

***Possibilian Landscapes:  
An Exploration on Afterlife Dimensions***

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**Abstract**

The normality of death has dissolved in the context of society through the passage of time. Death has been celebrated before in the past as a part of life. In the contemporary era, death is being revisited with a heightened social awareness wherein it is explored in different facets of interdisciplinary studies, ranging from technological to cultural studies. Because of this phenomenon eventually people will begin to ask: *What comes after death?* The afterlife is a realm of uncertainty and of possibilities. Different academic fields such as neurology, psychology, psychiatry, philosophy and the like extensively deconstruct, and in their own ways, define the realm of the afterlife. Its ambiguous yet mysterious nature provides us with the opportunity to further explore intangible and unmappable landscapes that are beyond human comprehension. Possibilian Landscapes imagines the idea of the afterlife through David Eagleman's book on his philosophy on Possibilianism, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. It explores the possibilities of afterlife dimensions as a means of creating new spatial translations in architecture, which would eventually lead to the expounding of the discourse of the relationship between architecture and reality. In this book, she selected stories that possess strong cues in spatial visualization, with each story having different spatial notions that the author would like to probe, provoke and explore. The author questions reality through architecture using the afterlife as a platform, adapting and exploiting the energy of the contemporary wave of the afterlife as it sweeps today's society.

Keywords: Death, Afterlife, Architecture, Art, Design Exploration, Morphology Possibilianism

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## **Introduction**

In the years of being exposed to various architectural theories and concepts, the author has led to a direction to pursue the exploration of a realm found beyond the outskirts of reality as a means of encouraging and challenging the existing role of architecture in different fields and disciplines; and vice versa. This mindset had given the author enough courage to involve her ideologies about death and the afterlife in the equation.

Of life's obscurities, it is the idea and concept of death that had always intrigued the author the most. What started as a fascination towards the Victorian death culture evolved into a deeper understanding and appreciation of the universal idea and concept of death, which eventually incited the author's curiosity to explore what lies beyond the confines of reality.

Throughout the years, research on death and afterlife studies were always anchored on traditional religious teachings. But the idea has evolved into an entirely different face today as more researchers and professionals try to invest on secular research as a means of challenging the preconceived notion of death and the afterlife. Furthermore, this has been supported by the widespread and growing population of people involved in unconventional New Age Beliefs, which has been later on reinforced by studies on the new science of afterlife research and its benefits to today's society. This new direction not only softens the finality of death but also defines a new position – one that emphasizes the exploration of new, unconsidered possibilities of an existence of a dimension that is beyond our reach.

The author aims to explore the possibilities of a new space through the concept of an existence of various afterlife dimensions. The study invites the interference of disciplines outside of architecture as an attempt to involve them in the design process, thus, forming new directions, theories, ideologies, and methods of translation within the field. The construction of this new afterlife dimension shall not only pave the way to the creation of innovative environments in architecture but will also contribute to our existing worldview towards death and the afterlife.

## **A New Death Paradigm**

Death is a feature of the human experience that is thrust upon all, an inevitable outcome that can be delayed but cannot yet be denied. Mortality stories have long been told from one generation to the other pejoratively, with all human life bleakly abridged as working–consuming–dying. Yet a growing scarcity of land, an abundance of digital information, and an increasing attention to individualization in the recent years may lead to discourse on the ways in which services and technology can redefine the human experience of life and death in the years to come.

Developments in cryonic technology dedicated to achieving immortality and the formation of research groups such as the Google-backed bio-technological company Calico aiming to halt the ageing process give truth to Baker's sentiments that humanity lives in a terror management of mortality, resulting in a civilization-wide "denial of death" (1973). The sum of all human activity becomes an expression of its inability to accept the greatest inevitability in life. This begs the question of choosing

between consuming a culture of indefinite life or a culture of death. Rather than perceiving death as a problem that needs to be solved in a utopic promise of regenerative medicine and longevity, redesigning death and the human relationship with reality provides a more natural outcome.

### **Death: An Alternate Reality**

Kastenbaum (1977) wrote about the indefinite state of death stating that, “Because death seems too extraordinary, it must also lead to something extraordinary”. Humans seek to find meaning to all encounters even when knowledge is insufficient to determine an experience’s true meaning. Should definite answers be unattainable, humans turn to fantasy to suffice their inquiries (Rowe, 2009). Death presents a need for such a fantasy as true knowledge about the afterlife, if there is any, is unattainable. The fantasy thus created is then supported by the materiality and architecture of the physical world. Death cannot be ignored as it forces one to choose the way in which he/she spends his/her life. Therefore, death must be defined, but not in terms of a fantasy.

A survey conducted by the Social Weather Stations (SWS), in conjunction with the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), showed the religious beliefs of Filipino adults in 1991, 1998, and 2007. One question in the most recent survey delved into the belief in life after death, which garnered 62 percent for “Definitely Yes”.

Results of the same survey showed that the lowest percentages of definite believers are the 55 of elementary dropouts and the 56 in the 18-24 age range, yet these are outright majorities. Based on the results, belief in the afterlife among Filipino adults also increases with schooling and social class, suggesting that the belief is reinforced by better quality of life and standards of living.

The ISSP religion module had two items to describe belief in God: one for firmness of belief and another for how long the belief has been held. The first item offered six choices of firmness and resulted in 81 percent of Filipinos choosing “I know that God really exists and I have no doubts about it,” and 9 percent choosing “While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.” The second item, with four choices of length of time as a believer, resulted in 90 percent of Filipinos choosing “I believe in God now and I always have.”

