

Treatment 1: Notes from an Informal Discussion on Interinstitutional Design Research and Image Production

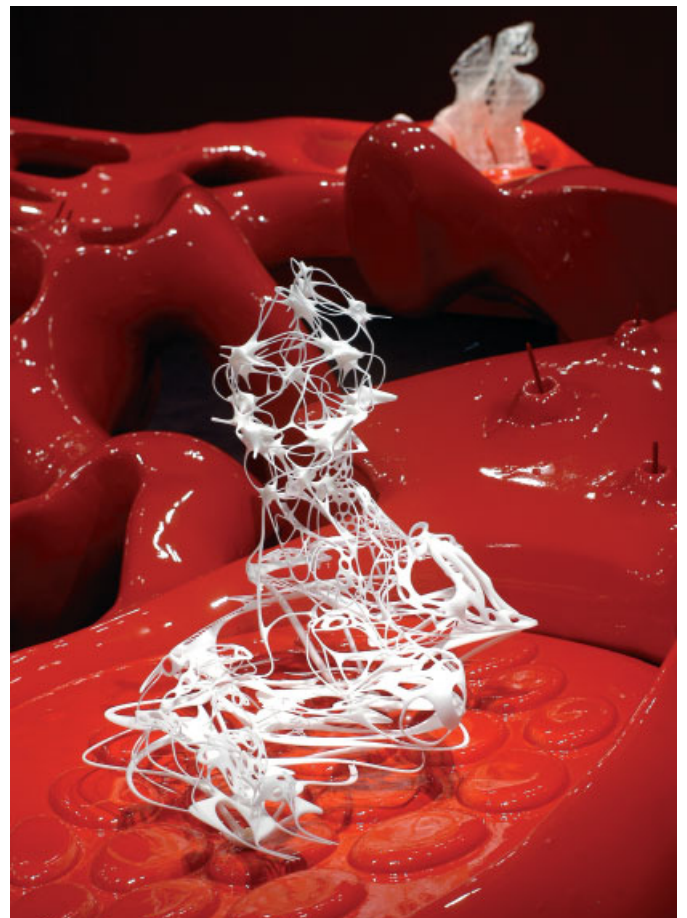
Since 2003, Benjamin Bratton and Hernan Diaz-Alonso have conducted a series of parallel theory seminars and design studios at SCI-Arc (Southern California Institute of Architecture). These collaborations have addressed questions of collectivity at varying scales: *personal* (between two individuals, each with separate professional practices), *institutional* (between two disciplinary positions, one analytical and the other creative) and *cultural* (between what is inside and outside the architectural imaginary). The work featured in the article represents another primary mandate of their interinstitutional project: the transdisciplinary implications of *design* as a general form of practice as opposed to the historical definitions of 'architecture' or the architect.

The following notes are the result of an informal discussion between Benjamin Bratton and Hernan Diaz-Alonso regarding their continuing interinstitutional design research project spanning a three-year period between 2003 and 2006. The research curriculum comprised so far a total of four sets of design studios and theory seminars, taught collaboratively over the course of four semesters at SCI-Arc (and replicated at Columbia University where Diaz-Alonso also teaches). The collaboration between the architect and the sociologist also extends to their respective professional practices, Xefiortarch and The Culture Industry.

Innovation and Novelty: Design as Research

When we started to teach advanced vertical studios at SCI-Arc we decided to conduct the studio collaboratively, in part because we've always been interested in production and technique, and wanted to eliminate the conventional notion of how research is conducted in a typical design studio. This involved a general reconfiguration of design as research, aimed very much at privileging the projective act of innovation and novelty, as opposed to the more traditional, reflective form of research as retrospective criticism.

