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## Graduate Sessions 8: Neil Denari

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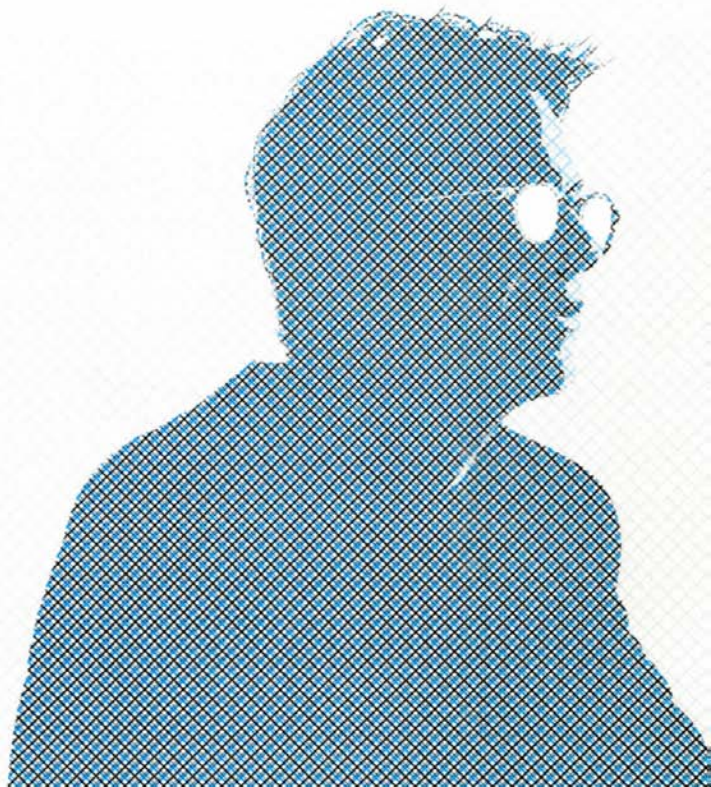
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graduate sessions

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NEIL

8 DENARI



Neil Denari

Graduate Session 03

2008.10.03

Syracuse University  
School of Architecture  
Graduate Programs  
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Neil Denari is the founder and principal of Neil M. Denari Architects, Inc. He was the director of SCI-Arc from 1997 to 2001 and is currently a professor in the Architecture and Urban Design Department at UCLA. His lecture at Syracuse Architecture, entitled "The New Intimacy," is one of over two hundred he has given at institutions throughout France, Japan, and the United States.

[Graduate Sessions](#) is a series of seminars and symposia offering Syracuse Architecture graduate students the opportunity to engage leading scholars and practitioners in conversation and debate. The resulting pamphlets offer unique insights into the work of our guests as well as the ongoing concerns of our students and the graduate programs.

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graduate session 08

“AL: The sculptural qualities and stainless steel skin of HL23 make it an iconic or monumental building. Was this intention your own or was it dictated by the client?

ND: It had to be both. There was an amazing convergence of site forces that demanded that the design become, ultimately, a economic commodity for the client as well as an architectural experiment for us. Beauty, or our own version of it, became a mediator between market forces and speculative concepts. Our client wasn't the first to recognize that this would work, but he very presciently understood that *that* site needed to have something unique on it. He was able to do so because his avowed interest in art and aesthetics intersected with a whole series of unwritten political agendas concerning the High Line. The development of each project along the High Line is, in theory, to support the new condition of this elevated park, but development around it was inevitable and it's obviously already happening. When you mix that twenty-five years of work and research in our office, it's safe to say that everybody's got their own agenda. It just happened that the client's agenda and our agenda matched-up perfectly and that's, of course, the greatest formula for making a successful project. Behind any incredibly powerful building is a client that was not at all passive, but in fact the opposite: "Give me your best work—work to a level to which you've never worked before." The client becomes demanding as opposed to disciplining or admonishing ("you can't do this," "you must limit that"). And it's not about money—it's about really understanding the value of the work. That's a major psychological shift which I think coincided, at least in the terms of the condominium market, with the construction of the three Richard Meier towers on Charles and Perry Streets in the lower West Village. They





opened the floodgates to designers and architects internationally to come in and, using the medium of condominium design and the condominium program, make New York a place for experimentation in architecture. This possibility is a result of the flow of global capital (insofar as it was an ongoing discourse prior to the recent economic collapse). In our case it was quite a convergence—a convergence of politics with site and a convergence of our office with a client who embraces architecture, even if he was somewhat new to it as it is his first building to develop on his own. And on a more self-deprecating side, because this is my first freestanding building, it was an accumulation of ignorance. I say that facetiously. I should say that it was an accumulation of *we've-never-done-this-before-so-let's-do-it-differently-than-everyone-else*. If we'd had a seasoned developer, maybe it would have been a different story.

In the era of *Learning from Las Vegas* everything had to be thematized—you had to make a pyramid casino or a knights-of-the-roundtable hotel. Contemporary architects are simply asked to do their work.