Furthermore, the survey reveals that there are more Filipinos who believe in heaven (93 percent) than in afterlife (81 percent) and that 81 percent of Filipinos believe in hell.

### **The New Science of Afterlife Research and its Benefits to Society**

Betty (2016) considers as one of the most revolutionary ideas ever conceived the idea that human beings are more than bodies and that humanity’s “true home” lies beyond the physical planet. Further, the idea that humans are or have souls that do not die at death, which had been under scrutiny since the Enlightenment, is reemerging as a progressive thought for a realist culture.

However, this idea has been updated as secular research into the mysterious depths of human consciousness has overtaken traditional religious teachings. Studies on near-death experiences are given more attention, and electronic equipment aiming for communication with the deceased are in development.

This emerging direction for the study of the unknown has potential importance for the wellbeing of the planet, particularly due to its potential to positively affect humans mentally, psychologically, and sociologically, as argued by Betty (2016).

### **Emergence of a New Belief: The Possibilian Afterlife**

Possibilianism is a philosophy, which rejects both the diverse claims of traditional theism and the positions of certainty in strong atheism in favor of middle, exploratory ground. This concept of Possibilianism was a New Age belief introduced by an author and neuroscientist named David Eagleman.

According to Wilson (2009), in an interview with the *New York Times*, Eagleman expanded the definition:

"Our ignorance of the cosmos is too vast to commit to atheism, and yet we know too much to commit to a particular religion. A third position, *agnosticism*, is often an uninteresting stance in which a person simply questions whether his traditional religious story (say, a man with a beard on a cloud) is true or not true. But with Possibilianism I'm hoping to define a new position — one that emphasizes the exploration of new, unconsidered possibilities. Possibilianism is comfortable holding multiple ideas in mind; it is not interested in committing to any particular story."

In a *New Yorker* profile of Eagleman—entitled “The Possibilian”—Burkhard Bilger (2011) wrote:

“Science had taught him to be skeptical of cosmic certainties, [Eagleman] told me. From the unfathomed complexity of brain tissue—“essentially an alien computational material”—to the mystery of dark matter, we know too little about our own minds and the universe around us to insist on strict atheism, he said. “And we know far too much to commit to a particular religious story.” Why not revel in the alternatives? Why not imagine ourselves, as he did in *Sum*, as bits of networked hardware in a cosmic program, or as particles of some celestial organism, or any of a thousand other possibilities, and then test those ideas against the available evidence? “Part of the scientific temperament is this tolerance for holding multiple hypotheses in mind at the same time,” he said. “As Voltaire said, uncertainty is an uncomfortable position. But certainty is an absurd one.”

In Eagleman’s (2010) *Beyond God and atheism: Why I am a ‘possibilian?’* article, he explains why he openly holds this new philosophy that simultaneously embraces a scientific toolbox while exploring new, unconsidered uncertainties about the world around us. Eagleman writes:

“I have devoted my life to scientific pursuit. After all, if we want to crack the mysteries of our existence, there may be no better approach than to directly study the blueprints. And science over the past 400 years has been tremendously successful. We have reached the moon, eradicated smallpox, built the internet, tripled lifespans, and

increasingly tapped into those mind-blowing truths around us. We've found them to be deeper and more beautiful than anyone could have guessed.

But when we reach the end of the pier of everything we know, we find that it only takes us part of the way. Beyond that all we see is uncharted water. Past the end of the pier lies all the mystery about our deeply strange existence: the equivalence of mass and energy, dark matter, multiple spatial dimensions, how to build consciousness, and the big questions of meaning and existence.

I have no doubt that we will continue to add to the pier of knowledge, appending several new slats in each generation. But we have no guarantee how far we'll get. There may be some domains beyond the tools of science – perhaps temporarily, perhaps always. We also have to acknowledge that we won't answer many of the big questions in our brief twinkling of a 21st-century lifetime: even if science can determine the correct answer, we won't get to enjoy hearing it.”

An adherent of possibilianism is called a **possibilian**. The possibilian perspective is distinguished from agnosticism in its active exploration of novel possibilities and its emphasis on the necessity of holding multiple positions at once if there is no available data to privilege one over the others. Eagleman has emphasized that possibilianism reflects the scientific temperament of creativity and intellectual humility in the face of “the known unknowns.”

### **Sum by David Eagleman**

The concept of Possibilianism was first defined in relation to his book of fiction *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. It involves major themes of the afterlife based on religion, perception, science, drama and human fallibility.

As a short story cycle, the book presents forty mutually exclusive stories staged in a wide variety of possible afterlives. The author has stated that none of the stories is meant to be taken as serious theological proposals but, instead, that the message of the book is the importance of exploring new ideas beyond the ones that have been traditionally passed down (Lanham, 2009).

*Sum* serves as the medium for the translation of this new afterlife dimension which shall be supported by the New Age beliefs of today's generation. Eagleman's stories have a place for beliefs, which is why they are relevant to the study and its translation process. In totality, these stories are not claiming a dogmatic position, and they are using the properties of fiction in order to maintain a position for you, as diverse or as singular as you might be, in their afterlives. In Bennett's *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction* (2012), she explains that Eagleman's stories foreground their status as fictions primarily through associations that come about through the use of the second person and offer practice in playing, experimenting and hypothesizing. Conclusively, these afterlife narratives are doing something different from either a realist novel or a religious text: *something that is about fiction and its properties as something other than fact and other than faith* – a statement that is comparable to what fiction in architecture preaches.

