be considered acceptable when looking at it from a post-modern view.

Thomas C. Veatch, “A theory of humor,” *Humor* 11, (1998): 161-215.

13 Warren, Barsky, and McGraw, “What makes things Funny?,” 52.

“Psychoanalytic and disparagement theories, which describe humor as a response to demeaning, aggressive, sexual, or otherwise taboo behaviors, suggest that these violations are more humorous if the source of humor is *misattributed* to something socially acceptable.”<sup>13</sup>

14 Warren, Barsky, and McGraw, “What makes things Funny?,” 53.

“*Play* refers to a state in which people are disinterested in things that otherwise seem serious ... in which people are concerned with immediate pleasure rather than long-term goals.”<sup>14</sup> This can be achieved in architecture, for example by integrating playground elements into a building.

15 Mary K. Rothbart, “Psychological approaches to the study of humor,” in *It’s a funny thing, humour*, ed. Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foote (Pergamon Press, 1977), 87-94.

Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, “The neurology and evolution of humor, laughter and smiling: The false alarm theory,” *Medical Hypotheses* 51, no. 4 (1998): 351-354.

“*Arousal-safety* (Rothbart, 1977) and *false-alarm* (Ramachandran, 1998) theories suggest that making a person feel safe can make otherwise threatening stimuli funny.”<sup>15</sup> People might laugh at the CCTV building by Rem Koolhaas because it seems to defy gravity, which might be dangerous. At the same time though, people feel safe because it is built by capable engineers according to the

Warren, Barsky, and McGraw, “What makes things Funny?,” 53.



right regulations. It would be less funny if the building was bound to collapse because it was built without the help of engineers and without according to regulations.

“*Psychological distance* refers to the extent to which a stimulus feels close or far away spatially (i.e., here vs. there), temporally (i.e., now vs. then), socially (i.e., self vs. other), or hypothetically (i.e., real vs. imagined; Liberman & Trope, 2008; Van Boven et al., 2010).”<sup>16</sup> Buildings built in the past might feel more acceptable than buildings built today. A building that was viewed as plainly bad design in the past might be considered a funny misstep nowadays, even though people deal with that building in the same way on their daily commute.

- 16 Nira Liberman, and Yaacov Trope, “The psychology of transcending the here and now,” *Science* 322, no. 5905 (2008), 1201-1205.

Leaf Van Boven, Joanne Kane, Peter McGraw, and Jeannette Dale, “Feeling close: Emotional intensity reduces perceived psychological distance,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98, no. 6 (2010), 872.

Warren, Barsky, and McGraw, “What makes things Funny?,” 53.

- 17 Warren, Barsky, and McGraw, “What makes things Funny?,” 47.



- D *House with Chimaeras*. Photograph from Romankravchuk, July 18, 2020. Wikimedia Commons.

The third element of humour as described by Warren, Barsky, and McGraw, is *simultaneity*. Simultaneity is defined as “holding contrasting perceptions, interpretations, or ideas at the same time.”<sup>17</sup> It is an essential antecedent of humour because it also refers to a general understanding of a viewer. A violation of expectations can only be funny if the viewer understands that it can be perceived as a non-violation as well, otherwise it would generally just be a negative experience. The House with Chimaeras by Wladyslaw Horodecki, see figure D, was built in 1902, using classical elements topped with ornamentation that could also be expected in a classical building. However, Horodecki uses animal figures as ornaments, and they are placed quite extravagantly and excessively. This is a huge exaggeration of classical architecture, and this ambiguity and contrast makes the building’s appearance amusing. The simultaneity in this example is characterised by the inconsistency between strict classical form, and the surprising exaggeration of this form.

In short, the three elements of humour, as described by Caleb Warren, Adam Barsky, and Peter McGraw, are violation appraisal, benign appraisal, and simultaneity. This can be summarized into the following; a violation of expectations, of which a viewer realises that it isn’t excessive in any way. This rule doesn’t necessarily lead to a funny interaction, but most funny interactions do follow this rule. In this thesis comedic architecture will be tested on this rule. Individuals reading the thesis might think certain buildings are funnier than others, which is not something this thesis will try to explain.

