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A Short Guide to Gestures

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The conventional reading of the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9) is a tale of hubris. The people of a city seek to build a tower to challenge heaven, but their plans are brought into disarray when God sends a babble of tongues so that the workers no longer comprehend each other. Discord breaks out amongst them and they are scattered across the world.

The original site of the mythical tower is often identified as Etemenanki, the massive Babylonian ziggurat dedicated to the god Marduk. ¹ And although the story is very old, so old that any act of interpretation has its roots floating in fiction, it might still be argued that the biblical interpretation reflects all too well the disparaging perspective of some passing pastoral herders upon such a massive project, and that the traditional version presents the story backwards. It was, after all, not uncommon in the ancient world for building sites to be multi-generational, sprawling affairs that were constantly modified, extended, and altered.

Take the Temple of Jupiter in Baalbek as an example. ² Its continued construction, and reconstruction, over two centuries contributed to transforming a minor fortress into a Roman town. Archaeologists claim that its “permanently incomplete” condition was intentional. ³ The building site offered work, and therefore rations, to refugees. And it did more than that: it was also the crucible whereby unskilled laborers would learn the language and the ways of a city. Far from being a site where discord was sown, it might be read as a site of integration, where a new synthetic language was creolized and a culture was cobbled out of the manifold transactions of the day. If sites like the Temple of Jupiter were powerful instruments of integration into a hellenized world, it becomes unsurprising that Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, specifically used his account of the Tower of Babel story in order to polemicize against the Greeks. ⁴

The name, “Babel,” has its ironies. The name of the city of Babylon is ancient, but the Hebrew variant recalls the Hebrew verb *bālal*, which means “to jumble” or “confuse.” The overlaying of the place name and the verb served, in the biblical account, as evidence for the story (Gen. 11:9). We find more direct evidence that the biblical version of the myth is a reversal by looking to its oldest known version, “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta,” the neo-Sumerian narrative. This account includes a prayer, the incantation of Nudimmud, beseeching the god Enki to unify the tongues of the world:

“Enki, the lord of abundance and of steadfast decisions, the wise and knowing lord of the Land, the expert of the gods,

¹ Hansjörg Schmid, *Der Tempelturm Etemenanki in Babylon*, Baghdader Forschungen 17 (Mainz am Rhein: von Zabern, 1995).

² Daniel Lohmann, *Das Heiligtum des Jupiter Heliopolitanus in Baalbek: Die Planungs- und Baugeschichte*, *Orient Archäologie* 38 (Rahden: VML Verlag Marie Leidorf, 2017); Daniel Lohmann, “Superlative baulicher Art: Zum ‘Trilithon’ und der Inszenierung von Größe im antiken Jupiterheiligtum in Baalbek,” in Klaus Rheidt and Werner Lorenz, eds., *Groß bauen: Großbaustellen als kulturgeschichtliches Phänomen*, Kulturelle und technische Werte historischer Bauten 1 (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2018), 149–63.

³ *Ibid.*, 150; see also Sebastian Hageneuer and Sylvia van der Heyden, “Perceiving Monumentality,” in Federico Buccelati et al., *Size Matters: Understanding Monumentality Across Ancient Civilizations* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2019), 65–89, here 71.

⁴ Sabrina Inowlocki, “Josephus’ Rewriting of the Babel Narrative (Gen 11:1–9),” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 37, no. 2 (June 2006), 169–91.

chosen for wisdom, the lord of Eridug, shall change the speech in their mouths, as many as he had placed there, and so the speech of mankind is truly one.”⁵

Crucially, in the great Assyriologist Samuel Noah Kramer’s translation, the call to “restore” is replaced with a call to bring “contention into” the unified language of the world.⁶ It is important for the interpretation of the prayer to note that in the city of Enki is the E-Abzu temple of Eridu, in which archaeologists identify some two thousand years of continual construction.⁷ That is, in the city of Enki, just as in Baalbek, people go in speaking in tongues, and come out speaking the *lingua franca*. And their organization within the labor of sacred work is what endows a city, and its kingship, with power. Of course, Hegel argued all this already. The Tower of Babel figures in his *Lectures on Fine Arts* as paradigm of the “independent or symbolic architecture” built for the purpose of unification:

*“In the wide plains of the Euphrates an enormous architectural work was erected; it was built in common, and the aim and content of the work was at the same time the community of those who constructed it. ... The ensemble of all the peoples at that period worked at this task and since they all came together to complete an immense work like this, the product of their labour was to be a bond which was to link them together ... by means of the excavated site and ground, the assembled blocks of stone, and the as it were architectural cultivation of the country.”*⁸

In this issue of *gta papers*, we have set out to seek newer embodiments of the myth. But, as in the case of the Tower of Babel, it is possible to read almost all these stories either as tales of vain pride or as unprecedented political acts that create novel constituencies, new economies, and unmapped possibilities.

If there is a counterpart in our time to the monumental symbolic buildings of early advanced civilizations, then it is undoubtedly to be found in those megaprojects that since the era of François Mitterrand have been referred to as *grand projets*. One speaks of *grand projets*, write Naomi C. Hanakata and Anna Gasco, because one wants to emphasize the “inherent notions” of power of such projects: “both the power governing bodies hold over a project and the power of these projects to profoundly impact and transform urban landscapes and the global perceptions of their cities.”⁹ Such structures are not infrequently public institutions or infrastructure facilities. In epochs in which demonstrations of magnificence (*magnificentia*) evinced virtue in a ruler, and wastefulness in sacred building was considered pleasing to God, this overdetermined greatness possesses no riddle.¹⁰ Great buildings belong amongst the great

⁵ “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta: Translation,” *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section1/tr1823.htm#line134> (accessed Aug. 27, 2020), lines 134–55.

⁶ Samuel Noah Kramer, “The ‘Babel of Tongues’: A Sumerian Version,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, no. 1 (January–March 1968), 108–11, here 111.

⁷ P. Delougaz, “A Short Investigation of the Temple at Al-Ubaid,” *Iraq* 5, no. 1 (1938), 1–11; Joan Oates, “Ur and Eridu, the Prehistory,” *Iraq* 22, no. 1–2 (1960): *Ur in Retrospect: In Memory of Sir C. Leonard Woolley*, 32–50.

⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), vol. 2, 638.

⁹ Naomi C. Hanakata and Anna Gasco, “Understanding the Making and Impact of Urban Megaprojects,” in Kees Christaanse, Anna Gasco, and Naomi C. Hanakata, eds., *The Grand Project: Understanding the Making and Impact of Urban Megaprojects* (Rotterdam: nai010, 2019), 15–23, here 15.

¹⁰ In the concept of “magnificentia” the ideas of majesty, splendor, sumptuousness, and generosity blend, “Magnificentia,” in P. G. W. Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), vol. 2, 1170.

deeds of great authorities. Such projects refer not only to themselves but allude just as much to the magnitude of the authority to which they owe their existence.

To look at the phenomenon of building on a large scale through a further conceptual lens, we draw on an expression that appears repeatedly in critical discourse without having been itself yet critically defined: the "grand gesture." To refer to architecture as a "gesture" implies that the structure demonstrates a certain symbolic surplus. We talk of grand gestures when constructions are not just large but also exhibit their size. Every *grand projet* can be read as a grand gesture; it is just a matter of perspective. If the first term tends to emphasize the intentions of such an undertaking, the second emphasizes its theatrical character.

