

**Please cite the Published Version**

Cocchiarella, Fabrizio  (2022) Visionary Rumours: Lost in Space – between rationale and reason, its time to realign our creative perspectives. In: AMPS - Representing Pasts – Visioning Futures, 1 December 2022 - 3 December 2022, Queen's University Belfast, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, National University of Singapore.

**Publisher:** Architecture, Media, Politics, Society (AMPS)

**Version:** Published Version

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# VISIONARY RUMOURS: LOST IN SPACE – BETWEEN RATIONALE AND REASON, ITS TIME TO REALIGN OUR CREATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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## INTRODUCTION

In confusing times of fake news and fake truths it seems feasible that people look for comfort in symbolic rumours. As we live our daily lives engaging with ‘the real’ how do we interpret what is ‘normal’? Perhaps by thinking about what is beyond our current knowledge we can find ways to encounter and explore territory we still don’t currently understand.

As artists and designers respond to ‘problems’ do we inhibit our opportunities to design ourselves into new possible futures? By focusing on fixing and being ‘realistic’ are we placing barriers in front of our creativity to re-work rather than re-invent? Are we inhibiting our opportunity as creatives or perhaps should we be celebrating being unrealistic in order to imagine things that haven’t been imagined before<sup>1</sup>. Could this be where true innovation lies? Testing the previously thought to be untestable? To imagine the previously un-imaginable.. what do we have to lose? Perhaps we should be materialising our dreams, listening to our imagination and celebrate being constructively unrealistic in order to explore new territory. Creative practices have the ability to create new methods for living and new modes of reality, enabling opportunity to mobilise change through shaping human existence in modern times. By exploring the territory between ontology (the way we make sense of being), phenomenology (the way we read our environment) and psycho-geography (the way we translate space and find meaning in the design of places) we can choose the Visionary Rumours we create that shape how we engage with ‘living the dream’.

## **Across the Pennines and the North of England people are experiencing a growing ‘Psychic Disturbance’**

As rationale becomes more individualised and collectiveness more confusing a study into the re-emerging British UFO phenomena alongside current political and geographic tensions could be an interesting way from which to measure the temperature of divided societies and opportunity to realign our philosophical perspectives. As we seem to become more disconnected from collectiveness, are stranger things happening around us? Are these ‘real’ or can they be attributed to the archetypes of modern fantasy. In Victorian times this was the belief and experience of the supernatural and ghost phenomena, today the UFO (a disc like Mandala) could be the manifestation of visionary dreams that

deal with conflicting traumatic issues in the self and our relationship with troubled times. Or, perhaps of course we are simply in fact being visited by aliens, can we totally discount things outside our normal understanding? As Irwin describes, the term paranormal in this context refers to,

“a proposition that has not been empirically attested to the satisfaction of the scientific establishment but is generated within the non-scientific community and extensively endorsed by people who might normally be expected by their society to be capable of rational thought and reality testing”<sup>2</sup>

Through the common metaphysical interventions of the paranormal there is an opportunity to investigate the role of (as Carl Jung describes) the ‘psychic product’, how it is manifested and how it is encountered. As geopolitically we become more nationalistic, phenomena like Brexit illustrates how communities may detach and isolate themselves in their own confirmation bias. Independence becomes defined through a ‘psychic disturbance’<sup>3</sup> based on hopes, dreams and fantasy rationale. The notion of the paranormal is something everyone can connect with and a levelling plane across cultures and diverse communities. It permeates our histories, folklore, belief systems and values, it acts as a reference to nature and science, posing plausible explanations for the unknown. Imagination, fascination and fantasy stimulates a human desire to explore alternative ways of ‘being’, outside the commercialised world view and towards a more creative ‘nature of living’.

Through talking about paranormal experiences, exploring the plausible science (what we know or can attempt to measure and prove) and creative speculation (prediction and invention) to investigate sense making through the lens of parapsychology it is possible to mediate and translate perceptive experiences through creative practices to direct, analyse and materialise ideas into physical form. Through artistically designed tools that re-invent how we interpret the world by means of refocusing our parameters for evaluating, measuring and experiencing it. Psychic products (the new products of everyday experience) tantalise the imagination within a grounded realism. Contemporary work examining the anomalous<sup>4</sup> (e.g., haunted locations) has established associations between the designed environment through staged haunted experiential scenarios and its effect on wellbeing and behaviour<sup>5</sup> allowing opportunity to consider alternative factors in designing staged experiences. Is ‘life a stage’ to be tuned to create new experiences we want to encounter? Through creative practices it becomes increasingly important to consider how we ‘emotionally engineer’ the built environment as an interface from which to explore new experiences, ‘para-normality’ and extended visceral experience.