Based on the literature on humour, a few conclusions can be made regarding humour in architecture. One thing that is very common in humour interactions, is when something comes unexpectedly. A problem with that is that architects, but all designers or artists in that sense, consistently push the boundaries of architecture, regardless of humorous intentions or not. This takes away part of the unexpectedness of new architecture, which makes it harder to make it humorous. Another problem with humour in architecture is that jokes can be

very timely, and buildings can easily outlive the relevance of certain jokes. Another argument is that, as Sean Khorsandi, professor of architectural history and theory at the New York Institute of Technology, has said: “Architecture is serious. We’re using copious materials, and we’re taking up land. There is a responsibility that goes along with that. If everything is a joke; reduced to this disposable ‘I like it in the moment’ fad, that’s a dangerous attitude to have.”<sup>18</sup> This was said about the design of the Emoticon Façade by Attika Architekten.

18 Sam Lubell, “Architects Discover Emoji, and Guess What They Aren’t All Happy About It,” *Wired*, 2017.



“ “The point is to attack!” When I asked Wines, “Attack what?” He responded with a laugh, “Architecture, of course!” ”

- James Wines, in conversation with Vladimir Belogolovsky<sup>19</sup>

- 19 James Wines, “Berlin’s Museum for Architectural Drawing celebrates 50-year career of James Wines,” interview done in 2015 by Vladimir Belogolovsky. *Stürworld*, Jul 17, 2021.

- 20 Vladimir Belogolovsky, “50-year career of James Wines.”

The work of SITE (sculpture in the environment) architects, of which James Wines is a part, is best described as a seamless integration of architecture, sculpture and landscape. Besides that, another important factor of their work is a constant “questioning of the established artistic and architectural conventions,”<sup>20</sup> and a further development of the practice. When questioning these established practices, SITE architects usually critique and humorously explore them, like in their BEST series. BEST was a Walmart-like chain retail store in the USA, operating between 1957 and 1998. Like so many suburban stores in the USA, the BEST stores were housed in big boxes, without any architectural expression besides their cubic form. SITE architects aimed to change this, and used the box concept as a canvas for their sculptural/architectural expression. This was around the time that Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour published their book *Learning from Las Vegas*, discussing the concept of ducks versus decorated sheds. Ducks represented architecture which is expressed through its shape, materiality and functions, whereas decorated sheds are expressed through their decoration, like the usage of murals, ornaments or signs.

The BEST series responded to this by searching for the cross-over between the two, for example in their Notch Building, built in 1977. Whenever the store is opened, a piece of the bottom corner of the box is rolled out, creating space to enter the building. When the building was opened for the first time, the entry space was filled with balloons, and when the corner was pulled out, the balloons could escape and take off into the sky, see figure E. Another example is the Tilt Building, built in 1976. In this design, SITE architects took one façade of the box, and tilted it in its entirety, see figure F.

In both cases, the box is taken as an empty canvas, and decorated. In that sense, it can be argued that it is a decorated box. It isn’t just ornamentation that is added to the building though, the massing of the box is taken and distorted, and therefore, the mass is also what gives the design its expression, making it also a duck. Historians Marvin Trachtenberg and Isabelle Hyman describe the Tilt Building “as an ostensibly decorated box, while connoting its meaning through its ‘sculptural’ shape more than its nominal ornamentation.”<sup>21</sup> Both buildings, and for that matter many other designs of the BEST stores as well, are also similar in the way they express their humour.



E *BEST Notch Building*. Photographer unknown, 1977. SITE.



F *BEST Tilt Building*. Photographer unknown, 1976. SITE.

- 21 Marvin Trachtenberg, and Isabelle Hyman, *Architecture: From Prehistory to Postmodernity*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams), 2002.

First of all, they violate architecture in similar ways, namely in the way they reject the traditional concept of a ‘box’, they play with structural integrity and a feeling of unsafety, and they disregard the consensus of the time - the distinct difference between ducks and decorated sheds. These violations are made benign because the store box in suburbia might be the perfect place to perform these architectural experiments, which creates a psychological distance and an alternate norm. The architecture engages the way a visitor playfully enters the building, and the visitor realises that the buildings are structurally sound, which makes the feeling of unsafety a false alarm.



G *Piazza d'Italia*. Photograph from Colros, January 2, 1990. Flickr.