Hayden White argued, in his 1973 book *Metahistory*, that the ambivalence of such narratives is a deep indeterminacy, and not merely a shortage of facts. The historian emplots facts into a narrative, and these narratives are — broadly speaking — divisible into genres. History understood as romance, for instance, is a tale of struggle with the world, in which human agency — heroically applied — ultimately triumphs. Satire, on the other hand, is a kind of anti-comedy: it is not that the world is not cruel, but rather the hero is not a hero. Satirical histories are sometimes bitter, but they are at least always plausible. As White remarks, in satire "there is no 'point' toward which things in general tend, no epiphanies of law, no ultimate reconciliations, no transcendence."¹¹ Satirical histories are histories of disillusion, characterized not so much by progress as by irony. Irony is, as it were, not merely the inevitable outcome of any grand historical gesture, but it acts as a strange attractor, seemingly guiding events to maximize the resulting anti-climax. The emperor, the *architectus sumptuarius*,¹² seeks a structure that is larger than the symbolic order will carry. Too heavy, it breaks through the chains of signification, becoming a kind of sublime, an absurdity around which inconsistent narratives flow. Indigestible to the city,¹³ beached on the sands of history, it turns into an irony-producing machine. The ongoing fascination of such narratives is not merely that they draw attention to the size of the gap between ideal and result but that they reveal the agency of that gap.

So much of greatness. What of gesture? The English "gesture" (but also French *geste*, Italian/Spanish *gesto*, German *Geste*) is derived from the Latin noun *gestus* (movement of the limbs, posture, attitude, motion, gesture).¹⁴ The word is formed from the perfect participle of *gero* (to bear, carry, perform). The noun (*res*) *gesta*, i.e. the Latin term for a (past) deed, action, or exploit, is also derived from this verb.¹⁵ Now, both (*res*) *gesta* and

11 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 251.

12 Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings. A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 11.

13 We think here of Rem Koolhaas's well known observations on "Bigness and the Problem of the Large," in Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL* (New York, NY: Monacelli, 1995), 494–516.

14 "Gestus," in Glare, *Latin Dictionary* (see note 10), vol. 1, 839.

15 "Gerō," in *ibid.*, vol. 1, 837.

gestus are technical terms of Roman rhetoric, within which they have a revealing relationship. Firstly, the *res gestae* appear in judicial speech. They are the actual subject of the *narratio*, i.e. of the recounting of the course of events that is a standard element of legal cases: “Narratio est rerum gestarum aut ut gestarum expositio.”¹⁶ The language of gesture (*gestus*), on the other hand, together with the voice (*vocis*) and facial expressions (*vultus*), is a crucial element of *actio* or *pronuntiatio*, the presentation of speech.¹⁷ Rhetoric, whose theory was formed in antiquity on the model of judicial and political speech, is the art of persuasion. For this reason, *actio/pronuntiatio* is, as contradictory as it sounds, an essential supplement to the facts recounted in the speech (*res gestae*) and the subsequent proof (*argumentatio*). According to Quintilian, Demosthenes considered the *pronuntiatio* to be not only the main thing, but the only thing that counts in a speech (“non praecipuam, sed solam iudicasse”).¹⁸ In Quintilian’s *motus* (movement) of the hands, i.e. in the actual gestures, *pronuntiatio* is at its purest and most autonomous. *Motus* has a richness of expression equal to that of words, but it should accompany them in a natural way and not actually add anything, certainly not in the sense of an artistic imitation (*res imitatione significant*), as is the case with *comoedi* (comedians);¹⁹ and yet it seems to be able to completely replace the spoken content of the speech. Quintilian considers gestures to be the “common language of mankind” (“omnium hominum communis sermo”).²⁰

All this becomes graphic if we follow the history of concepts and their ramifications in the Middle Ages and early modern period. On the one hand, the term *gesta* became a synonym for history itself in the Middle Ages, or more specifically, for historical accounts in which the deeds of historical agents – whether rulers, bishops, or ethnic groups – are at the center. At the same time, the French vernacular *geste* became an independent term for “heroic deeds” as they were sung in the epic genre of *chansons de geste* (heroic songs).²¹ Both developments seem to lead us away from *gestus* understood as rhetoric. But if

¹⁶ M. Tullius Cicero, “De inventione / Über die Auffindung des Stoffes,” in M. Tullius Cicero, *De inventione: De optimo genere oratorum / Über die Auffindung des Stoffes: Über die beste Gattung von Rednern*, ed. and trans. Thodor Nüßlein (Zurich: Artemis & Winkler, 1998), 56 (I, 19, 27); “Gesta,” in Gert Ueding, ed., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1992), vol. 3, 969–71, here 969.