This presents new challenges for design to look beyond what is perceived as ‘normal’ and perhaps explore the realms of fantasy rationale as a way to design new meaning, behaviours and environments. Because after all, we all understand our experience with the world differently, which is filtered by what we believe, what we would like to believe and what we feel is truly real. In the book ‘fitness for what purpose’, in an essay entitled ‘a larger reality’, Anthony Dunne talks about the Marketisation of every aspect of life. He talks about how the current economic system whilst generating vast wealth has failed to ensure fair distribution, and asks the question...

“What if our approach to design and design education is wrong? ...What if ‘making real stuff’ perpetuates everything that is wrong with the current reality, which means all possible futures are extrapolations of the dysfunctional present.”<sup>6</sup>

Could design practices better explore how to 'emotionally engineer' the built environment as an interface from which to explore a 'para-normality' and ways of unconventional thinking, innovative thinking, outside of normal parameters and away from the dysfunctional present. Perhaps towards a spiritual future, consciously designing the immaterial. The culture of how we make sense of things rather than simply how we use them.

## PARA-DESIGN

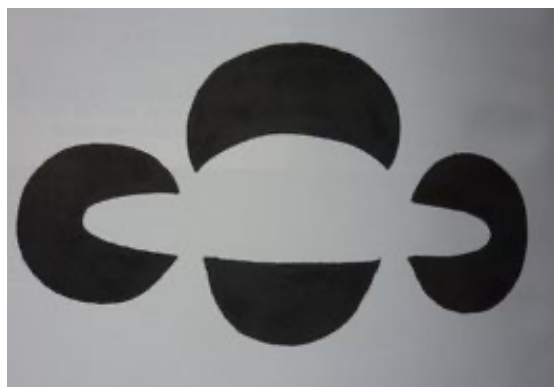
Through design research projects the term “Para-design” has been used as a word/ concept to define what could be an emerging field in design that draws inspiration from parapsychology and operates on the borders or periphery of common design practices. Para also meaning ‘for’ or ‘alongside’. Para-design means design that occurs outside of ‘normal’ design parameters, it’s an approach to thinking beyond constraints and notions of what is real, it explores belief and how we consider the analytical (rational) and experiential (emotional) factors that affect perceptions of the physical world in which we live.

Para-design in this sense is a form of social research that translates critical aesthetic experience into fictions that are assimilated into a world of ideas rather than market-led objects.

Through...

- Conceptual models for shaping identity, desire and fantasy
- Exploring critical and aesthetic roles for design
- Using estrangement to open space for critical discussion
- and exploring the link between people’s mental lives and their lived experience through the design of their environment
- Perhaps this forms a psychodynamic approach to design?

Through a series of designed objects and by interrogating the way we perceive paranormal phenomena research aims to investigate experiences triggered by spatial characteristics and phenomena that influence our behavior and perception through reality testing, investigating the sense of self and experience of space.



*Figure 1: Ufologist Jenny Randles talks about misperception and how we see with our mind and make sense of that based on current popular rationale.<sup>7</sup>*



*Figure 2: UFO cloud<sup>8</sup>*

“UFO clouds”, a natural phenomena called lenticular clouds, can be viewed as other worldly depending on the context and atmospheric conditions. The weather can present unusual patterns that when rationalized in a human context can become visceral fantasy experiences. When we take these iconic symbols and start to materialize those fantasies into real places perhaps we have the opportunity to literally ‘live the dream’ as seen in figure 3 of the iconic Futuro House being transported in the early 70’s through the main street of Todmorden in the UK, this was a vision for the future of housing.



*Figure 3: Futuro House<sup>9</sup>*

Whether reported direct experiences are true for all is not the focus, the value of the research is to explore the many possible interpretations of phenomena. Current academic practices often insist on a reductionist approach to distill all experience down to a purely objective, quantitative physical process produced and understood in reference to the established laws of reference. This perspective reduces experience to purely physiological and often explains away unusual experiences as delusional.<sup>10</sup>

A non-reductionist viewpoint could be healthier, to open up opportunity for new insights, exploring how paranormal belief is mediated through the design of spatial scenarios that perhaps work beyond the plausible. So in this sense design practice has an opportunity to adopt an experimental approach, merging science (what we know or can attempt to measure and prove) and creative speculation (prediction and invention) to investigate the opportunity to explore sense making and translate perceptive experiences through what could be referred to as design alchemy, directing, analysing and materialising ideas into physical form.