Then, another project by a different architect; the Piazza d'Italia built in 1978 and designed by architect Charles Moore and Perez Architects, see figure G. Between the late 19th and early 20th century, a lot of Italian immigrants came to New Orleans, and leaders of its community asked the city to construct a celebratory memorial of their experience. Charles Moore was asked to design this place, in the form of a public square. The design featured colonnades and a Roman Temple, circling a fountain in the shape of Italy. The design is very colourful and has a few playful characteristics, like the unusual and displaced application of classical Roman symbols, water-spewing heads, unexpected materials and colours, and the forced perspective of the Roman Temple. However, when the square was built, it was immediately considered a controversial design among architects,<sup>22</sup> and the area quickly fell into disrepair. The square was even used as a background set for a murder scene in the film *Big Easy*. The dilapidation of the square resulted in it often being characterised as the first Postmodern ruin. Charles Moore observed this by referring to it as a Piazza “in a fully Latin state of disrepair.”<sup>23</sup> So why was the design so controversial?

22 “Charles Moore, Piazza d'Italia,” Deutsches ArchitekturMuseum, accessed April, 2023.

23 Charles Moore, “10 years later,” *Places* 1, no. 2 (1983), 28-30.

24 Jay Claiborne, and Tom Aidala, “Ethnic Design or Ethnic Slur?” *Places* 1, no. 2 (1983), 18-20.

25 Claiborne, and Aidala, “Ethnic Design?” 20.

First of all, the history of the Italian community in New Orleans was sensitive. Italian-Americans were subjected to racism, which at one point even led to the lynching of eleven Italian-American in 1891. American architect Tom Aidala<sup>24</sup> believed that Charles Moore didn't respond correctly to this sensitivity and that the design didn't respect the Italian-American community, and instead stereotyped it. Aidala also touched upon the permanence of the built environment and said “The display of ethnic imagery in a place like the Piazza d'Italia can result in an initial expression of ethnic pride, especially on the part of people who are themselves only superficially related to their culture. Such places, however, soon become offensive. They are jokes that will not go away. They are extravagant toys or stage sets that have nothing to do with the permanent business of cities.”<sup>25</sup>

As mentioned in the first part of this thesis, architecture is long-lasting, and humour can therefore become unfit in a design as time passes. In the case of the Piazza d'Italia it can also be discussed whether its humorous appearance

is caused by a) the unexpectedness of symbols, colours, and compositions, or b) underlying racism among some viewers who *misattribute* their suppressed feelings to the socially acceptable reasoning of its funniness. The latter would only count for a small number of people though, and Charles Moore didn't intend the design to offend anyone. Overall, it is an interesting example that shows that design can have a big impact on people's lives, and that humour needs to be implemented thoughtfully.

Keeping in the theme of Italian architecture, another example from the 70s is the Teatro del Mondo built in 1979 by Aldo Rossi. Many works of Aldo Rossi, both in architecture and other mediums, have a certain playfulness to them. Renowned architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable called Rossi "a poet who happens to be an architect"<sup>26</sup> in a 1979 article in the New York Times. According to her, Rossi composes architectural symbols and objects in a similar way a poet would compose words. These symbols often refer to objects in Rossi's history and life. In his words he calls these; "the things that I remember, that I have seen in my travels, that have stayed with me. These are things that I like and use over and over again." Using his symbolic poetry Rossi produces works that are imaginative, and consequently playful and colourful.

The Teatro del Mondo, see figure H, built for the 1980 Venice Biennale, also has these playful characteristics. Its composition is defined by the use of basic geometric shapes and multiple floors that provide views of the stage on the ground floor. Besides that though, there is another aspect that makes its playfulness stand out; it is a floating building. Buildings generally don't float, which is why the design can violate a viewer's expectations. The generous use of colour is unusual, but this also leads to a playful state among viewers, one of the possible examples of benign appraisal. Another part of the design that makes the violation acceptable, is the setting of Venice. A city of art, theatre and worldliness, is the perfect stage for a fantastical design like the work of Aldo Rossi (alternate norm). The violation of expectations, combined with the playful state it causes viewers and the setting of Venice, makes the overall design humorous.

26 Ada Louise Huxtable, "The Austere World of Rossi," *The New York Times*, October 7, 1979.

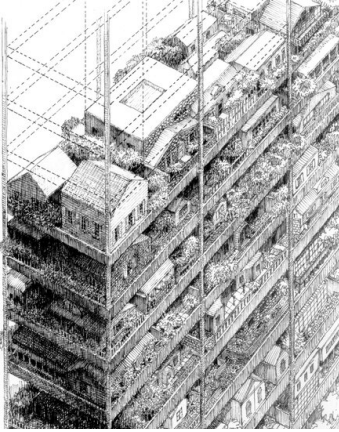


H *Teatro del Mondo*. Photographer unknown, n.d. MA.