¹⁷ “Pronuntiatio est vocis, vultus, gestus moderatio cum venustate” (“Delivery is the graceful regulation of voice, countenance, and gesture”), Theodor Nüßlein, ed., *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (Zurich: Artemis & Winkler, 1998), 8 (I, 2, 3); for the English translation, see *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Rhetorica_ad_Herennium/1*.html (accessed, Aug. 27, 2020).

¹⁸ Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, *Institutionis oratoriae libri XII / Ausbildung des Redners. Zwölf Bücher*, ed. and trans. Helmut Rahn (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), vol. 2, 610 (XI, 3, 6).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 640, 642 (XI, 3, 88 and 91).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 640 (XI, 3, 87).

²¹ “Gesta” in Ueding, *Historisches Wörterbuch* (see note 16), 970–71.

22 John Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court* (New York: The History Press, ebook edition, 2011), Ch. 10, n. p. Ben Jonson describes the character Carlo Buffone in his comedy *Every Man out of His Humour* as “[a] publick, scurrilous, and prophane jester; that more swift than Circe, with absurd similies, will transform any Person into deformity,” Ben Jonson, “Every Man out of His Humour,” in William Gifford, ed., *The Works of Ben Jonson: With a Biographical Memoir* (London: George Routledge, 1879), 29–68, here 29; Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1935), 24–25.

23 For a universal study of fools, see Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

24 The main attribute of the fool was, as one can deduce from historiated initials to the Psalm 52, still a club until it finally became a marotte and the *gesta* of the jester became “mere gestures.” For images of fools in historiated D-initials in Western European manuscripts of the Middle Age, see D. J. Gifford, “Iconographical Notes towards a Definition of the Medieval Fool,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974), 336–42.

25 For the marotte, see Werner Mezger, “Bemerkungen zum mittelalterlichen Narrentum,” in Hermann Bausinger, ed., *Narrenfreiheit: Beiträge zur Fastnachtforschung, Untersuchungen des Ludwig-Uhland-Instituts der Universität Tübingen 51* (Tübingen: Tübinger Vereinigung für Volkskunde, 1980), 43–87, here 53–54; Maurice Lever, *Zepher und Narrenkappe: Geschichte des Hofnarren*, trans. Evelin Roboz (Munich: Dianus-Trikont, 1983), 44.

26 Otto, *Fools* (see note 23), Ch. 3, 97–132.

27 Southworth, *Fools* (see note 22), Ch. 1, n. p.

28 Sonja Hnilica has recently published a valuable study that provides a broad overview of the major projects of late modernism that places post-war Europe in an international context. Sonja Hnilica, *Der Glaube an das Große in der Architektur der Moderne: Großstrukturen der 1960er und 1970er Jahre* (Zurich: Park Books, 2018).

we follow the language development further, gesture reappears in an unexpected place. From the name for the singer of heroic songs (*gestour*) comes the name of a character unknown to the ancient world: the court jester. ²²

It is true that the (transculturally identifiable and apparently necessary) presence of jesters in ruling houses goes back to antiquity; ²³ but in the Middle Ages the “artful” jester – who performed the role without being predestined for it by a disability – was only one of many roles that courtiers of lower rank (minstrels) performed. The same courtiers might also serve as messengers, masters of the hunt, or soldiers. And what they did as fools seems to blur with entertainers’ other activities as jugglers, musicians, singers, bards. The English jester emerged from a domestication of the ambivalent figures of the minstrel: half joker, half brigand. ²⁴ We know of court jesters who acted as doubles to their king (and thus were once again entangled in the ruler’s *res gestae*). It was always one of the tasks of the jester, who parodies the monarch’s gestures, to also act as his mirror image. This is highlighted by the marotte. ²⁵ It is usually crowned by a carved fool’s head and marks the jester as an agent of comical redoubling. His imitations must appear as a distorted image, but one in which the truth becomes visible. ²⁶

