
Three Thirty Six

Ayad Rahmani

Associate Professor, Washington State University

It is 2:30 in the morning and the last person in the building has not yet left; she has quit her desk and is currently drooped on the edge of a sofa nearby, gifted to her by one of her friend's grandparents. Her selfie at that hour showed her smiling but drained, resigned to the realization that no matter the effort the body can only take so much. In the background the ceiling is a glare, in part due to the quality of the picture, taken by a low res Iphone old enough to date to Obama's second term acceptance speech, and in pat excess neon.

"I am the last one around," her text declared, to which the only reasonable response could be why, "why not come home," which I texted with some relish, feeling my fingers strike a particular punch at the glass. But then there was no reply and in checking my message 30 seconds later I realized I had forgotten the "not" and so instead of "why not come home" I had typed "why come home." "Darn," I muttered to myself, slapping my thigh harder than I thought I wanted, my mind still with the broken text. "Is it just me or does everyone do this, forget to type half an intended text," I quizzed myself looking sideways at a drifting black hole. "Isn't it interesting," I continued ruminating "how texting had made it clear that between thinking and typing there is a lag, sometimes bad enough to destroy a perfectly good relationship, at least for a brief time." Frantically I typed again, this time capitalizing the "NOT". A minute later; still no words back.

I looked at the selfie one more time and began to dissect it. My friend's head, also my roommate, was only half visible, cut off as it were at the nose, leaving ample space for other information to seep through. Just beyond the sofa three desks managed to make it into the picture. On them strewn were signs of a serious model underway, a combination of wood, metal and glass, big enough to be real life, something you could stick your whole head in and be in a different world instantly. "What was that," I wondered looking closer at the image as my phone dimmed, until I touched it again and back to life it came.

I should know as I too am studying in the same building and on the same floor and have walked over to those very same desks and perhaps have seen at least the beginnings of that model. "What, what is that model," I pressed my brain to remember, my mental presence now back staking a spot between sofa and desks. My friend was majoring in architecture while I in interior design and on that note of difference one could have excused my ignorance of my friend's undertaking. Yes "could have" but in reality "shouldn't have" because those who know what is happening at the school also know that since the merging of the disciplines - architecture, interior design, landscape and construction management - three years ago the majors have been spatially mixed and organized so as to coexist on singular floors. Indeed my desk was only on the opposite side of the same floor as my friend's. I really should



have known the nature and purpose of that model.

I gave up and sat back in my dark room, against pillow and wall, now made darker by the fact that my phone had just died. But just as my eyes were beginning to shut I plugged it back in and it beeped. I slid the bar over and there the image returned, half head, sofa and desks. Ceiling lights still blaring. I looked around further and noticed the number, 336, printed large on a medium sized white paper and hung seemingly independent of other numbers or words. What were those numbers, my brain burned yet again? The time now was 3:00 AM and my concentration was just not there. I let my eye zone out across the little screen, and in a short while, without thought or purpose, it had located a mirror diagonally across from the mysterious number and by sheer luck of angle and location I could now see what was only half told previously. 336 as it turned out was the number associated with a furniture class, one made famous by a state of the art fabrication lab, endearingly referred to as the “fab lab”, fabulous for the way it can take complex demands and run them effortlessly through a CNC machine, slicing and carving pieces that when assembled generate the creamiest results ever. The lab is fabulous also for the reason that the person running the show in it is a work of art in his own right, a jack of all trades, at once literary critic and master carpenter.

“The shop opens at 7 and I want to make sure I get the first go at the machines,” a text finally chimed. The girl must have gone mad, not the least because our professors had specifically and on repeated occasions said make sure you get rest, even if it means incomplete work. I needed to go get her, walk to studio and insist she return. I parted the curtains in the one window in my room and looked out, at what I am not sure. Snow was falling, in big chunks, stuff you wish for Christmas but not in the middle of the school year and on February 23rd. The lights of the stadium nearby had been strangely left on, maybe not in full numbers, but enough to give campus a divine aura, something out of Tolkein’s fantasy lands. To the left and just barely within my cone of vision the rolling hills of the Palouse could be seen in outline, rendered not in the usual earthy greens and browns of the daytime but in layers of gray and white as if scratched hard on a surface not unlike canvas by charcoal and white pencil. Suddenly I had the urge to draw, recalling a sketching class I took a summer ago in which the professor divided the class into two segments, one manic the other placid, one encouraging channeling our demonic side, mashing tool and paper to the mutual dissolution of each, the other calm and karmic and to the effect of letting the spiritual liquid inside us bubble up and pool at the table.

I looked on for what must have been a long five minutes, captivated by the art outside. But soon also by the stadium lights, not as contributors to the poetics of monochromy but as consumers of energy being wasted for no particular reason. I began to think of a required class I had just finished

a semester ago on sustainability, touching among other things on something called the “ecological footprint,” originally developed by Canadian academics named Matthis Wacker and William Rees, in which algorithms quantified rates of consumptions and translated them into area. “What was the ecological footprint consequence of turning the night sky into day,” I thought to myself, blinking compulsively? I did not have a quick answer of course and felt somewhat discouraged. Other lessons popped into my mind, of sensors and electrical circuitry that made it automatic and self-reflexive for shutters, dimmers and a battery of other energy saving features to operate in unison, calibrating electrical supply against demand regulated by the hour. Big urban data was part of the class and while the professor did not fully understand the topic in detail she did say that it had to do with creating a network of information about city functions tying the operation of one with those of another for maximum efficiencies.

“Could this be applied to our school”? Could the merging of Architecture, Interior Design, Landscape and Construction Management be more than a gluing exercise, give our school a certain professional appeal? There is no question about it, gluing or otherwise, the move was an exciting one, but one also riddled with fears and insecurities, of turf battles fermented over years of understanding and misunderstanding between the fields, some stemming from legitimate differences in values, others in narratives willfully constructed to mislead and self serve.

Could big data be appropriated to advance a healthy integration between our four programs, distributing information in such a way so that knowledge is monitored and calibrated against a specific demand for it? developing collaborative links to solve emerging problems. This way schedules and disciplinary barriers would melt away in favor of a dynamic system in which learning is based not on agendas but flows of energy, more search than established wisdom. Where there used to be a drive for the finished now would get replaced with the open-ended, like someone had just split coffee and watched its droplets streak down a no particular path.

I was getting tired but also determined to go get my friend. Stabbing in the dark for my jeans my phone brightened once again, this time with an image of me sitting at the window, my face drenched in electronic light against an otherwise perfectly charcoal frame. I smiled and opened the door. It was 3:36 AM.