“Just carrying a ruler with you in your pocket should be forbidden, at least on a moral basis. The ruler is the symbol of the new illiteracy. The ruler is the symptom of the new disease, disintegration of our civilisation.”

- Friedensreich Hundertwasser<sup>27</sup>

- 27 Friedensreich Hundertwasser, “Mouldiness Manifesto against Rationalism in Architecture,” (1958/1959/1964).



- 1 *Highrise of Homes*. Axonometry by James Wines, 1981. SITE.

- 28 MOMA, “Highrise of Homes, project (Exterior perspective),” accessed April, 2023.

- 29 Christopher James Botham, “James Wines and the Highrise of Homes,” *On Verticality*, accessed April, 2023.

Architect James Wines also worked on personal projects outside of SITE architects. One of them is the project Highrise of Homes, conceived in 1981, see figure I. The project proposes a steel and concrete grid, where each floor is divided into individual housing plots. These spaces allow residents to build their own detached single-family homes. By doing this James Wines establishes a vertical community to “accommodate people’s conflicting desires to enjoy the cultural advantages of an urban center, without sacrificing the private home identity and garden space associated with suburbia.”<sup>28</sup> A typical urban skyscraper would have similar apartments for each resident, but in Highrise of Homes, the housing units are very personal to each resident. Furthermore, the project also aims to create village-like communities on each floor. The design violates the standard expectations of architectural typologies and it searches for the ambiguity between urban and rural living. Architect Christopher James Botham gives a few examples on his blog ‘On Verticality’: “Front and back yards are now terraces. Handrails and balustrades are now white picket fences. Pitched roofs are now glorified, redundant ceilings. Sidewalks are now open-concept hallways. The building becomes a bespoke mashup of architectural styles and elements that have lost their original meaning. Wines has taken the suburban house and created a decorated shed out of it; the exterior exists to give the impression of something, without actually being that thing.”<sup>29</sup>

Again, just as with the BEST stores, Wines shows that the distinction between decorated sheds and ducks isn’t black and white. The design is funny because it violates certain architectural expectations, but makes them benign by having strong reasoning behind the design choices (*resolution* and *alternative norm*).

The second example of the 1980s is the Hundertwasserhaus in Vienna, designed in 1985 by artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser. This building was the first time that Hundertwasser ventured from his work as an artist into the field of architectural design. The building is a social housing complex, and it features two important ideologies of Hundertwasser. The first ideology is to



- 30 Peter Kraftl, “Living in an artwork: the extraordinary geographies of the Hundertwasserhaus,” *Cultural Geographies* 16, no. 1 (2009): 111–134.



- J *Hundertwasserhaus*. Photograph by Andrzej Barabasz, 2002. Wikimedia Commons.

- 31 Stephanie Jenkins. “The History of the Shark.” Accessed April, 2023 from: <https://www.headington.org.uk/shark/>

- 32 Aamna Mohdin, “‘It went in beautifully as the postman was passing’: the story of the Headington Shark,” *The Guardian*, April 7, 2019.

create architecture that serves both humans and nature. The second ideology emphasizes the need for people living in an apartment building to be able to express their individuality. Vienna, like any other city, already had a lot of social housing, but this design was special. As explained by Peter Kraftl, professor at the University of Leicester: “Although this tourist attraction is a social housing apartment block, ... (and thus, functionally, it is quite normal), it is extraordinary. It is not merely unique; for it is not hard to be unique. It is extraordinary, precisely because it should be very ordinary.”<sup>30</sup>

It’s not just this unexpectedness of function and form that makes the design amusing, the humour mostly originates from the playfulness of Hundertwasser’s artistry. The house features wavy floors, because according to Hundertwasser: “the straight line is immoral and an uneven floor is a melody to the feet.” The building is very colourful, and the colours are chosen as if the building is a child’s drawing. The massing is irregular, there are towers topped with onion domes, staircases extruding from the façade, loggias topped with large arches, an entrance to the courtyard that is curved inward, a hilly sidewalk in front of the building and of course the trees on top of the roof, all of which result into a whimsical and weird design. The building violates a lot of architectural standards, but it is playful (*playful state*), and it follows Hundertwasser’s ideologies (*alternate norm*). These factors are why the building has its humorous appearance.