Qin Er Shi (230–207 BC), the second emperor of the Qin dynasty, is said to have once thought of having the Great Wall of China lacquered. Apparently, he wanted to reappropriate the existing structure as his own great deed. It must have seemed to him a mere infrastructure facility that needed a symbolic touch. Sima Qian (ca. 145–90 BC), the great historian, reports that no one at court dared to raise any objection to this mad plan. Only the court jester Twisty Pole was able to set the emperor straight. The plan was a splendid idea, he remarked. Once the Great Wall had been lacquered to a glassy finish, the enemy would find no foothold to scuttle up it. The only remaining question was where to build a large enough room to dry the wall in. ²⁷

In no other historical period have so many building projects of Babylonian dimensions been put into practice as in the last century. ²⁸ At the same

time, the *grand projet* seems particularly inclined to becoming entangled, *nolens volens*, in the kind of contradictions that result in *gesta* and *gestus* collapsing together – producing, so to speak, self-satirising institutions. This can be succinctly illustrated, if not proven a historical rule, with two examples. One is the ongoing tale of the Berlin Palace (the Berliner Schloss). After a decade-long debate, it was decided in 2003 to revenge the iconoclastic removal of the ruins of the old Hohenzollern residence by the East German government upon its modernist replacement, the Palast der Republik. No better image of the future of Berlin could be conceived than a 1:1 reconstruction of the seat of the Prussian rulers.²⁹ The apparent fidelity of the reconstruction to the original conceals the fact that even the funding is a kind of pastiche. The raw structure of the building is paid for by a coalition of government agencies, the controversial restoration of the imperial façade by a private association of nostalgic businesspeople. As Andreas Kilb acidly commented in the feuilleton of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, “the birth defect of such a project is not redeemable.”³⁰ The result, still under construction, is quite literally a hollow gesture. The date of opening has been postponed repeatedly, and the authorities have attempted to hedge their reconstruction of an architectural symbol of the authoritarian Prussian State by declaring their intention to fill the empty halls behind the façade with collections of non-European art.³¹ Meanwhile, as if in order to demonstrate the preeminence of physical trade over enlightened discourse, steel from the demolished Palast der Republik was shipped to Dubai to be incorporated into Skidmore, Owings & Merrill’s Burj Khalifa, the tallest building ever constructed.³² Its design self-consciously refers to the stepped pyramid of the ziggurat.

Donald Trump, the 45th President of the United States of America, was a real estate developer before he became a reality television persona. In free market economies, as often as not, it is private capital that hazards the grandest gestures. The branded corporate tower is the classic example. Trump Tower in New York is merely one superlative amongst many.

²⁹ Wilhelm von Boddien and Helmut Engel, eds., *Die Berliner Schlossdebatte: Pro und Contra* (Berlin: Berlin-Verlag Spitz, 2000); Didem Ekici, “The Surfaces of Memory in Berlin: Rebuilding the Schloß,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 61, no. 2: *Engaging the Recent Past* (November 2007), 25–34; Adrian von Buttlar, “Berlin’s Castle Versus Palace: A Proper Past for Germany’s Future?,” *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2007), 12–29; Hartmut Ellrich, *Das Berliner Schloss: Geschichte und Wiederaufbau* (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2008); Manfred Rettig, ed., *Rekonstruktion am Beispiel Berliner Schloss aus kunsthistorischer Sicht: Ergebnisse der Fachtagung im April 2010; Essays und Thesen* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011); Jonas Tinius and Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, “Phantom Palaces: Prussian Centralities and Humboldtian Spectres,” in Jonathan Bach and Michał Murawski, eds., *Re-Centring the City: Global Mutations of Socialist Modernity* (London: UCL Press, 2020), 90–103.

³⁰ Andreas Kilb, “Kreuzweise blamiert,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.faz.net/-gsf-9zvi8> (accessed Sept. 7, 2020).

³¹ Humboldt Forum. <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/> (accessed Sept. 5, 2020).

³² “Berlin’s Demolished Socialist Palace is Revived in Dubai,” *Deutsche Welle*, August 11, 2008, <https://p.dw.com/p/Eugg> (accessed Sept. 7, 2020).