## **Establishment of Premises (Case Build Up)**

The premises of the study include the following:

- Not much is known about death, apart from it causing a living person to become strangely still; thus, designers can create a fantasy supported by the materiality and the architecture of the physical world.
- Coming to terms with one's own mortality can be oddly life-affirming, which presents opportunities to redesign death within the death sector.
- The reality and existence of death urges humans to choose how their lives should be spent; therefore, defining death is essential in fully understanding these choices, even if the definition is only in terms of a fantasy.
- Literature review on the influences and culture involved in Generation Z will provide the needed information on society's current trends, as well as evidence to prove a paradigm shift in the generation's reason and thought towards explored and unexplored disciplinary conversations, including the study of death and the afterlife.
- Beliefs regarding the afterlife accumulate new details depending on society's present concerns, changing both its form and function along with the times.
- Life after death has become an arena for exploration of fictional processes and formal conventions.
- As a practice that deals with problems of the realm, architecture reveals reality.
- Connecting the physical to the metaphysical by going beyond expectations, architecture can aid in bridging the gap between things that can and cannot be understood.
- Architecture can serve as a tool to create a manifestation and translation of an intangible space where the afterlife realm lies. Thus, the exploration of a new dimension that does not exist in the physical realm provides possibilities to visualize a new form of landscape.
- The process of exploring death and the afterlife provides opportunities for alternative forms of visualization and imaging which speculate unexplored disciplinary conversations and alternative agenda for architecture.

In totality, the study aims to construct an afterlife dimension as a means of providing the majority of today's society a clearer perspective of the afterlife. It aims to ask a question: *How can architecture convert something unthinkable into terms that can be conceptualized? How can the exploration of the afterlife realm create new fictional processes and formal conventions in architecture?*

The study is essential in order for the people to have a different outlook on their perspective towards death and the afterlife through the exploration of a new afterlife

dimension in architecture, which will be anchored on a New Age belief known as Possibilianism. Although the study will benefit diverse groups of the society, it specifically aims to target those involved in today's generation as they are considered to be part of the population involved in the construction of these new beliefs and theories. The author also seeks to help people understand the importance of introducing ideologies from other disciplines in architecture and establish how it can serve as a tool to create a new approach in the design process—one that values hybrid notions of materializing the intangible while still grounding its output on poetics.

Architecture strengthens our subconscious minds and is capable of materializing intangible dimensions that have yet to be explored. The concept of an afterlife realm is anchored on this proposition as it imagines a world other than our own—a fictional fantasy that is known to be an object of speculation and imagination. Where death comes and life ends, exists the possibility of intangible landscapes and unmappable spaces.

### Conceptual Framework

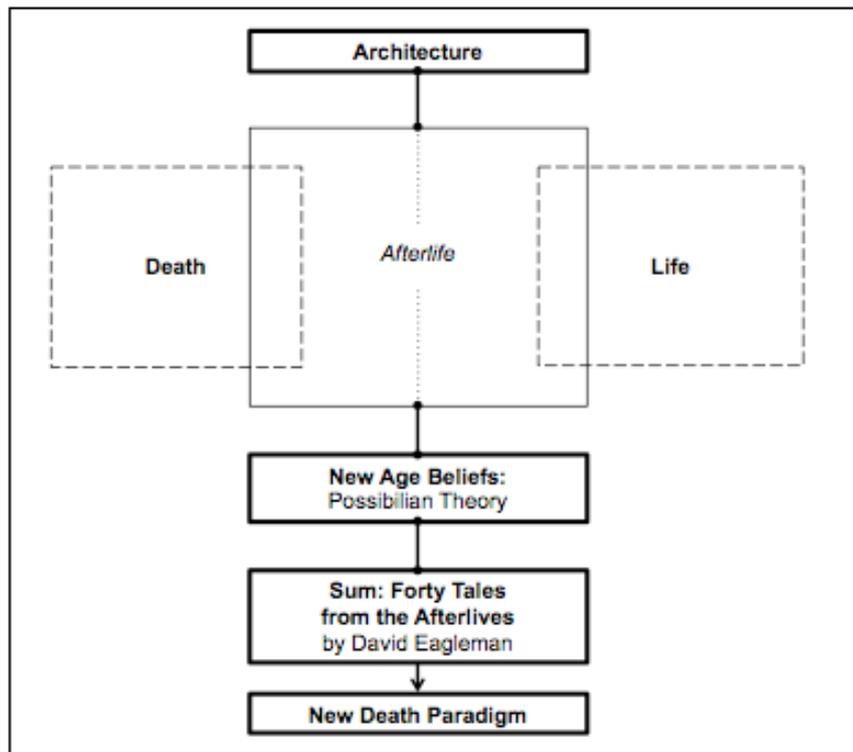


Figure 1: Diagram of the Conceptual Framework

According to Pallasmaa (2012), an architectural space frames, halts, strengthens, and focuses human thoughts, preventing them from getting lost. In other words, architecture transcends intangible concepts into tangible ideas.