On the 9th of August, 1986, the village of Headington got a new resident; a giant shark collapsing through the roof of an ordinary row house (see figure K). The shark was commissioned by Bill Heine, and built by sculptor John Buckley, and it was made as a critique of the political events of the time. The artwork was put there overnight without the permission of the local municipality. On a website about Headington, built by Stephanie Jenkins, she explains that journalists asked for the reasoning behind the sculpture, to which Heine supposedly answered: “The shark was to express someone feeling totally impotent and ripping a hole in their roof out of a sense of impotence and anger and desperation.... It is saying something about CND, nuclear power, Chernobyl and Nagasaki.”<sup>31</sup>

The council tried to get the shark removed, which led to a long period of back and forth between Heine and the council. In the end, it was ruled that the shark could remain. As Heseltine’s planning inspector, Peter Macdonald said: “Any system of control must make some small place for the dynamic, the unexpected, the downright quirky.”<sup>32</sup> The act of placing the shark stirred up a lot of discussions and as a result, quite a few articles were written about it. On the side of Heine, Bernard Levin wrote in a 1992 article in the Times: “It makes a delightful, innocent, fresh and amusing sculpture, and people come from far and wide to see it, to admire it, to photograph it, and to smile at it. ...

But there is nothing about smiling in the analects of the planning committee of the Oxford city council, and that august body ruled that it must come down, giving as the reason that it had been put up without planning permission, or more likely just because it was delightful, innocent, fresh and amusing — all qualities abhorred by such committees.” Not everyone defended Heine though, as local street residents mentioned: “I feel sorry for the next-door neighbours and the effects on their houses,” and “Mr Heine kept claiming it was a work of art, but it’s no longer a work of art, it’s a dilapidated eyesore.”<sup>33</sup> The shark violates the viewer’s expectations, and the reasoning Heine gives for its placement can make the violation benign (*resolution* and *alternative norm*). However, the perspective that the violation is benign isn’t true for everybody, and the work shows that not everyone agrees on the role humour should have in architecture. It also shows that humour itself is very subjective and that it is experienced differently among individuals.

- 33 Unknown, “Shabby shark house angers residents,” *Oxford Mail*, December 12, 2003.

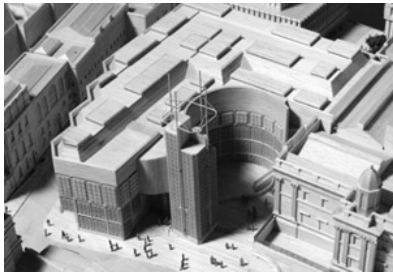


- K *Headington Shark*. Photograph by Henry Flower, February 14, 2006. Wikimedia Commons.

*“It looks as if we may be presented with a kind of municipal fire station, complete with the sort of tower that contains the siren” ... “what is proposed is like a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend.”*

- Charles III, Prince of Wales<sup>34</sup>

- 34 Charles III, Prince of Wales, A speech by HRH The Prince of Wales at the 150th anniversary of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), Royal Gala Evening at Hampton Court Palace, May 30th, 1984.



- L *National Gallery Wing Extension. Model by Ahrends, Burton, and Koralek, n.d. IanVisits.*

- 35 Adam Nathaniel Furman, “AD Classics: Sainsbury Wing, National Gallery London / Venturi Scott Brown,” *Archdaily*, October 3, 2018.

- 36 Paul Goldberger. “Architecture: Design for National Gallery in London.” *New York Times*, April 16, 1987.



- M *National Gallery Wing Extension. Photographer unknown, n.d. ArchitectMagazine.com.*

- 37 Paul Goldberger. “Design for National Gallery” *New York Times*, April 16, 1987.

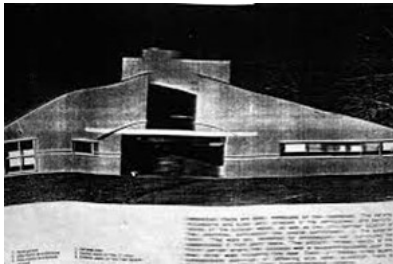
This is what Prince Charles III thought of the proposed design for a new wing of the London National Gallery. It is quite a strong way of words to talk about a building, especially for a Prince. The design was proposed by Ahrends, Burton, and Koralek, see figure L, and was a post-modern addition in great contrast to other architecture on Trafalgar Square. The quote at the beginning of this part of the thesis is taken slightly out of context, since the Prince didn't comment on post-modern architecture as a whole, but instead critiqued the design on its lack of visual connection and subtlety to the rest of the square.