## TESTING THEORIES

Through an investigative workshop to explore this new territory with psychologist Dr Ken Drinkwater, we worked with Product Design students from ArtEZ in the Netherlands on an expedition to investigate paranormal perception. Students explored locations and appraised environmental conditions and unusual experiences as part of a series of field-tests that generated design proposals to produce paranormal products. These became the centrepiece of an exhibition where interaction with each product revealed diverse experiences and understandings of the paranormal. The combination of para-psychology and para-design revealed how design can elicit, engineer and channel perceptive experiences.

Learning from the previous studies investigating other sites the aim was to collate a broader and more extensive set of experiential data investigating different types of spaces through a spontaneous case approach<sup>11</sup>. This looks at the psychogeography<sup>12</sup> of particular sites and explores notions of embedded meaning<sup>13</sup> through experiencing spatial qualities. On the first day of the workshop students investigated notions of the paranormal through discussion and debate, looking at the psychology of the paranormal and how this translates through the design of experiences. Students then used the afternoon to rapidly model ideas for experiential scenarios. Invention gives objects distinctive identity away from linguistics of construction and manufacture, a ‘gadget’ for influencing behavior.<sup>14</sup>

For the second day we went on a day trip and spent the morning at the 20th-Century Dutch academic parapsychology, spiritualism and mediumistic art collections. Psychologist Dr Wim Kramer and assistant Lotje talked with the students about the archives and current research, explaining how the archives had accumulated over the years and also demonstrated artefacts used to make contact with the spirit world. These ‘spiritual products’ gave valuable insight into the design of objects to facilitate communication with the esoteric... Wim demonstrated a Victorian devise that signals when spirits are present during a seance. It was thought at the time that spirits were present in the breeze or drafts in a room. This lightly weighted devise would flutter in the movement of air (Wim’s breath) and light up to signal a presence.

At our first ‘haunted’ location students employed field research using a spontaneous case approach, parapsychologist Steven Parsons recently wrote a field guide for the Society of Psychical Research in London, on how to investigate spontaneous cases i.e. on location rather than in the lab. This method is concerned with data collection and verification, whilst generating ethnographic and observational data.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, field research provided students with a way of studying each location within its “natural” setting. As designers they were exploring and thinking through real experiences that they could later translate into designed responses. The following day after a morning of prototyping we conducted another study at the nearby Panopticon prison. The recently retired building was excellent inspiration for investigating a different type of perceived haunted space. Through another building study, students were able to compare perceptual experiences with the day before and analyze the different design languages employed in diverse places. The spiritualist building in Utrecht was a place to host seances and friendly contact with the spirit world whereas Arnhem Panopticon prison was a place where paranormal phenomena occurred as a consequence of an oppressive environment.

Through making, tests and conceptual mock-ups helped to model experiences from the building study into objects that either simulated phenomena through light, through exploring cultural notions of

superstition or objects to act as conduits to esoteric forces as proposals for new types of experiential products that connected the physical world with psychological interpretation.



*Figure 4: The Mediumship Hand*



*Figure 5: A device for seeking advice from Dead Designers*

The project depicted in figure 4 allows a medium to channel a spirit through the soft arm that comes to life when in contact with the receiver. Allowing the receiver to embrace their lost loved one and physically experience their presence. Through selecting a key (figure 5) and soundtrack that represents a ‘dead designer’ the user is able to select their preferred oracle and insert the Totem key

into the device that when turned presents ‘words of wisdom’ communicated from the designer’s spirit. As in reference to Denis Santachaira’s ‘Portale’,

Strange psychological and social narratives that play through interaction in a consumer-oriented society. The suspension of belief through the whimsical or satirical – the power of mockups, scenarios or fictitious narratives over prototypes as a way to present fictions<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The workshop allowed students to think about design in different terms and identify new scenarios and territory. Students created aids to thought and contemplation through creating a ‘prosthesis of the spirit’.<sup>17</sup> Ways in which to materialise an alternative connection to products related to belief allowing as Dunne puts it...

When introduced to everyday life, they explore what is and what might be ‘para-functionality’ between desire and determinism, objects initiate the world of the ‘infra-ordinary’.<sup>18</sup>

Belief is an important factor in how we interpret the designed world, which often gets overlooked and underexamined. In exploring territory for design and the invention of innovative scenarios that effect our mental and physical connection with our surroundings, the synthesis of paranormal research and design thinking here allows opportunities to investigate these subtle and imaginative links with the environments we occupy. Manzini talks of...

