PHILIP BEESLEY
MICHAEL STACEY

Michael Stacey / Phillip, as you well know, back in 2004 I curated the Digital Fabricators Exhibition, and you kindly hosted the North American stage in the Cambridge Gallery, the first ever exhibition there, and Bob Sheil's work with his colleagues, sixteen*(makers), was included. Do you think it's significant that the 2011 conference drops the word 'Digital' and is just called 'FABRICATE'?

Philip Beesley / I do see significance in that. The implication for me is that specialised craft rooted in material manipulation is a key for quality in the field of building today, while the ubiquity of the computing medium is something that could be taken for granted. I don't completely agree, because there are a myriad of issues surrounding digital tools, but it might be well to uncouple the term 'digital' from 'fabrication', and allow each its own forum, rather than focusing (as we did many years ago now) on the novelty that made digital practice coupled to fabrication seem innovative. 'Fabrication', by stripping away the 'digital' term, opens 'fabricare', with existential and poetic implications of that eternal term. History and theory come to the fore in this gathering, alongside technique and craft.

MS / Interesting response, Phillip, because I think people have been encouraged back to the workshop, but I am concerned that today there are too many, essentially similar, parametric projects, and some of the papers submitted for the conference really reflected this, trumpeting the parametric tools, rather than making inventive architecture. It's actually less inventive than architecture from almost any other era, and they're not engaging in the realisation, and I think that part of the field has already collapsed, which is perhaps a bit negative of me to say.

PB / Certain languages in parametric design appear generic: Platonic waves that ripple out, organised in gradients, perhaps salted with certain variants that appear like viruses to interrupt the field. Random functions create difference wilfully, seeming to correspond to the tutorials that are embedded in next-generation software. A kind voice might say this reflects extraordinary progress made in skilling up a generation of designers. Yet, along with emergence of these skills, there also comes a kind of exhaustion: languages sometimes reveal themselves to be static, disappointing, when the concrete examples replace the visionary impressions that preceded them. But I'd like to see that as a healthy thing. My Darwinian hat sees this as a large project where waste and excess inevitably boil off. The rather abject state of Dubai might suggest these tools are sometimes playing uncritically, but that comes with any experimental territory.

MS / That's my concern; the uncritical use of such tools. Although you could also say that our profession has been quite slow to adopt building information models, as a better mode of collaboration. But before you can answer that, I'd like to move onto an earlier conversation we had in the summer; you suggested maybe that a future version of a BIM tool could accommodate ambivalence and improvisation; could you say more about that idea?

PB / Ambivalence can be an enabling term. I move back and forth between hard-core measurement and performance testing and, on the other hand, open, rash speculation akin to lighting matches with tinder. I wonder whether design tools might include a variable focus that invites both impression and precise analysis, akin to drawing with charcoal alternating with silverpoint. When I speak about ambivalence, I'm thinking of designers using new tools and practices to meet the challenges of our day, however unspeakably grave those might be on bad days and however inspiring and playful they might seem on good days. I want to move back and forth between optimism and pessimism as a designer. I'm trying to find a kind of human experience grounded in my own body and feelings and rooted in motivation for changing the world constructively.

I do wonder if the monster of BIM software might be improved with integrative tools for conscious play. Many of my students and colleagues are worried about how management-oriented BIM tools are influencing design. BIM tools might imply profoundly negative clerical work. There is a risk of these tools creating sub-classes of desk workers prevented from working intuitively, obligated to punch in specifications and hyperlinks to catalogue sources. Its power for control and administrative depth is clear but can BIM be a freely creative tool?

MS / On one level your description terrifies, the practice of architecture reduced to people choosing from the existing and choosing from the manufacturers who insist on talking about solutions without ever asking what the problem might be. I actually quite enjoy writing a specification because I find it a way of thinking about architecture, but the old Skidmore, Owens & Merrill model, which had a separate floor of specification writers,

I think is just a waste of human endeavour and is wrong. The key question here is how one creates very strong and direct human relationships with the people that actually make things. I saw a lecture last night here in Nottingham where a London-based architects' practice described working directly with industry; they were using parametric tools, but the workshop relationship was direct, perhaps in a way that you could have seen in many generations. So I do worry that a very static view of a BIM is an institutionalisation; I almost want to say a set of malpractices, rather than a set of best practice within our own industry. I think the relationships within sixteen*(makers), for instance, is a much more productive and interesting possibility because it steps out of the conventional structure of the fabricator, of the architect and the academic, and looks for something a lot more fluid and interesting.