MP: A lot of your recent works seem to have to do with the idea of branding and architecture becoming iconographic in a market sense. You did bank branches in Tokyo for MUFG that saw a 100% increase in business after your renovations. Does that limit or enhance your ability to experiment in architecture when the client is looking for a certain aesthetic?

ND: In none of the projects we've done has the issue of branding been a foregrounded agenda. The projects are our work, which is based on understanding contemporary life, specifically contemporary life as it connects to subjects theoretically taboo to architecture—ephemerality, fashion, shifts in time. And architecture in its most old-fashioned sense is a guardian against all of that. "Architecture is heavy." "Architecture is expensive." "Architecture needs to last a long time." I've never shared those philosophies since their call to timelessness can really inhibit certain aspects of architectural innovation. That doesn't mean that I'm not as committed as any architect to building the finest object possible, but we all work within certain conditions. None of the projects that we've done began with an advertising company or a text that was pre-written for us to respond to. In every case the message we've received has been this: *do your best work—we feel that what you do will then shift perceptions*. And in that sense, we're happy to work in the commercial world because we're *not* acquiescing to forces that would cause us to lose that which we cherish most about architecture—that it's really the greatest medium of experiment.



I say that from a biased point of view, and a filmmaker or a painter could say the same, but because architecture has such capacity to it, not only from the built scale—the nature of the body and inhabitation—but also as a medium of communication—meaning, semiotics, messages—which, of course, has to do with branding. Our work isn't *about* branding. We don't brand things for people. We do our work and we let them use us in that way. It's still a project of resistance; it just happens to be a medium of exchange that works.

**BN:** As the discipline moves away from criticality and toward a more effect-driven architecture do you think branding will start playing a larger role in architecture? Or will architecture play a larger role in establishing brand?

**ND:** It depends on how you analyze the contemporary landscape and opportunities for architecture. The Bilbao museum created an effect





articulated via the economy—a downtrodden region suddenly becoming infused with tourists—because the building became a *destination* in the same way that cathedrals once were. Thomas Krens, who just stepped down as the director of the Guggenheim system, is completely aware that the Guggenheim was the fault-line project which was set up as a high art institution using the idea of exposing its name and its brand through architects like Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, and others. He was giving the architect a chance to produce an experiment, but the institution was clearly saying that signature has currency. And that acknowledgement has created a debate in architecture that's very polarizing: It's the development of something that's about personal expression—which, seen in a particularly negative light, is itself a narrow, artistic project—simply offered up for consumption. A museum director is taking your work and your research, putting it out for the public, and using it as an engine—but that's been going on in various guises throughout time, so we can't say that architecture has suddenly become just another telegenic medium that it looks good and is a good postcard idea. We *can* say that new techniques, new technology, and new ambitions in architectural forms are, at times, dramatizing that role, and dramatizing the idea of it being an important agenda for architecture.

BN: So you would agree that we're moving away from a critical architecture or that critical architecture doesn't lend itself as well to this branding model as a project for architecture?

We do our work and we let them use us in that way. It's still a project of resistance; it just happens to be a medium of exchange that works.

ND: The project of the avant-garde and the project of the critical narratives—using architecture as a device laden with politics or with forms of resistance—are the well-known models established in the twentieth century. We can speak

about generational systems. We can speak about the May '68 generation as having been imbued with a certain type of politics or as architects who live through the project of form on a relentless level. Which is to say that challenging preconceptions about form, function, and aesthetics makes architecture a medium whose central mission is to eclipse or cancel-out previous paradigms. I still think that's going on—it's just going on with a different agenda. Over the last seven or eight years the avant-garde project has transformed from a project of saying *no* to one of saying *yes*. Koolhaas's yen symbol / euro symbol / dollar symbol '¥€\$ world' is his Dutch way of talking about how our world operates on a deeply commercial level and how the only real issue is your position relative to that world. The black humor of it is this: to say *yes* you're accepting something that must be taboo, because isn't critical architecture about saying *no*? *No* to the ordinary. *No* to the banal. One could say that the critical project has now turned into the spectacle. The spectacle was long rejected as a *modus operandi* by people like the Situationists who saw it as the loss of real life in the face of a mediated life. I believe the *relationship* between being compliant with the world and not giving up the deep tenants of the avant-garde project *is* the experimental project. For the past seven or eight years, with an economy fueled by Asian and Middle Eastern wealth, with new tools and new technologies, with a lot of exploration in terms of structural systems and envelope systems—which we saw in Beijing—there's been an era of asking fewer questions, making more projects, producing more evidence from which to reverse engineer the questions. As an architect who is always quite curious about contemporary production, I have been ideologically supportive of this time. Some think that you should never give up the questions—that you should always worry about saying *no*. However if you always say *no*, where's the project? I think the *no* part of today's most ambitious work isn't as predicated on the architect's agenda as it used to be. Actually, I think clients have said *no* to provinciality, in essence doing some of the political



dirty work to make things happen. Meanwhile, architects have been given space to explore material worlds that have recently been genuinely exciting and quite beautiful. I should say there that I'm very open about using the term 'beautiful' because it's what I search for. I'm not searching for the grotesque or the alienating project; I'm not searching for the project which is unattractive. I'm not motivated by those paradigms of progress in the visual arts. At the same time I can't really say that I'm producing work which falls into an easily consumed or easily understood state.

