

THEM

architecture | design

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Three Preoccupations: form-making, building practices, and development

1) The invention of new forms is an essential social task. New forms are a physical representation of new possibilities: they liberate thought. New forms put institutional and cultural habits and preconceptions into play: they allow a society to re-imagine itself. An expanded universe of forms is the central preoccupation of contemporary American architecture practice, and our work is also committed to this project.

But architecture should be concerned with more than the form, the end result. Construction work is not only a means to an end, but also something of value in itself. The architect, like the director, composer, and conductor, should understand the abilities, desires, and limitations of all parties to the act of making. Architecture is a type of choreography, with drawing as its notation; for better or worse, every building is the record of a performance.

2) A new construction method/element/practice, even one that directly affects a small percentage of the total work, can have a catalytic effect on the entire process of construction. In post-industrial societies, new methods and practices can change our perception of the established "building delivery system," with its codified rules and roles, by reminding us that *things could be otherwise*. In countries undergoing industrialization, new methods and materials of construction can play the role of "social technologies." We have explored this potential in a number of small-scale development projects. Simple, adaptable building components, produced in community-based industries from recycled or readily available materials, create economic opportunities for people at the margins of the industrial economy.

In developed societies the greatest obstacle to architecture is the desire to anticipate and predict the entire course of construction: to eliminate surprise and contingency. Image-based design methods dominate contemporary architecture in part because they propose an equivalence of conception and result: the building is *no less and no more* than the image that precedes it. This fantastic goal, total predictability, is the logical end-point of digital automation. We have seen the process unfold in three phases: CAD, CAM, and now parametric BIM. The next logical step would be "expert systems," comprehensive problem-solving design routines. But digital technology could also be used in exactly the opposite way: GPS, point cloud mapping, wireless internet, and inexpensive design/fabrication software could give designers, fabricators, and tradespeople the power to make spontaneous, precise, well-informed decisions in the field. Our studio is searching for such new "scenarios of construction," different approaches to building that preserve opportunities for creativity and invention at every stage of the process.

Crafts and applied arts have always been characterized by heuristic, tacit knowledge. The hand of the craftsman and the artist is guided by circumstances as they arise. Because traditional crafts have been displaced by industry, we assume that this very human, very contingent type of thinking is also obsolete. Actually, after two hundred years of industrial expansion, we are beginning to see that such a view is far too simple. Technological development causes a proliferation of unintended by-products, risks, and side-effects; it is always creating new uncharted territories, new kinds of contingency. If anything, this "reflexive modernity" requires more intuition and flexibility than ever before; rules-of-thumb no longer apply.

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The only creative tasks remaining for post-industrial human beings to address are tasks with no clear solutions and no clear rules. This is why architectural “expert systems” cannot succeed completely. Standardized, formalizable, “greenfield” design problems are already being automated and outsourced but there will always be a large residue of intractable local problems for the architect to address. Messy, ill-defined problems characterize the design phase: they take the form of conflicting requirements between site, program, budget, and so on. The construction phase also has its amorphous tasks—which are generally resolved through “hack work,” craft’s evil twin. But aren’t these the very situations where fluency, even mastery, is actually called for? Such thoughts encourage us to believe that new types of craft—new ways of working, which might seem more familiar to a software troubleshooter than to a traditional journeyman—are evolving. In a number of projects we have tried to widen the field of “tacit judgment” by proposing simple, re-orientable building blocks, connectors, and components that are deployed in different ways depending on conditions in the field.

To engage construction is to engage society; but architecture must go deeper than an exploration of construction. Buildings are epiphenomena. To actually influence society for the better, architecture must understand and address the process of development—meaning both economic and real-estate development. Over the past fifteen years we have sought to educate ourselves and provoke others by proposing new ideas for the design and development of settlements, regions, and city districts; by proposing new tools for building and land use regulation; and by encouraging new cultural and productive relationships between agricultural and urban landscapes. The next step for this work is implementation.

3) What defines the possibilities of a society? What establishes those limits, beyond which change is impossible? Besides habits, laws, customs, economic systems, and other disembodied forces, the arrangement of human activities in physical space has a decisive impact. Architecture is another name for the built landscape.

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