

SWON



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(left): Mystery Falls at Ausable River, ON.

SWON Song: O Cambridge, O Cambridge

Igsung So

Dear Waterloo Architecture,

I've been meaning to write to you. I've been thinking of you more and more recently. The last time I saw you, we were both in a bit of a hole. We felt then, as we still do today, that the architectural discipline is too weak: too slow and ill-defined to assess itself against ever-changing demands and contexts of the modernizing world. Once aware of this general problem, perhaps in shock, we burrowed seasonal nests in Cambridge, Canada. In school, we quietly drew and practiced our architectures into the night. In off-seasons, we would nuzzle into various corporate and boutique offices that the global market continued to proliferate. At these offices, we incessantly questioned their architectures even as we frantically worked throughout their days. After a few seasons back and forth, we paused to reflect and published a journal together. After a few years back and forth, I decided to leave for America.

The Cambridge of America was fine. There were more people there. It seemed older there. It was Harvard there. My years were shorter there, but you know that... I'm writing to let you know that I'm back; that I've been back; that I've come back, to see you.

In all realness, I biked from the Toronto airport to come see you. You know that I still cannot drive.

I took my bicycle and rode 90 km a day until I reached our dear Cambridge once again. Though I should have realized from the recent pandemic, you were no longer in school. In fact, all schools were to be closed for the foreseeable future. Perhaps in shock, I kept biking... perhaps, in search of you... perhaps, I've been meaning to tell you that we had it right all along: the truth that no Cambridge in this world could teach us to be as fast as modernity purported us to be; and that the struggle to keep up with its marketplace had come to define the limits of the architectural profession.

Yet as the recent pandemic slowed the world down to an alternative pace, I feel less and less of an imperative to be novel all the time. Even cities seem less enticing as the de facto hub of architectural work and discourse. Maybe I just needed a break... so I kept biking... down the Grand River to Paris, Canada; then down the Thames River to London, Canada; aspirations of our grandest cities from recent history, burrowed into the countryside of Southwestern Ontario. With intense optimism and a lot of exercise, I began fantasizing about the possibility of a practice in this rural, historic, and ambitiously-named context. I simply realized that every place has buildings that could be subject to architectural discourse if imbued with enough intent and narrative.

Through trails, through fields, I noticed a small white-canvas tent raised on a square cedar deck, off the edge of a forest. I inquired about my stay for a few nights, wishing to breathe in the morning mist and trip over the grassy mounds. The owner told me that she had recently inherited this old dairy farm and had begun converting it into a retreat ground. At this point, I could not help but slip my architectural background into the conversation. She responded in kind by sharing her plans to build a more permanent structure that could perhaps replace the existing tent. Nothing fancier than a cabin. She was considering tucking the structure in the slight valley of the site and asked whether this may be a bad idea. I suggested to her that most architectures began as pits in the ground anyways and that we could instead focus our efforts on designing the top. A hat for Stratford, ON.

Biking away from the fields, I reached a lake and stayed a few weeks. I regularly visited a local dispensary in a nearby Indigenous reserve and enjoyed my growing conversations with the store owner. Through these visits, I gradually met his brothers, aunts, uncles, and grandchildren. They asked if I would be interested in building a sweat lodge with them; and if all goes well, the community was also considering building a longhouse. They were curious to see if my formal training would offer variations to their practiced tectonics. I told them how it is every architect's fantasy to build with your own hands. A craft for Kettle Point, ON.

Back up along the rivers, I found a museum, celebrating its local history of cheese and agricultural productions. As the curator toured me around the campus, I took note of the board-and-batten constructions and elaborated on the similarities and differences to those I visited during my time in America. Once aware of my enthusiasm for these structures, he told me of their plans to add another room to their one-room schoolhouse building. They had an initial sketch, but the local designer had recently passed away. Now the museum needed further drawings to complete the scheme. I told them that I could draw. A drawing for Ingersoll, ON.

This is my swan song to recent history, to our years in school together, and to our days lamenting on the deficiencies of the architectural discipline and profession. I feel iffy about our cities and their predictably "smart" futures, so I design in the countryside. Right here, in Southwestern Ontario: SWON for short. SWON LLC in full. SWON is interested in and concerned with architectural work, yet it is not a professional firm; it is an architectural design consultancy. It is light, fluffy, and bears limited affinity to the discipline and the profession. It simply wishes to enjoy its rural context, then reacts with architectural instincts. It travels via a bicycle, so that it may enjoy the company of as many people and travel as slowly as possible. As it collects and meditates on various stories, it advises and elicits embedded desires of those communities. It does not meet their "needs" nor "service" them. At its best, it seduces them; it takes you for a ride and a conversation.