PB / Returning to the question of ambivalence, we've just lurched in our conversation – we started with an almost despairing sense of the sameness, reacting to trivial qualities of sine waves and gradients characterising some parametric design today. We've touched on integrated building information modelling, implying a stultifying mass of static cataloguing, a contrary of agile play. If that practice doesn't promise opportunity, then what might we offer? A kind of agile substance is implicit in your question. I admire collaborative practices where people have profound grounding in certain crafts, while at the same time they have the confidence to act as generalists. Lateral play – specialised languages transferring into new hybrids – marks that kind of work. When we look at the architectural practice sixteen*(makers), we have an example of individuals in specialised silos that have the ability to do steel manufacturing with advanced craft in that specific discipline; side-stepping to another silo, ability in computational simulation with formidable craft; then to yet another, performance based scripting. 'Emergent' design has teeth in this picture.

MS / I think the simple starting point is that, as architects, we shouldn't be embarrassed about discussing our own skill. I think the twentieth century was almost burdened with architects who said they were only generalists and they weren't good in mobilising their own skill, or mobilising the skill of others. I think that's what interests me in fabrication, is that exchange, or a dialogue between a group of people, all of whom know that they actually have very relevant skills. That's when I think the exchange becomes exciting; because you are building with them a whole set of positives, to me that's part of what your body of work eloquently demonstrates.

PB / It's a very curious question about how unskilled things seem to play so readily in architectural disciplines. The question of individual skill and the fostering of craft is something that any musician would take for granted, because that culture is rooted in the rigours of language; sound exposes its technical qualities immediately to the limbic quarters of human perception. Perhaps in that medium we take facility for granted. But perhaps, before arguing for craft, we could take the other side of the coin: did you take macramé in your art class in school?

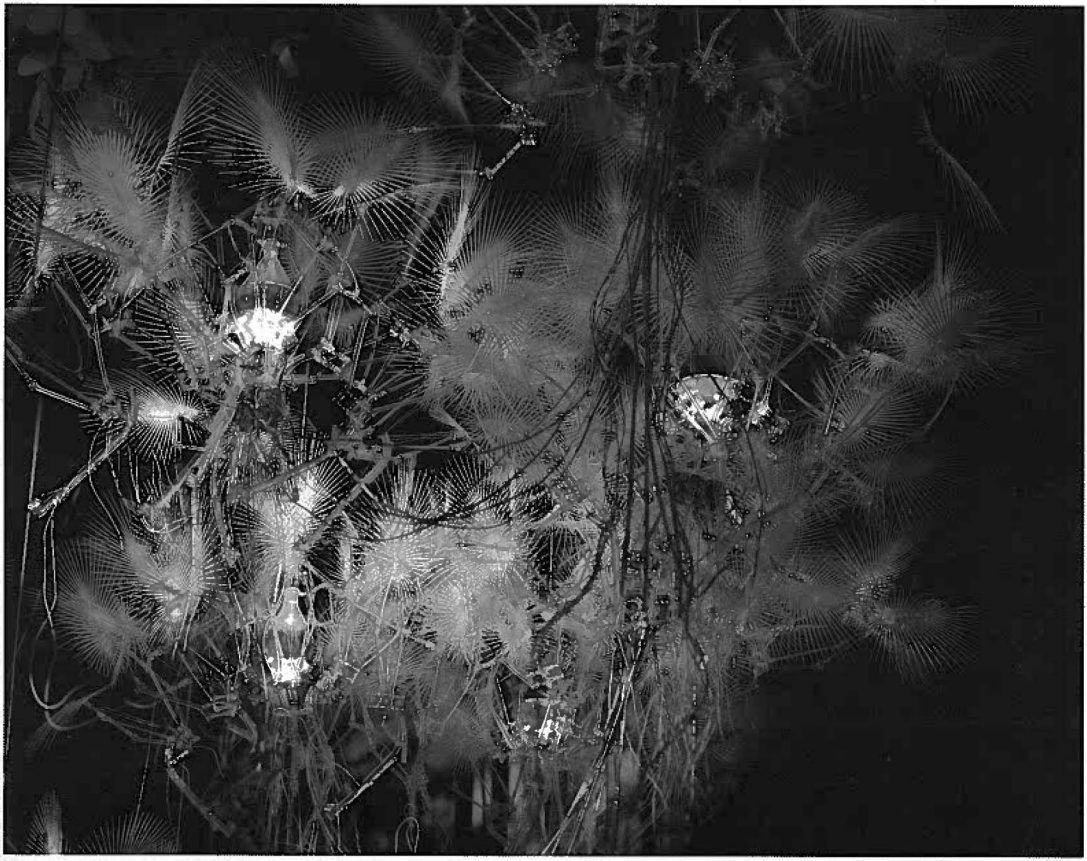
MS / I did yes and I can knit as well.

PB / The enabling qualities of physical experience are fundamental to my view of architectural creativity. But physicality isn't automatically inspiring. It can speak for a kind of dreadful silence, a kind of forlorn, blind quality of intimacy as well. There is an implied silence of the individual thing moving again and again interminably.