As an extension of this interest in open-ended innovation as a legitimate form of design research we were more specifically interested in the degree to which highly involved geometrical forms could be interpreted programmatically, or in terms of having latent narrative potential. In other words, how might conventional architectural programmes be productively mutated (if not entirely mutilated) by the organisational influence of formal and geometrical effects? Advanced modelling software generates the potential for what we began to see as a productive migration away from conventional notions of programme (that which is typically thought of in planometric terms) and towards a



Hernan Diaz-Alonso/Xefiortarch, Design Series 4, 'SANGRE', San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California, 2005–06

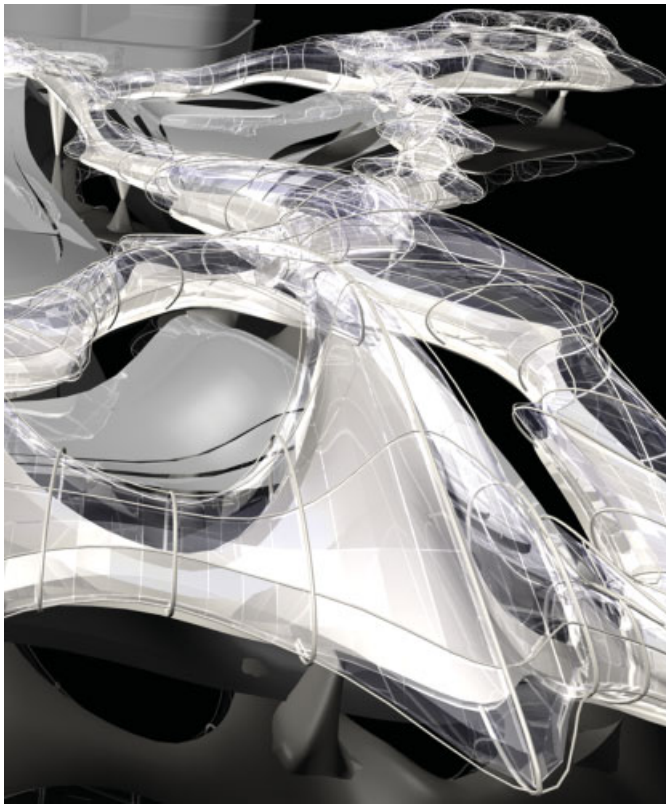
Detail of the display system.

Project architects: Jeremy Stoddart and Josh Taron

Design team: Ben Toam, Mirai Morita, Robert Mezquiti, Greg Derrico and Klaus Ransmayr

reconsideration of programme as something much less determinate. We began to think of programme as being less quantifiable in nature and more the product of specific qualities, in particular the notion of space and programme as an embodied experience.

In the context of these general research interests, the first set of seminars and studios taught collaboratively was on airports. We treated the arc of flight from one city to another as a temporally contiguous space and asked students to



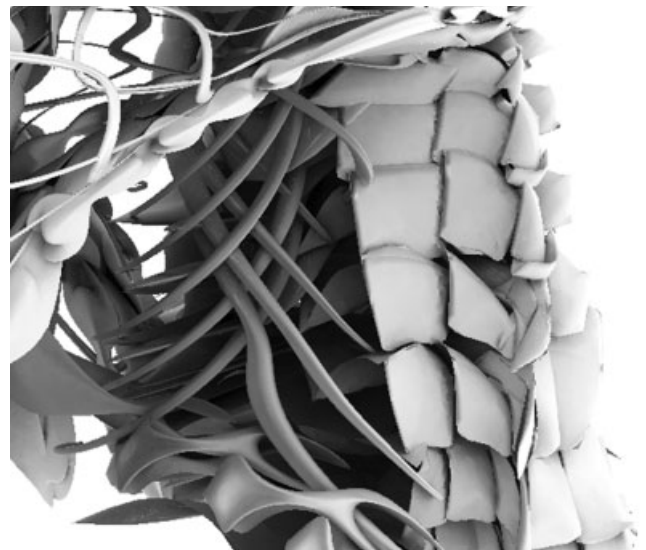
SCI-Arc design studio, Terminals, spring 2003
Aerial perspective of the Long Beach airport variation 1.
Students: Kevin Sperry and Asako Hiraoka