Since Limited Liability Companies do not exist in Canada, I surreptitiously registered our new consultancy as *SWON LLC*. I distinctly recall a professional practice course in America that emphasized the expediency of an LLC structure, such that I could limit my professional liabilities from my disciplinary intellections. This is not actually how it legally works, but this is how SWON LLC intends to operate.

SWON LLC is a seasonal company; it roams and engages during the warmer months, but hibernates and ruminates over the colder months. We will probably see you this summer.

Origin Myth for SWON: The Ugly Duckling

Taylor Halamka

According to the latest, greatest science available from the top swan-studying-schools, swans have good memories. So we wonder with you here, do swans reminisce about childhood? Beyond strong stimulus-response skills, how much nurture remains in their nature? Take one swan, any swan. Actually, specifically one SWON. From the first breath of untainted countryside air and the vantage of the primitive shell, Andersen's Ugly Duckling is given everything as certainties. You are a duck and should behave as such even if you are different (and ugly!). Typologies must be respected, precedents revered, canons sanctioned by the architectural authorities. And so on and so forth...



Down the Ausable River, ON.

Nothing is inherently wrong with this epistemology. In his odyssey from egg to meadowland to moors, through rushes and farmhouses out into the frigid winter, the ugly duckling gains knowledge of appropriate behavior, dangers of society, and Rhinoceros 3D modeling. Along the trodden path our duckling hears the self-assured instruction of hens and cats and geese and adjunct lecturers—they all have valuable advice, albeit sometimes strongly stated. To be clear, being born the ugly duckling versus a beautiful duckling is arbitrary; all the ducklings receive the same sermons.

Then, a leap of faith! It takes a moment of reflection—literal reflection in a pond, in fact—to rear our SWON. Meditation makes misfits mindful of established structures. Cambridge, America cannot categorize architecture any more than Cambridge, Canada without some biased lens or framework, and neither can SWON; they are all equal if you look at them differently. The SWON simply allows the possibility of perspectives different than those imposed by their parental institutions. And that is what a consultancy does; it deliberates the context in which it finds itself, be it countryside or construction site. It discusses alternatives and suspends categorization for as long as it can.

Everything is a nail to the hammer, just as everyone is a duck to the uncritical mind. The incubation periods of the Cambridge ducklings are at once too short and too long. This coming-of-age is drawn out just enough to produce the illusion of a holistic picture, yet it is conveniently brief such that no counterpoints can carve away or corroborate them. The expedition is essential to recognize that perhaps the best approach to architecture is not inherently as an architect. Get the biases out of your ducking head. Become a SWON.

Duck, Duck, SWON: Circle of Knowledge

Bijan Thornycroft

Duck, duck, SWON: around and around. It's a game. Which one in front? Which one out back? As the loop repeats, the beginning, middle, and end lose their senses. Unrolled, it is simply a line. One point marks the beginning and another the end. Eventually, the two become too distant to remember each other. To preserve some sense of their attenuating relationship, narratives of their mythical origins develop. Case in point, the "hut" remains a fashionable myth today because it appears to be both architecture's first and its latest. Both ends are equally present. The line coincides at a point.

Like ouroboros, the point bites its own tail and eventually consumes itself. In its absence, other origins of architecture are considered. Objectivity is briefly touted as architecture's original ideal. Complexity arrives soon after to replace this. This too is abandoned at the sight of simplicity, and the intellectual value of its schema. As in most rebellions, each ideology displaces its predecessor. Then again, when the next ideal is argued and sustained. Each point circles to the last. They aim for the same impetus, to connect the end to the beginning—but arrive only at a near miss.

Architecture as first a line, then a point, now spirals. Whether to become what it already was or to escape what it never had been, its ducks continue to go around and around. While beginnings and ends barter endlessly, SWON flies to the middle and seats itself in relative calmness. It does not mythologize the past nor claim to understand the future. Unconcerned with difficult ideals, SWON just enjoys the game and a chance to play.

Taylor, Igsung + Bijan
recommend:

Life: A User's Manual by
Georges Perec (1987) and
"Turtles All the Way Down"
on Wikipedia.

Also, *Reveries of the Solitary
Walker* by Jean-Jacques
Rousseau (1782) for some
guidance on solitude and
what to think about while
seemingly doing nothing.



Rock Glen Conservation, Arkona, ON.