The designers responsibility to contribute to the ‘habitable world’ which refers to the environment as a complex existential condition that cannot be reduced to its functional component. Rooted in the anthropological and social nature of the human race.<sup>19</sup>

In exploring this territory as a way to investigate new ways of understanding connections we have with space, places and objects we encounter, and how the ‘Real’ is dealt with in western design pedagogy. Designers can ask whether we focus too much on being realistic, thinking within existing realities. The social, political or economic which have got us into a situation of producing endlessly through design. But, how about if we became constructively unrealistic, breaking with conventional wisdom and experiment with new ways of thinking. Design has the ability to broadcast stories, perhaps we need to imagine radically different ways of being. As in the words of Ursula Le Guin,

The direction of escape is towards freedom. So what is ‘escapism’ an accusation of? <sup>20</sup>



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Anthony Dunne, "A Larger Reality," in *Fitness for What Purpose? Essays on design education celebrating 40years of the Sir Misha Black Awards*, ed. Mary V Mullin et al. (Design Manchester: Eyewear Publishing, 2019) 116-117.
- <sup>2</sup> Harvey Irwin, *The psychology of paranormal belief: A researcher's handbook* (University of Hertfordshire Press, 2009), 16-17.
- <sup>3</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Flying saucers: A modern myth of things seen in the sky* (Psychology Press, 2014)
- <sup>4</sup> Harvey Irwin, *The psychology of paranormal belief: A researcher's handbook* (University of Hertfordshire Press, 2009)
- <sup>5</sup> Michelle Annett et al. "The living room: Exploring the haunted and paranormal to transform design and interaction," *Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Designing Interactive Systems* (2016): 1328-1340, doi: 10.1145/2901790.2901819.
- <sup>6</sup> Anthony Dunne, "A Larger Reality," in *Fitness for What Purpose? Essays on design education celebrating 40years of the Sir Misha Black Awards*, ed. Mary V Mullin et al. (Design Manchester: Eyewear Publishing, 2019) 116-117.
- <sup>7</sup> Jenny Randles, Oz Factor Books, accessed February 20, 2023 <http://www.ozfactorbooks.com>
- <sup>8</sup> Lenticular UFO clouds and other spectacular cloud formations, *The Telegraph*, (2009) image credit Gianandrea Sandri/Roberto Cavallini, accessed February 20, 2023 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/earth/earthpicturegalleries/6582538/Lenticular-UFO-clouds-and-other-spectacular-cloud-formations.html>
- <sup>9</sup> Rik Moran, *Chance Encounters in the Valley of Lights* (CentreCentre, 2021) image 89
- <sup>10</sup> Jack Hunter, *Engaging the anomalous: Collected essays on anthropology, the paranormal, mediumship and extraordinary experience* (August Night Books, 2018)
- <sup>11</sup> Steven T. Parsons, *Guidance Notes for Investigators of Spontaneous Cases, Apparitions, Hauntings, Poltergeists and Similar Phenomena* (SPR: Society of Psychical Research, London, 2018)
- <sup>12</sup> Keith Bassett, *Walking as an aesthetic practice and a critical tool: Some psychogeographic experiments*, (*Journal of geography in higher education*, 2004) 28, no. 3, 397-410
- <sup>13</sup> Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001)
- <sup>14</sup> Phillip Garner, *Utopia or Bust: Products for the perfect world* (Plexus, London, 1985)
- <sup>15</sup> Steven T. Parsons, *Guidance Notes for Investigators of Spontaneous Cases, Apparitions, Hauntings, Poltergeists and Similar Phenomena* (SPR: Society of Psychical Research, London, 2018)
- <sup>16</sup> Anthony Dunne, *Hertzian Tales: Electronic products, aesthetic experience, and critical design* (MIT Press, 2008) 69
- <sup>17</sup> Meyer R. Rubenstein, *Philippe Ramette* (Art Forum, May 1993)
- <sup>18</sup> Anthony Dunne, *Hertzian Tales: Electronic products, aesthetic experience, and critical design* (MIT Press, 2008) 71
- <sup>19</sup> Ezio Manzini et al. "Prometheus of the Everyday: The Ecology of the Artificial and the Designer's Responsibility," *Design Issues* 9, No.1 (1992) 5-20, doi: 10.2307/1511595.
- <sup>20</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *No time to spare: Thinking about what matters* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017)

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