Because of the fuss Prince Charles III caused the design was rejected, and in 1991 a new design was built, proposed by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown (see Figure M). The design had to react to the architectural discussion going on throughout Britain at the time, between neo-modernists and English classicists,<sup>35</sup> which made the design brief complicated. In a New York Times article, it was stated that: “Too much is going on in Trafalgar Square for a modern building to be comfortably added to the mix” ... “But too quiet and proper a classical building would run the risk of appearing too timid and proper and of not being able to hold its own amid this active urban agglomeration. And it would surely collapse beside the weight of the old National Gallery building.”<sup>36</sup> The design of Venturi and Scott Brown stood in between the two architectural styles, it features both elements from English classicism and Neo-Modernism. Where the extension façade is nearest to the main building of the London Gallery, the design copies the original façade but pushes the elements closely together. Getting further and further away from the main building, the classical elements become more spread out, and more faded, until around the corner it turns into a more neo-modernist style of façade. The façade almost seems like a curtain of English Classical elements, draped around a neo-modern building, and pushed into itself when nearing the main building of the London Gallery.

Paul Goldberger<sup>37</sup> called the design “an unorthodox building, full of quirky plays on classicism, such as one blind window that lacks a bottom sill, and a large engaged column beside the facade that appears to support nothing.” The design induces a violation appraisal because it doesn't respect



classical composition stateliness in any way, but at the same time, it is trying to fit into a square full of classical architecture. The violation is made benign because the quirky design meets the complicated brief very effectively (*alternate norm, resolution*).



N **Howard Kronberg Medical Centre.** Photographer unknown, n.d. @MAngel\_Arqto on Twitter.

In 1993, the Howard Kronberg Medical Centre by ARM architects was realised, see figure N. The building looks like a distorted version of the Vanna Venturi House, designed by Robert Venturi in 1964. Where the Vanna Venturi House was already a playful design, the design by ARM architects additionally features crooked lines, untidy brickwork, and a disproportionate façade. At first glance, it might seem like a badly carried-out copy of the original. And indeed, as seen in image x, it is a bad copy of the original. ARM architects took a page of a book on the original building, crumbled the page, and used a copy machine to create a distorted image of the house. The architects then turned the copy into a real-life design, creating a copy of a copy.

This building has all three elements of humour as discussed at the beginning of the thesis. First of all, the building evokes a violation appraisal, because it seems to have no consistency. People that recognise it as the Vanna Venturi House might find it an insult to the widely known architect Robert Venturi. However, when you realise that it is a literal copy of a copy, the benign appraisal comes into play; there is a *resolution*, a reasoning for why the building looks the way it does. Here the viewer might feel conflicted, between seeing the inconsistent design and realising that it is a copy of a copy, which is the simultaneity element of humour.



O **M2 Building.** Photograph by Wiiii, May 27, 2008. Wikimedia Commons.

The M2 building, designed by Kengo Kuma and built in 1990, (see figure O) is maybe the most obvious example in this thesis of integration of humour in architectural design. The first thing that stands out is the Doric column in the middle of the building, scaled to a size fit for giants. This immediately subverts all expectations of classical order and human scale. In a chapter from a book on Kengo Kuma, architect Botond Bognar states that the use of classical elements in Kuma's early designs has "been shaped by the overly historicizing genre of American postmodernism as defined by Robert Venturi, Robert A.M. Stern, and Michael Graves."<sup>38</sup> The use of these oversized elements was therefore a critique of Kengo Kuma, and a way for the architect to step away from what he had learned about architecture in his education. The M2 building is a "chaotic mix of fragments made using various architectural styles, materials and scales" as described by the architect himself.<sup>39</sup> Years after it was built, Kengo Kuma said in an interview with architecture magazine Dezeen that "sometimes I feel a bit embarrassed by some of my buildings."<sup>40</sup> Future works of Kengo Kuma also stepped away from the initial design

38 Botond Bognar, "An Architecture of Dissolution? The Work of Kengo Kuma," In *Kengo Kuma*, pp. 18-41, Princeton Architectural Press, 2005, 24.

