

Uncommon Building: two pieces of thinking

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Written as academic-in-residence enabled by a [HEIF](#) award, while developing the Uncommon Building workshop into a [publication](#). Here, Honor Gavin reflects on and explores what is at stake in the terms that frame the research.

I

To begin with, we called this building ‘uncommon’ because of the way in which it – the word, the building – articulates a veering between excess and its opposites, between significance and littleness, between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Considered temporally, whatever is uncommon is whatever is ‘not commonly met with’, whatever is not of ordinary occurrence. That which occurs uncommonly is that which happens not often, or only infrequently: like February 29th – like birthdays that come only in leap years – the uncommon is few because it is far between. In this sense, the descriptive work done by the word in its adverbial or adjectival form is diminutive, yet oddly so, because that which is uncommon is also that which is remarkable, astonishing, distinctive. For example, I can talk of an uncommon name and mean a name that is not used much. But I can also talk of an uncommon quantity of noise and mean the noise being made is very substantial. If I say something is uncommonly beautiful, or that something is of uncommon beauty, the beauty of the thing is probably in my eyes quite stunning. Linguistics calls this situation – one in which the possible contexts of a word have accumulated – ‘semantic broadening’ or ‘semantic widening’, but what’s also striking is the way in which this expansion in meaning of the word ‘uncommon’ is expedited by a kind of loss, by a quiet falling off or attrition of meaning: whereas at one point ‘uncommon’ described something rare in terms of size and greatness, eventually, at least in some cases, the element of infrequency became insignificant, sporadically but not absolutely obsolete in language. Thus, whatever happens uncommonly can now happen merely remarkably, and it’s on account of this odd combination of mereness with remarkability that the uncommon has a way of

THEATRUM MUNDI

articulating a complexity of quantification. 'Uncommon', it might even be said, is an uncommon quantity linguistically, which is again the reason that we called this building uncommon to begin with. We had no other word, anyway, because the building we were referring to did not exist in the ordinary sense - it was hypothetical, speculative, and always possibly would be. Does that also mean that the building was fictional?

II

We called it 'fictional' to begin with, certainly. 'Uncommon Building: Collective Excavation of a Fictional Structure' was the full title of our first workshop, which brought together a miscellaneous group of poets, visual artists, urbanists, architectural historians, and architects and asked to them to contribute their expertise to the documentation of a building of which we knew very little, almost nothing. It was 'wild but tender' in form, we said, and 'bigger than a house but smaller than a department store'. Within these parameters, which were themselves imagined, the building could have been and could come to be anything. Over the course of the few hours we had together, what the building came to have been - and what the building became - was indeed all over the place, nowhere but in such a way that it touched on a whole multiplicity of things, nudging us to discuss such things as skiagraphy, Ovid's palace of Fame and John Cage, invisible gold and questions of value in the contemporary built environment, the empty Headquarters of the National Union of Mineworkers. As its form developed - which was also a form of falling apart - the building's contours tenderly traced the incommensurability of our individual visions for it. Its wild angles articulated our disciplinary differences, and in doing so undisciplined us. What we built had the shape of the way in which we were all there in the room simultaneously, excavating nothing, making whatever, not quite able to picture how everything was coming together but picturing it anyway, nevertheless. Fictional buildings do not necessarily function like this. Fictional buildings function, even fantastical ones: they maintain their own existence even if they do not exist, properly speaking. Fictional worlds operate similarly: they establish themselves, sustain themselves. Our building was not quite as big as this. Though out of this world in a number of ways, it was also more everyday, more or less of the day. It did not and nor does it make much of a claim as to the nature of its future existence. It wasn't even certain that there was enough of it to sustain the appellation of 'fictional' - and in this way it perhaps asked, if only tangentially, and in ways still to be figured, an interesting question about sustainability.