The study aims to create new methods of translating intangible ideas through the integration of a Possibilian afterlife ideology in architecture. The construction of a possible afterlife or series of afterlife realms would be anchored on the New Age Belief of Possibilianism and will be further explored through David Eagleman's book, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. In totality, the study aims to blur the boundaries

between the society's belief of life, death, and the afterlife, challenging the existing afterlife beliefs of society with the help of architecture and contemporary afterlife ideologies as a means of establishing a new death paradigm.

## Data Gathering Procedures: Statistics and Survey Methods

### 1. Global Demographic Landscape

The author provided a research on the Global Demographic Landscape, which was summarized through the use of diagrams that support the author's stand towards the relevance of acknowledging the emergence of a new belief in the public realm. These were supported by the following studies:

- Religious demographic study conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life (2012).
- Results of a poll conducted by global research company, Ipsos Social Research Institute indicating the percentage of people who believe in an afterlife.
- Survey on Filipino afterlife beliefs conducted by the Social Weather Stations and International Social Survey Program (2007).
- Regional Distribution of the Unaffiliated (2012)

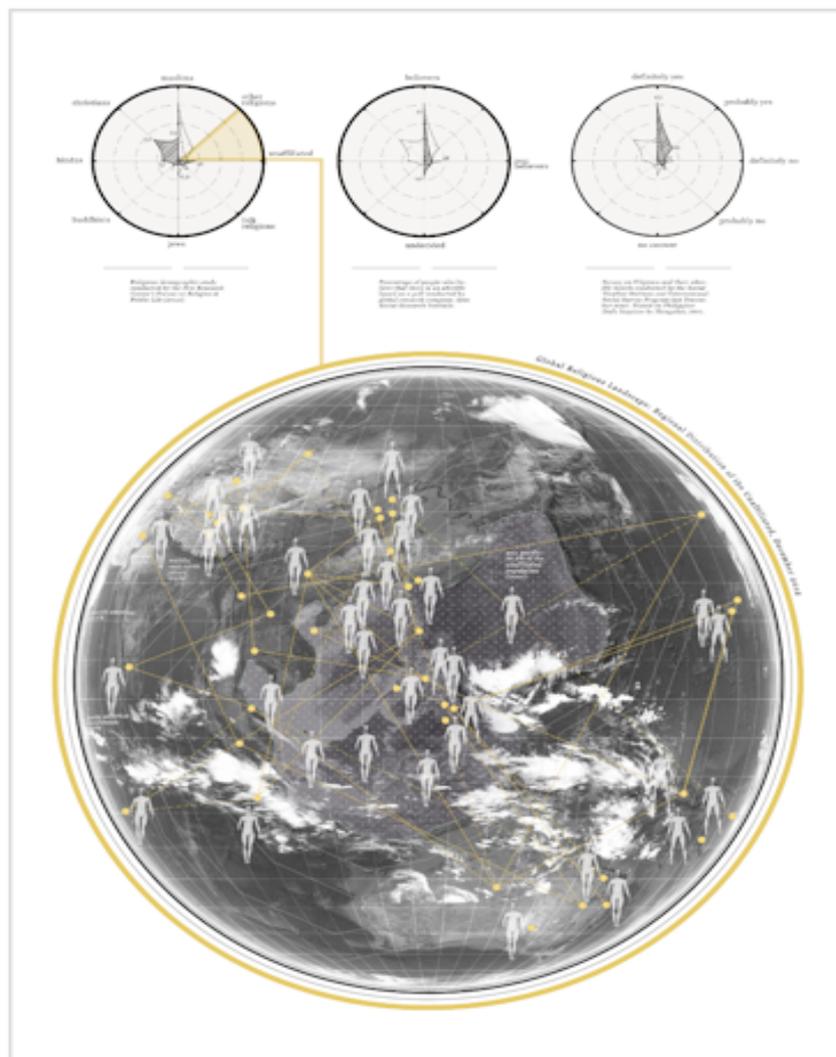


Figure 2: Global Religious Landscape - Demographic Study

## 2. Survey Questions Formation Process

To support the demographic study, the author conducted a survey which questioned the respondents' afterlife beliefs, including a descriptive assumption of what they thought would happen beyond death. The results were also grouped into different age groups and religious affiliations.

## 3. Sampling of the Respondents

The sampling size criteria included those who are involved in the Generation Z, specifically aged at 18 to 21 years old.

The survey was conducted in areas that were identified as Millennial/Generation Z hubs, including educational institutions, commercial establishments, and other recreational areas. In addition, these selected sites should undeniably show characteristics of a culturally diverse environment.

With the participation of a hundred (100) respondents, the survey noticeably validated the results of the demographic research as it showed that majority of the local respondents resonated with the global sampling size with 62.40 percent having New Age Beliefs despite being part of the Roman Catholic demographic which dominated the sampling size at 76 percent.