33 Under Barack Obama's Presidency the notion of "The People's House" was frequently cited in connection with initiatives intended to showcase a commitment to "government transparency," like the establishment of a visitor's center in the White House. See Ashleigh Axios, "Opening the People's House," September 15, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/09/15/opening-peoples-house> (accessed Sept. 8, 2020).

34 Lauren Vella, "Trump Taunts Democrats in White House Speech: 'We're here and They're not'," *The Hill*, August 28, 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/514093-trump-taunts-critics-at-white-house-were-here-and-theyre-not> (accessed Sept. 8, 2020).

35 Nick Miroff and Josh Dawsey, "Trump Order to Paint Border Wall Black Could Drive up Cost \$500 Million or More," *Washington Post*, May 7, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/trump-border-wall-black-paint/2020/05/06/dbda8ae4-8eff-11ea-8df0-ee33c3f5b0d6_story.html (accessed Sept. 7, 2020).

Within the grid of Manhattan, the brutality of competition imposes a curious conformism, even amongst the eclectic architectural styles. Washington DC, however, was not able to impose the same limits upon Trump's hubris. Nothing has made this clearer than a highly controversial gesture that took place in the US election campaign of 2020. The White House is understood in the USA as a symbol of popular sovereignty — "The People's House"³³ — and as an attribute of the presidency, itself a non-partisan office. Hence, it has been convention not to include it in election campaigns. By featuring the White House in his campaign, as a backdrop to his convention speech, Donald Trump not only defied this unwritten law but he specifically emphasized his desire to use the symbolic power of the building as a weapon in party disputes in this speech, noting, as he pointed to the house in his back, "The fact is, I'm here — the fact is, we're here and they're not." The scandal of this production, however, went further. For only superficially, Trump expressed himself in the transition from "I" to "we" as the representative of the Republican Party. That he did not simply see himself in this role, and that he actually changed to a *pluralis majestatis* at this point, was made clear not only by the preceding sentence of the speech — "We must turn the page forever on this failed political class" — but also by a statement in this passage in which he claimed the White House as his "home" ("It [the White House] is not a building it's a home, as far as I'm concerned").³⁴ We imagine Twisty Pole remarking: "Excellent choice of home, Mister President. The only thing missing is a permanent lease."

As it happens, however, the Trump Organization does not employ a separate court jester to mirror the man who plays monarch. So it was that there was no one left to contradict President Trump when, in a perfect reprise of the gesture of the Emperor of China — it is part of the logic of gestures that they repeat themselves — the president sought to have his own great wall painted black.³⁵ According to the *Washington Post*, he claimed the color would make the wall more imposing. Politics and aesthetics go hand in hand, and after all, black is the color of the logo of the Trump Organization. Lacking a Twisty Pole, the president was obliged to enthusiastically affirm his own plan: the black paint would make the wall heat up in the desert sun, and the enemy would find it too hot to scuttle up.

The magazine is a wonderful format for the investigation of the grand gesture, for magazines present their stories as separate, unrelated articles. Their case studies, interesting fragments, scurrilous anecdotes, and stories with conflicting morals carry the ever-present possibility of contradictory juxtapositions. The magazine, as its name suggests, is a storehouse of fragments,

and so it suits this theme, with its mixture of megalomania and self-deprecation, better than any scholarly edited book. At the same time, the temptations of scholarship are irresistible. So we sought out examples with polemical implications, and yet have presented them with all the caution and measure of academic prose. From the most ambitious infrastructural projects of Louis XIV to the most apocalyptic schemes of the Cold War, this issue presents a bestiary of monstrous architectural ambition, plans gone awry, and unintended consequences. If, as we argue, some of these projects produce historical irony as an inevitable side effect of their scale, then it might be said that it is impossible to learn from them – this is no instruction manual for planners. But the articles included all offer vantage points for interpretation that deepen, or sharpen, our appreciation of the contingencies of history. And there is no likelihood that history, moving forward, will offer fewer grand gestures than it has in the past.