39 KKAA, "M2," accessed April, 2023.

40 Dezeen, "'I feel embarrassed by some of my buildings' says Kengo Kuma," accessed April, 2023.

strategies used in the M2 building. The design is funny but in a way also straightforward. It subverts expectations but isn't especially creative in doing so. However, the fact that Kengo Kuma admitted to being embarrassed about it, shows that even the architect agrees that it might have been a slight misstep. This creates a *psychological distance* because it was built a long time ago. The chaotic mix of fragments is a violation of expectations, which can lead to the building being considered funny. However, the funniness of the entire situation can maybe also be attributed more to the clumsy misstep Kuma admitted to. While the building may have been a misstep for Kuma, it is also a nice example of extravagant experimentation of humour and architecture, and also shows that looking back at a situation from the past can make something benign.

- 41 Angela Becher. “Splendid?! Preposterous! Chinese Artists Mock the Architectural Spectacle,” in *Laughing at Architecture, Architectural Histories of Humour, Satire and Wit*, ed. Michela Rosso (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019).



P *Yiding yao baochi gaodu*. Shi Yong, 2003. ShanghART.

- 42 Innovations Xtreme, “Inflatable church,” accessed April, 2023.



Q *Inflatable Church*. Photographer unknown, n.d. EveryVeryThing.

China’s urban transformations are partly characterized by a large increase in skyscrapers and the growing influence of Western architecture. Shi Yong, an artist that grew up in Shanghai, has observed this transformation throughout his life, and his art is often inspired by this. In the 2003 project ‘Yiding yao baochi gaodu’, or ‘Keep the height by all means’ (see figure P), Shi Yong critiques foreign architectural form and phallic symbolism of skyscrapers.<sup>41</sup> The artwork consists of a limp see-through skyscraper, which can be inflated by using handpumps at the bottom of the tower. When the skyscraper is fully pumped up, the sound of an Italian opera is played, hinting at a male orgasm.

Shi Yong brings forward serious topics that might evoke a violation appraisal. By undermining the phallic form of the skyscraper, Shi Yong’s artwork humorously critiques the dominant narratives of urban development and masculinity in China.

The website [inflatablechurch.com](http://inflatablechurch.com)<sup>42</sup> offers the rental of, quite predictably, inflatable churches (see figure Q). As described on their website, the company’s goal is to facilitate people to be able to have a wedding anywhere around the world. The company claims that the church can be set up in a couple of hours, making it very easy to customize the place of a wedding. It is difficult to know whether the company is fully serious about its concept or not, but the concept makes for a funny semi-architectural example either way, but it raises some interesting questions. For example, is it still a holy place despite its cheap and phony appearance? Consequently, does the architecture of a church alone define whether or not something is fit for a traditionally Christian wedding?

This example is part of the thesis because this picture, see image x, was featured on an interesting Instagram account, named “everyeverything”. The account posts absurd and funny pictures that always relate to architecture in some way. This photo, of a newly wedded couple walking out the door of an inflatable pop-up church, is the perfect example of the kind of content that is posted. The act of marriage is an important part of a lot of people’s lives, and churches play an important role for many Christians. The inflatable church’s deviation from Christian architectural traditions and its resemblance to bouncy castles results in a humorous experience for the viewer.

*“Infinitely harmless, the floor is obliged to offer its occupants stability - yet receives from its users systematic harshness, if not abuse, in return.”*  
- Keller Easterling<sup>43</sup>

- 43 Keller Easterling, “floor,” in *Elements of Architecture*, ed. Rem Koolhaas (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2014), 1.



- R *Emoji Façade*. Unknown photographer, n.d. Attika Architekten.

- 44 Sam Lubell, “Architects Discover Emoji.”

- 45 Rory Scott, “In Defense of the Emoji Building and Architecture Being Fun, Sometimes,” *Archdaily*, 2017.



- S *Little Caesars World Headquarters*. Photograph by JJonahJackalope, May 22, 2022. Wikimedia Commons.

Another very literal addition of humour into architecture is the Emoticon Façade, built in 2016 and designed by Attika Architekten. The building is a housing block, with mixed public use on the ground floor. It is a brick building, with white horizontal bands that span across the entire façade. The architect’s utilization of brick and a consistent grid pattern caused them to seek out a way to inject humour into the design. As a result, the choice was made to place emojis on the façade, in places where someone could expect some type of ornamentation. The design led to a lot of discussions online and in the architectural field.