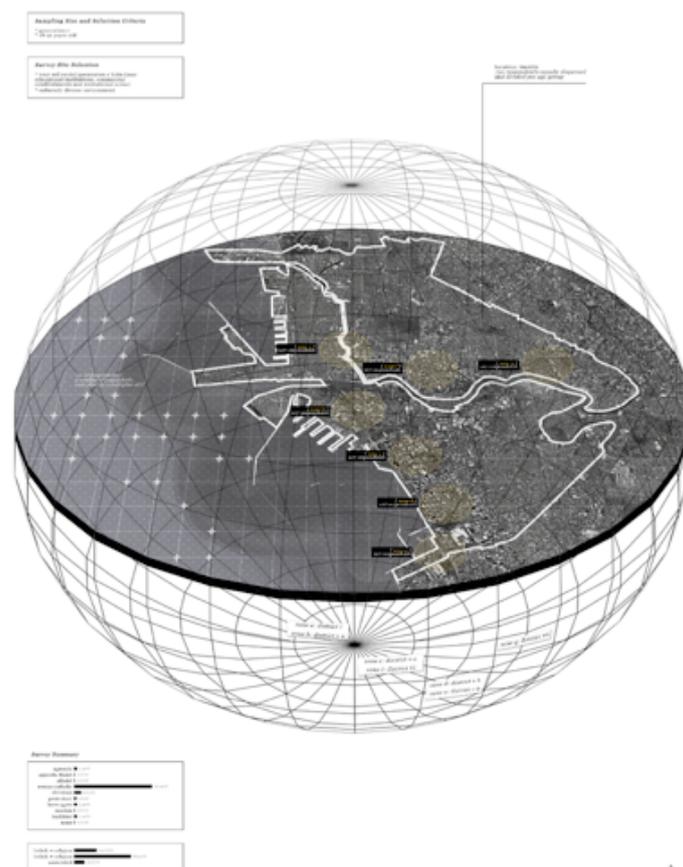


Figure 3: Sampling Size and Selection Criteria, Survey Site Selection, and Survey Summary Diagram

#### 4. Survey Results

A comparative analysis of the survey results was then formulated to identify which of the beliefs were beneficial to the contemporary demographic and focus of the study. This was based on the uniqueness of the answers of the respondents which resulted to three (3) categories.

1. Percentage of people who had beliefs that were highly influenced by their affiliated religion
2. Percentage of people who had unorthodox beliefs that were not based on their affiliated religion
3. Percentage of people who were undecided

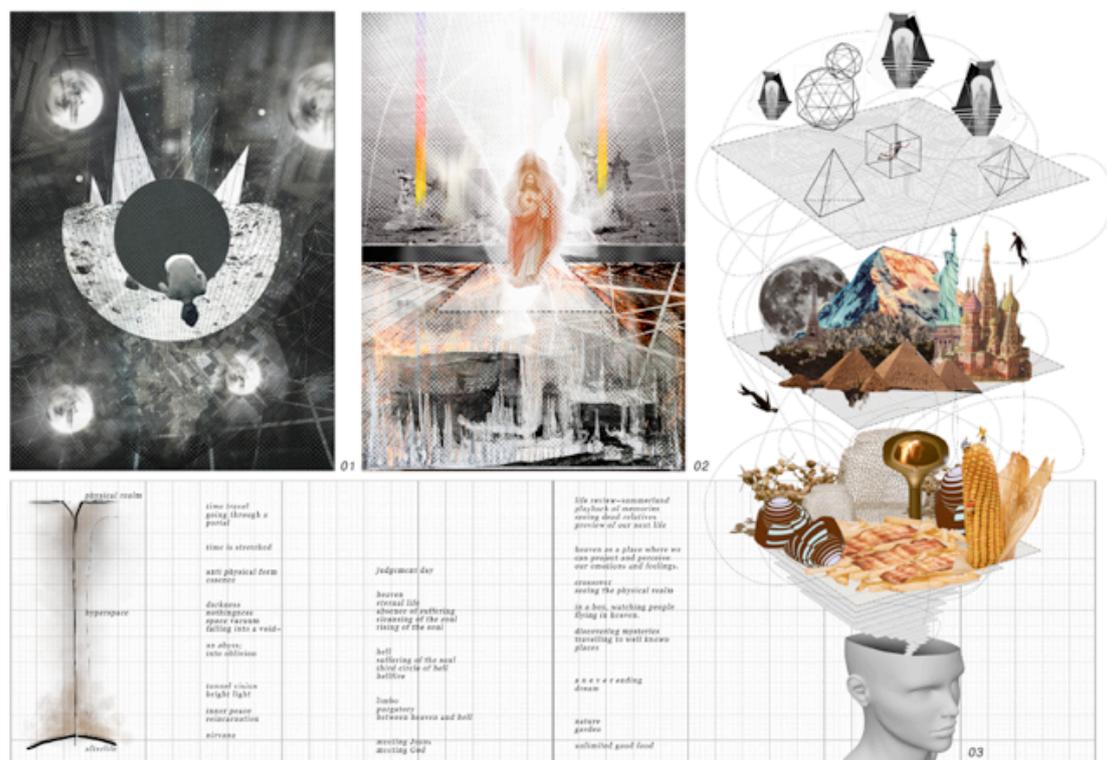


Figure 4: Survey Conclusion and Analysis Diagram  
(Existing beliefs vs. New Age beliefs based on the conducted survey)

#### 5. Constructing Imagery and Finding the Narrative

The process of creating architectural translations for each narrative starts of by constructing summaries and photo montages for each of the chosen stories. The generation of these montages will be based on the main keywords mentioned in the narrative as well as the author's initial thoughts and intentions toward the translation process.