design three airport locations and two cabin spaces along a single itinerary. Rather than tracing a space of flow as a formal surface organisation, we experimented with constructing a cinematic continuity of experience, a travelling POV shot, through the design of form and atmospherics. These investigations led to the second set of studios and seminars, which addressed the single-family home as a straightforward architectural typology. The seminar focused on issues particular to post-Oedipal family dynamics, a notion of the plural body of the biological family and the way in which architecture operates as a kind of prosthetic projection to exacerbate, accommodate and confound intimate social economies. We discovered that architectural design became a means by which to construct narratives about new kinds of

social bodies. In fact, the results of the design work became the production of a 'body' as much a 'building'. Whether the students were conscious of it or not, these 'houses' transformed into self-portraits. This suggested dispensing with the 'building' altogether, and having each student focus instead on the design of a body, or what we eventually came to consider a kind of 'animal'. This evolution towards the production of a body or animal led to the third set of studios and seminars, in which we continued to shift the research down in scale, focusing on the invention and production of bodily 'organs'. By the time we reached the fourth set of studios and seminars (in progress when this discussion took place), our focus was on the viscous formal capacities of 'blood'.

Software Isomorphism: Design as Image

Many of these interests regarding forms of innovation and novelty raise questions of design technology and, more specifically, design software. There has been a striking de-differentiation of design disciplines in the last few years.



SCI-Arc design studio, Fleshology, spring 2005
Detail perspective of the final version of the tower/species replacing the Freedom Tower at the World Trade Center.
Students: Hunter Knight, Nick Pisca and Jason Mah

Graphic designers, architectural designers, shoe designers and car designers all once had forms of expertise particular to their specific sets of tools and their techniques of production with those tools, thus helping to distinguish each skill as a predominantly separate and distinct design practice. More recently, the tools that differentiated designers from such diverse fields have converged with the rapid proliferation of computer technology and, more specifically, 3-D digital modelling programs, the effect being the production of a kind of 'software isomorphism'. It is now common practice that most if not all designers work with

similar if not the same software applications, regardless of the scale or function of the design products they are generating (a logo, a shoe, a building, etc). We see one predominant effect of this 'isomorphism' being the aggregation of diverse forms of design intelligence into an almost universal condition of image production.



Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation (GSAPP), Columbia University design studio, Fleshology, spring 2005
Detail of the genetic code of tower/species evolution.
Student: Robert Mezquiti

Design always concerns a translation between forms and formats of image. More than 'textuality' or even 'iconography', its very form is a secondary function of how it performs as an image. Perhaps some might see this as a triumph of superficiality over depth, but it's certainly also an intensification of the conjectural and fictive logics of design, of its ability to mobilise a social imagination and with it a series of potential futures. We see this as a real and complex demand that global network culture makes on producers of architectural content.

Our Certain Los Angeles-ism: Design as Cultural Production

Another implicit (if not explicit) interest particular to this research project is the embrace of Los Angeles (and perhaps more specifically 'Hollywood' – less a place than a condition)

as a cultural milieu. Even if superficial and banal, LA continues to have a very particular and profound influence on the shaping of contemporary aesthetic culture (particularly in terms of the entertainment industry and the general spectacle of celebrity). To this extent, our interest in the question of the image (as mentioned in the previous section, architecture or design-as-image-making) has its origins in a culture in which image is quite literally 'everything'. This condition, however, provides a different context for each. Hernan makes images in a city of image-making. Benjamin positions himself more as an 'intellectual', a 'permanently absurd identity in Los Angeles', a perspective that he uses nevertheless as the basis of critical and professional production.

In the collaboration across their professional practices 'Hollywood' becomes as well a model for the informal and opportunistic circulation of ideas and strategies across disciplines. Our exchanges, however, are never directly programmatic, nor ideological, but rather they mutate and migrate across the different purposes to which they are put.



SCI-Arc design studio, Hemastology, autumn 2005
Detail perspective of the final version of the bridge/species replacing the Brooklyn Bridge.
Students: Brian De Luna and Chikara Inamura

In this, the pedagogical collaboration within the context of the institution often functions as a forum for unexpected and unplannable innovation. What is learnt there is idiosyncratically applied to practical problems elsewhere. Hernan also characterises this back and forth in the musical terms of improvisational compositional techniques. 'It's like a four-year-long jam session,' he smiles.

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