In a Wired article written by Sam Lubell,<sup>44</sup> the author shares some criticisms against the design. Among these is the argument that architecture has a responsibility to be serious, given its impact on the environment and people’s lives. Additionally, it is argued that the design misses an opportunity to delve deeper into the message the emojis convey, considering that emojis have actual meaning and are part of our online language. One additional point that should be noted is that emojis are frequently used in memes, which can lead to people not taking the design seriously. On the other hand, some people argue for more experimentation in architecture, and argue against excessive gatekeeping in the profession, like former ArchDaily’s Managing Editor Rory Scott.<sup>45</sup> The design also was a source of cheerfulness for a lot of viewers. Overall, the Emoticon Façade can be seen as a bold move in injecting humour into the typically serious world of architecture, even though its success is still debatable.

The last example in this thesis is the building for the Little Caesars Headquarters in Detroit, designed by SmithGroup, and built in 2019 (see figure S). While not as obviously humorous as some of the other examples, it still incorporates a subtle touch of humour into its design. The windows on the front facade are arranged in a way that resembles pizza slices, a nod to the company’s signature product. This small touch of humour doesn’t take away from the building’s overall design, but rather adds a playful element to its appearance. It’s an example of how humour can be incorporated into architecture subtly, without compromising other parts of the design.



## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this thesis was to test both realised and conceptual architecture throughout history on its funniness, and look for similarities and differences. The research question was: ‘What can be learned from the integration of humour in architectural design by looking at historical examples?’ To answer the question, a few buildings were discussed that included humour. The designs varied greatly in the way they incorporated humour. They could evoke various reactions, ranging from delighting viewers to bringing a smile to their faces, or in the rarest cases letting someone burst out into roaring laughter.

The first important takeaway from this thesis is that actively searching for humour in architecture can reveal previously unnoticed funny elements and enhance the overall experience of a building. That isn’t necessarily a bad thing though, because, as explained in the first part of the thesis, experiencing humour can have multiple good outcomes. Looking for humour can be just as enjoyable and fruitful as having humour thrown your way. It is important to note though that the integration of humour ranges from very subtle to very obvious, and that it can have various effects. For certain people, the effects of humour in architecture can also be negative, like in the example of the Piazza d’Italia and the Headington Shark. The Piazza d’Italia was also a reminder that architecture is very permanent and that the implication of jokes can change over time, from being funny at first to becoming annoying or even offensive in some cases. However, the opposite can also be true, like in the M2 building, of which Kengo Kuma admitted that it was a bit of a mistake on his part. The passing of time with architectural humour can also be seen whenever humour is used as a way to critique architectural ideas, values, and philosophies. This strategy was used in most of the buildings that were discussed. In those cases, the passing of time often led to the relevance of humour dissipating slowly. Not because the joke wasn’t funny, but because architectural styles move on, and innovative designs from the past become less and less unusual as time passes. The context of the culture of a time was an important basis for the cases shown, but the context of the brief, site and political events also resulted in the use of humour. Sometimes a building was funny at first glance, but most of the time an explanation from the architect and a historical context is needed to fully understand a joke.

In short, humour can have a place in architecture, although opinions on its use may vary. Humour is an effective tool to enhance architecture and bring joy to the profession. This doesn’t mean that every building should have humour incorporated into it though. Architects should be careful when using humour, because people don’t always grasp certain jokes, and sometimes humour can even come off as offensive. All in all, it is a part of architecture that can still be explored further, and future integration of humour holds exciting possibilities for the field.

The outcomes of this thesis have provided an exploratory introduction to humour in architecture. It didn't provide a theory on exactly how to implement humour into architecture, but different applications and their results were discussed. It was difficult to find relevant material, because the subject isn't very broadly researched and developed yet. The research does prove that humour in architecture can exist, and that exploring it further will yield interesting results in the future. The thesis took examples from a broad range of buildings from different time periods, which resulted in that there weren't very many cases per decade. This made generalizing certain strategies to find similarities per decade difficult. Future research could focus more on the way humour is connected to history, and how it has changed. Additionally, interdisciplinary research would be very interesting, because of the interconnectedness of humour. To name a few additional research fields: the psychology of humour –discussed shortly in this paper – but also the cultural, historical, social and political contexts of humour. As mentioned in the thesis, cultural, social and political backgrounds might influence how and why an architect uses humour in a building, but it can also influence how the public reacts to said building. This is a complicated topic though, so further research could provide interesting results.

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