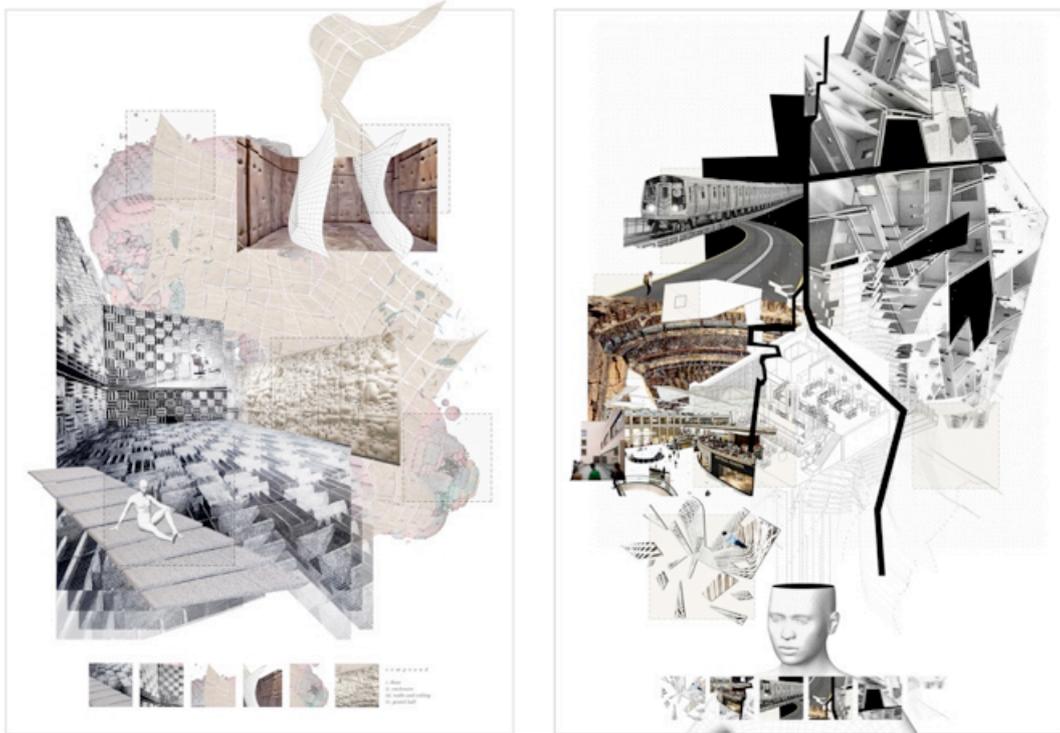


Figure 5: Photomontages created as part of the process of finding the narrative for each of the chosen narratives

## 6. Materializing the Constructed Image and Narrative

After establishing the focus through these montages, the author then proceeds to developing the main exploration procedures that will complete the materialization process of the Possibilian Landscapes. Each narrative will have its own setting based on the book; and a theme that challenges the preconceived notion of architecture in reality. Thus, the exploration process for each narrative shall be a product of the dialectics of the two (2) aforementioned aspects.

### *First Narrative: Giantess*

*Giantess* had keywords that targeted the fundamentals of architecture in reality, thus, questioning what these fundamentals would look like when integrated in an afterlife dimension or integrated in the realm of ambiguity. With that said, it calls for the exploration of a new dimension through the integration of a soft and quiet landscape. This speculates and distorts the existing notion of architecture in reality. The exploration of this narrative was categorized into iterations for the floors types, the compound enclosure, wall enclosure, the compound landscape, and the great hall.



Figure 6: Study models of the architectural elements that make up the Giantess Landscape

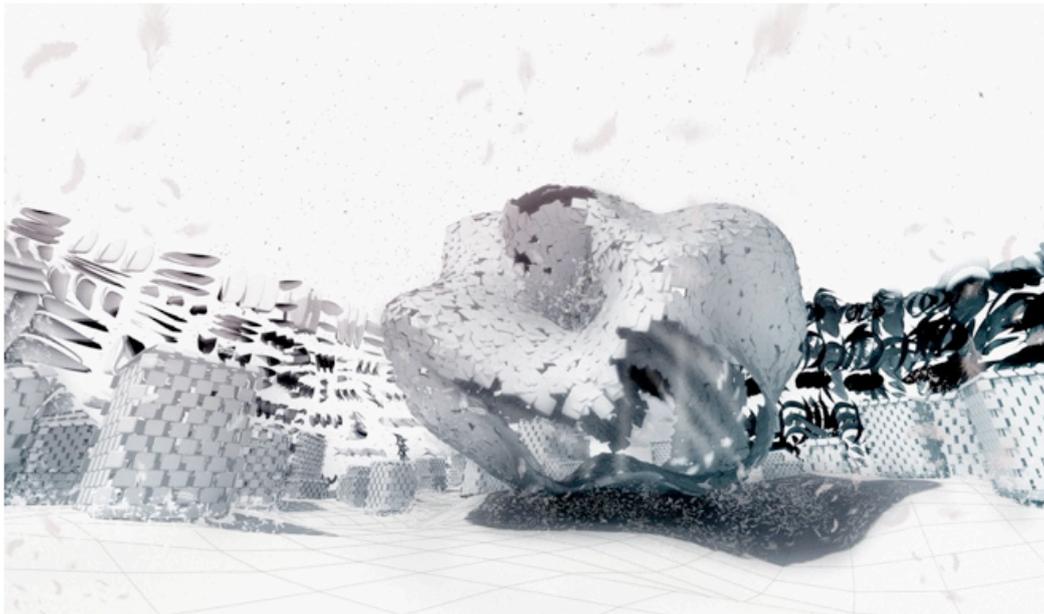


Figure 7: Three dimensional visualization and perspective of Giantess

### ***Second and Third Narrative: The Cast and Incentive***

The Cast and Incentive are two (2) mutually exclusive narratives that describe an afterlife that exists in a dream dimension. In this afterlife, you will transcend in the dreams that you had when you were still alive and will continue to exist in the dreams of the people who are still living.

