

The Arch: Conjecture of Cities

By Forrest Aguirre

“Thrumming,” I think, is the word I’m looking for. Yes, “thrumming” will do, the rhythmic rush of blood through the jugulars, squeezing my eardrums. I haven’t sweat like this in years and it feels good. It feels good, this pressure on my ribs, the pounding heart, the burning calves, even the worn fingers, chafed by concrete. It feels *right*, being a part of the city, like I’ve finally come home, though I’ve been here all along.

Only one thing is lacking.

Is she here?

How long until she arrives? I look at my watch; I’d forgotten I had a watch. She should have been here by now. Has she come and gone? Already?

I have to tell her that I’ve made up my mind, that I’ve chosen her and rejected *The Arch: Conjecture of Cities*. I’ve told the Bird Man to go to hell. Hell, I almost killed him myself.

An obscure bibliography led me to *The Arch: Conjecture of Cities*, one of those hand-typed, hodgepodge lists of books lurking in the back of some obscure crackpot Master’s thesis in the University of Wisconsin’s basement. The sort of thing that looked like it was edited by the Zodiac Killer. The long-forgotten thesis with the simultaneously unrevealing, yet academic-jargon-saturated title “Urban Matrices and the Organic Construction of Place” had clearly been bound by an undergraduate student of library science with no sense of margins or page articulation, but with a clear sense of superiority over any who dared breach his paper-buried work counter, one of those bushy browed, bearded, angry nerds who landed a work study job at the library because his lack of social skills precluded him from a normal campus job, though his apparent lack of anal-retentiveness did not allow him to work in that other bastion of vengeance-minded antisocials, the Bursar’s Office.

Not that this imagined tyrannical nerd had any right to be haughty.

The thesis was rife with spelling and grammatical errors. It's a wonder the student who wrote it had been allowed to graduate, let alone my mythical librarian whose job it was to catch such blatant errors. These student's advisors should have been fired.

Even the citations themselves were suspect. The quote associated with the reference that first caught my eye stated that "the external forces of law, economy, sanitary considerations and engineering necessity barely constrained the internal impulse to architecturally and organizationally express ego at Mohenjo-Daro." The notion of a city possessing any kind of "internal impulse" in and of itself smacked of amateur journalism rather than academic rigor. So I found the footnote referenced and turned to a bibliography in order to confirm my reflexive scorn.

The author's typewriter ribbon must have run dry while the bibliography was being prepared, or an old reference had been whited-out and replaced after the original had been shelved. The title, *The Arch: Conjecture of Cities*, appeared to have been handwritten in the style of the typewriter font, but lacked the crisp lines of metal keystrokes. The pen ink had veined out into the heavyweight cotton paper like spreading mold. No publication date was listed. There was also no author or editor credited for the work. Clearly, my angry librarian had not seen fit to confirm this reference. I searched the library's database and card catalog, even doing an inter-library loan search with an anxious staff member watching over my shoulder, to find the book. Soon, another pair of librarians joined the search, but the four of us could not locate a reference for the book, not even after calling on the state historical library and the special collections experts for help. Every one of us was stumped. The librarians apologized, supposing that the reference had been interpolated by some mischievous person after publication. The book was a phantom.

Then there was the thesis' author.

Burdock Mannfrey, MA, '76.

I knew instinctively that his friends had called him "Bird Man," either to his face or behind his back, maybe while smoking a bong and watching "Soul Train". Bicentennial year, "Hotel California," the war over; yeah, they definitely called him "Bird Man". It was natural. I felt like I knew him already -- sideburns, feathered hair and all. It was as if he'd bled a piece of his soul into that thesis. And I would find him, like a clairvoyant bloodhound on the trail of my Bird Man.

Unlike my childhood Pittsburgh, my university Madison was large and strange enough to contain more than a few quirky people, the kind of people I suspected Bird Man to be a part of, but small enough to socially