After a brief period of enthusiasm for the craft of macramé, the practice of decorative knotting, the overwhelming labour and slow progress of that private craft put me off. But yes, with caution, let me suggest fabrication and material embodiment offers a fundamental start to my version of design education. Would you go that far? What would be the first steps in the first year for a designer?

MS / Well here we have another complete conversation that we could have Philip. The thing I feel strongly is that there has been a sort of false dichotomy between the intellect and the hands, whereas your installations demonstrate a holistic approach very well. To discuss your installations, you need to discuss some of the making, some of the philosophy. I think there's too much architecture where it's neither built well, nor is it a constructed line of thought, to use Sverre Fehn's phrase.

I've always found that it's in the physical where ideas become evident and real to everybody, that's probably why I like workshops and also the power of the mock-up and the prototype. I've gone to appointment meetings with samples, and the committee have looked at me quite strangely. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, not to presume what the project was going to be made of...



Protocells in Filter Field
Hylozoic Soil: Méduse Field,
'Mois-Multi Festival', Centre Méduse,
Quebec City, 2010.

PB / I can agree, but I wonder whether there is a risk of this insistence on materiality being mistaken for something negative, an earnest and stultifying quality.

MS / That is a bit of a misunderstanding. I was actually going to ask you, and maybe we should store this, whether we could describe architecture as a collective craft, because your earlier comment sounded very much like we were knitting on our own, rather than quilting, to use James Timberlake's analogy.

PB / Yes. But this tangent might imply that the collective craft and physical embodiment risk a kind of hair-shirt architecture. To counter that we could point to some of the qualities that come of this sensibility. I'm finding myself focusing on failure and the outer edges of performance, where things diffuse and dissolve and collapse. I'm finding that material manipulation is an effective conceptual link that fosters experiment. Instability, or sources of irritation catalysing design spaces might offer performance akin to hiccupping or convulsing, a link into temporal performance. Being able to wind up a piece of sheet metal or plastic right to the very outer edge, past its performance, fosters a grasp of what it can actually do. This kind of design space welcomes dissolution and disorientation.

MS / I think it's almost essential that we give back to the students the opportunity to fail. Often that can be in the physical construction, as long as they understand what's happened, because, I don't know about Canada, but in British education, absolute certainty of success has been so ground into the current generation, they want to know whether they've passed the module before they've even started. So you have to feed the space back in to create the experimentation, and then once that's there, I feel that they become like people from anytime. I think, as professional architects, we have an interesting dilemma that we might engage in experimental processes, and yet we might have finite budgets and finite delivery dates, and so we have to almost somersault from the experimental to the certain. We had exactly that on the Nottingham house we built for the Solar Decathlon 2010 competition in Madrid, which also reminds me of your earlier comment; I think sustainability has been set back by the sort of hair-short, dour, desperate duck-and-cover approach. If we take an analogy from the Slow Food movement, it should be deeply enjoyable, and the process should be enjoyable for all of the participants. It's how we sustain ourselves and future generations, so that we're not making sacrifices to sustainability.

One of the terms you used was efficiency. I think material efficiency is incredibly important, liberating and dynamic. But too much of the discussion about too much architecture is simply about efficiency, whereas if we take the creation of a home, for example, there's so many more issues that are actually much more interesting than whether a particular solar panel is specified and whether it's 83 per cent efficient or not. It is more important whether the technology is used and appropriated. I know it's some people's role to measure, but it's almost the least interesting quality, and in some areas of architecture, the technocratic discussion just totally dominates.

Just going back several steps, I think that understanding the past, and understanding what humankind has done through time, is actually a means of being radical, and not conservative. It's actually how one seeks the radical edge.

In that sense, I want to come back to your own body of work, because on one level I understand some of your installations to be a metaphor for healing the world; am I being too simplistic Phillip?

PB / Well, no, you're not being too simple. I'd be nervous about saying 'yes this is about healing the world', because everyone in the room might take a step back! But I wonder whether such an earnest term might be grounded both in radical delirious experiment and at the same time in fundamental human existence, anchored in a sense of the deepest history. I'd like to think so.

In the work that's in Venice right now, one strain is rooted in origins. You and I have often spoken about my encounter with blood deposits that lay under the north gate of the city of Rome. I learned that those corresponded to thousands of blood deposits and substitution burials running throughout building foundations. That archaic space seemed to offer almost unspeakable abject fragility, rounding the act of building the city into the earth.

It had a resonance with the sense of trying to create something direct and living, rooted in the soil and spreading out into the realm of agriculture and, further, into a sense of general stewardship in creating, earning the ground. I think this sensibility of trying to grasp space and ground as an active design space is an absolutely current sense. Air, water, earth and rock have vital and tangible qualities. This seems a valuable way of approaching the environment.