In The Cast and Incentive, the author constructed spatial translations of possible dreamscapes through the application of psychological concepts and theories on REM and NREM Dream Content from Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. This involves creating architectural translations of the fragmentation or the absence of our dreams,

presence of endless thought loops and undefined transitions, and the involvement of colors to name a few.

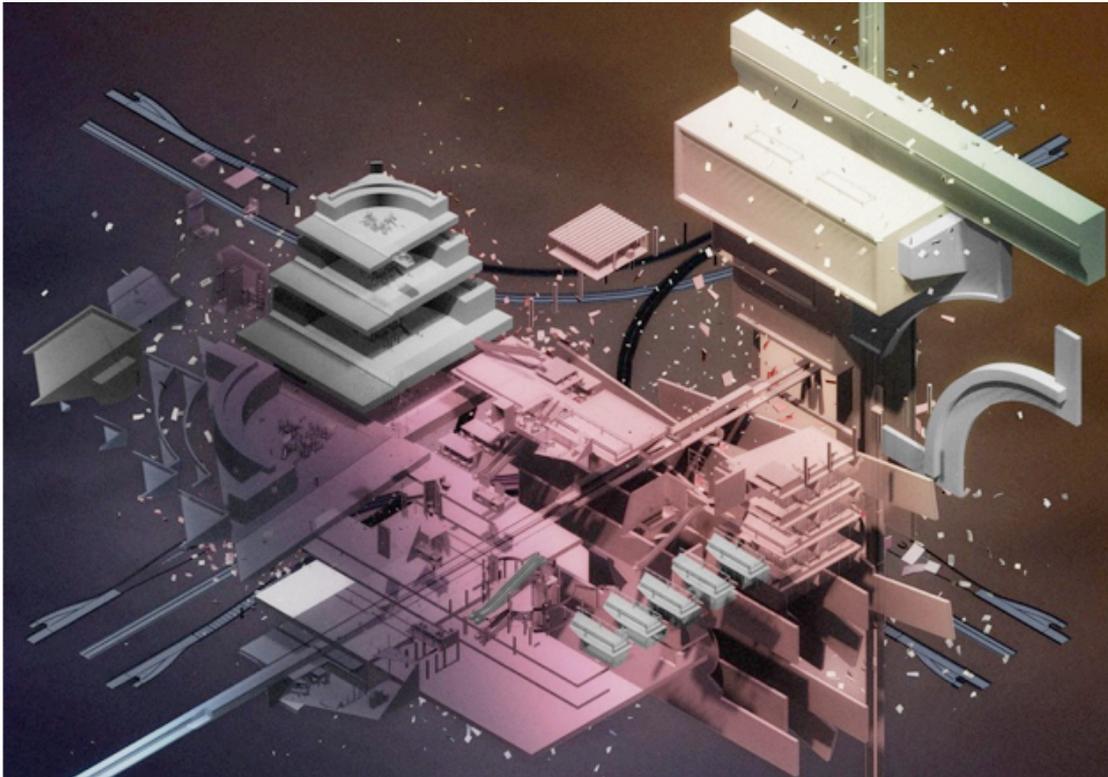


Figure 1: Spatial translation of the NREM Dream Content

The theories used for translating the NREM and REM Dream Content are as follows:

**Freudian Day Residues:** Fragmentation of NREM programs as a means of representing the memory traces that constitutes our dreams.

Each program is subjected to two (2) fragmentation phases:

*Fragmentation based on commonly used spaces*

- What is a bathroom for?
- What do you usually do in a schoolyard?
- What do you usually see in a restaurant?

*Fragmentation based on cues/essence*

- What makes a bathroom a bathroom?
- How do you know that it's a restaurant?

*The fragmentation process for the REM dream content shall only include the programs that are (still) anchored in reality.*

**Undefined Transitions:** Generation of a dreamscape through the application of a dream's undefined transitions in the construction of the dreamscape's composition.

**Jungian Endless Thought Loop:** Generation of additional programs that represent the repetitive quality of the NREM dream content.

**Absence of a Dream:** Generation of disintegrating spaces and entities in the atmospherics of the dreamscape as a means of representing our failed attempts at remembering our dreams.

**Colors:** Finalizing the atmospherics of the NREM dreamscape through the integration of a color scheme that can psychologically trigger our emotions, which is one of the factors that can affect our dreams.

**Constructing a new spatial translation:** Due to the bizarre quality of the REM Dream Content, the programs situated within this dimension required new spatial translations based on ideas of it constructed in reality. This includes an exploration on the Deep Circles of Hell, which is one of the programs mentioned in the narrative.

**Peculiar Transitions:** In Jung's analysis on the content of the REM state, he states that before a sleeper can access the bizarre imagery of REM, he/she must wade through the mundane neurotic mental content associated with NREM sleep.

REM dreams provide a more vivid imagery and predictable narrative with unpredictable forms. In this part of the study, the author constructed a narrative that encouraged the peculiarity of the order of events through linking the NREM programs with the REM programs.

The possible narratives to be explored are as follows:

- Subway and the deep circles of hell
- Subway and the deep circles of hell to abandoned structures
- Deep circles of hell and the terrifying masquerade party
- Roads to abandoned structures
- Roads to the deep circles of hell

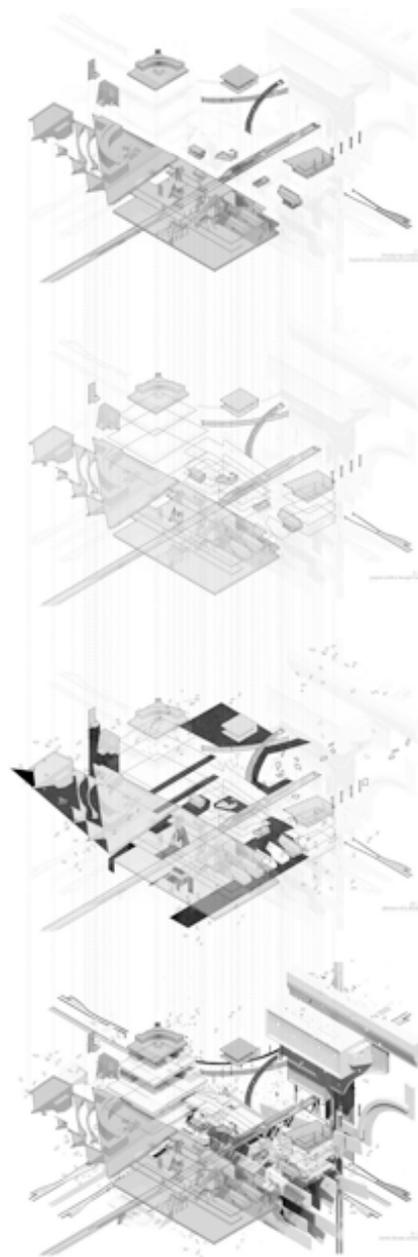


Figure 2: Process diagram of the NREM Dream Content

**Distortion of Axes:** Establishing the composition of the REM dreamscape through the act of disregarding the x, y, and z axes as a means of representing the bizarre quality of REM dreams that go beyond the laws of nature, logic and reason.

**Episodic Pedestals:** Accentuating the episodic quality of the dream content through the application of pedestals that act as a homogenizing component of the individual events present in the REM dreamscape.

**Episodic Framing:** Accentuating the vividness of the REM dreams through the integration of frames; Amplification of the dream events/episodes.

**Colors:** Finalizing the atmospherics of the REM dreamscape through the integration of a color scheme that can psychologically trigger our emotions, which is one of the factors that can affect our dreams.



Figure 10: Study models of the REM Dream Content

#### ***Fourth Narrative: Ineffable***

In the narrative of *Ineffable*, the author realizes that death is not only for humans but for everything that existed. According to him, anything which enjoys life enjoys an afterlife, including the congresses, plays, performances, and wars that we had created, most especially the feeling that arises toward the end of each event – the mood that haunts actors on the drop of the final curtain or when a congress wraps its final session, or the emotion that triggers the insides of a soldier at war's end.

In this narrative, the author emphasizes the transcendence of the mood that made us feel like we were part of something larger than themselves – something we knew had a life even though we couldn't exactly describe what it was. This is the feeling of *melancholy*.

In order to construct possible spatial translations of the feeling of melancholy, one should be immersed in the feeling itself. The expressions of the architecture of melancholy are products of the author's immersive experience which were induced by *Memory* and *Place*.

This process was then translated into two dimensional illustrations and physical models by using graphite pencil, markers, acrylic paint, watercolor, spray paint, candlewax, white air dry clay, and G.I. wires as mediums that would provide the freedom to construct variations for the translation of this dimension.

The Architecture of Melancholy is influenced by the “being” of the city. This involved constructing two-dimensional and three-dimensional manifestations of melancholy dependent on human interaction, or the lack thereof; place, transitory events, and the concept of time.



Figure 11: Two dimensional translations of the feeling of Melancholy induced through Memory and Place



Figure 12: Three dimensional translations of the feeling of Melancholy

## Conclusion

As humans, we neither control nor have the power to dictate what exists beyond death. But that does not mean that we are not allowed to bathe in the mysteries of the ambiguous *afterlife*. These Possibilian Landscapes neither impose nor act as guidelines of what to believe in, rather it questions our existing realistic notions, specifically in architecture.

In these explorations, the author attempted to challenge what architecture is in reality through the application of the afterlife ideology and the Possibilian theory in the construction of these afterlife dimensions. Fundamentals were questioned by its preconceived purposes, programs were fragmented and displaced, therefore forming

new configurations, narratives and possible typologies in architecture; and the being of architecture was seen in a new light through its translation in a melancholic point of view.

In a Possibilian's perspective, architecture should be all these things at once. There is a need for architecture to be integrated in the realm of ambiguity for it to be able to evolve in the sphere of certainty. Architecture in reality *only* succeeds through the presence of unreality.

The afterlife ideology provides us with infinite possibilities that can be explored in diverse academic fields. With that said, the author concludes the study on an open ended note. Possibilian Landscapes can be interpreted in different ways and directions that may or may not be synonymous with the methodology of the study. The author presumes the emergence of two evident directions – to either construct new intangible landscapes or to formulate landscapes that will eventually be displaced and/or situated in reality. Nonetheless, both directions provide new, equally significant layers of possible outcomes.

Although Possibilian Landscapes, when seen collectively, only exists as a speck of dust in the possibility space, it has the potential to initiate a discourse that raises the need for an exploration of a realm beyond of our own – unconstrained by the concept of the real and devoid of certainty.

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