**BN:** The beautiful *does* lend itself to branding, or what we traditionally think of in our market as branding.

**ND:** Branding is an abstract thing. A company needs to project some specific message or set of affinities. Most of the branding that's being done in architecture today is probably for institutions which previously were never



seen as *being* branded. The Tate Modern, the Guggenheim, the Seattle Public Library—these are projects of a type that architects usually treat as truly exalted. This is a different condition than the use of Modern architecture in the 1950s to project power at the Lever House and other headquarters of multinational corporations. There is no type of project or institution in today's world that is resistant to scrutiny through architecture or other cultural media. Is the blockbuster Picasso exhibition good or not? How are those TV ads working? I'm quite interested in how architecture joins other media in that exchange. I know a lot of other architects who are interested in it, but they're probably pretty hesitant to talk about it because anything that suggests that architecture is losing its position as a stalwart still touches a nerve. This is not to say that I don't personally draw lots of lines—there are lots of things I wouldn't be caught dead doing, I just don't know exactly what they are. [laughter]

(Actually, I was asked to be a judge on one of those reality design TV shows. I said, "You've got to be kidding me." That would be suicide.) Anyway, for me architecture and design just go on, but this distinction between the commercial and the institutional is blurring quite a bit. It's as if you were a filmmaker, and you've made a mainstream movie, but you've made it Stanley-Kubrick-style and you have final cut and don't let them alter the ending because their ending would to change it from an intense thing into a let's-wrap-it-up-and-make-everybody-feel-good thing. It's not simply a question of how to work a system politically—it's about having the intensity in your work overcome doubt that it can't be viable on any particular level. For the generation above me, that's already been proven. Soon the dust will settle

**Make it a risky project knowing confidently that it's going to change the paradigm in a positive way. The "red badge of courage" era is over.**

for my generation, and we'll have to analyze our own effort in terms of technology, new forms of decoration, new forms of tectonics, and issues of viability and sustainability, not only on a green level but on a cultural level. But right now we're still in a let's-see-what-we-can-do phase. I was told that you've got a good number of people coming to give lectures on technology and about how you build a project. Technique is content—*don't give us theory right now, we don't need too much of that. We need to figure out how we can make that wall.*

MP: Technical ingenuity seems to be a big part of your work: you spend a lot of time working out ways to make something pre-fab look like something custom. HL23 looks curved but the panels are actually straight. How did this focus evolve?

ND: I'm one of a number of architects working in a country that is not really interested in rewarding architects very early on, so you have to keep fighting and you have to keep pushing. Even though there's not a massive body of built work, I've always had really a strong instinct on the idea of construction and technique. I'm technically minded although I'm not hyper-rational.

MP: Does that have to do with your dad being an engineer?

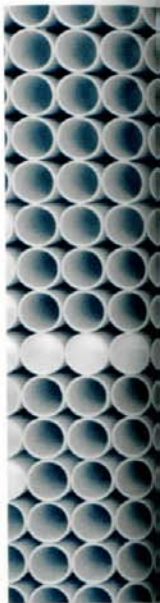
ND: It has to do with some autobiographical things, notable among them the time I spent in Paris watching the design and fabrication of very high-tech machinery. I was looking at a big machine that makes one part; it was designed in Germany and built in London. And even then I knew that it was a big world of intelligence going into something. I have a friend, a colleague now teaching at SCI-Arc, Andrew Zago—he's an astute (and sometimes very humorous) architect who says that there are people who are interested in structure and then there are people who are interested in *being* interested in structure. [laughter] They won't really make a commitment to it, but they'll think about

being interested. Watch out for that difference—it becomes very clear. In all humility, when I say that I'm interested in structure, I'm interested in the deep complexity of a building, whether it is drawn or whether we have put it up in the field. I think personal interest and commitment to learning and education and working not only creates the possibly for our projects to be well crafted (in so far as we can communicate intent and so forth), it allows us to deal with the simple fact that everybody has limits, everybody has budgets, there are no magic materials. How much effect can you get out of all of the things that come into play on a building? When you have a six week project and the structure comes in at week four and you're thinking, "I just don't want those columns there," but you haven't made enough intuitive provision for how to make a long span reaction to that—then the structure becomes this burden. I approach every project with the attitude that of all that goes into making a building, *nothing* is a burden and *everything* is an opportunity. It's the only way in which I can think about architecture because it's only then that you have the possibility of innovating. There's nothing that escapes intent in that way in our office. That's not a boastful point—I'm just talking about the way in which we can achieve what we want to achieve. It also has to do with the fact that there are time limitations with which everyone has to contend. I think we've benefited from having very good intuition about how to deal with that.

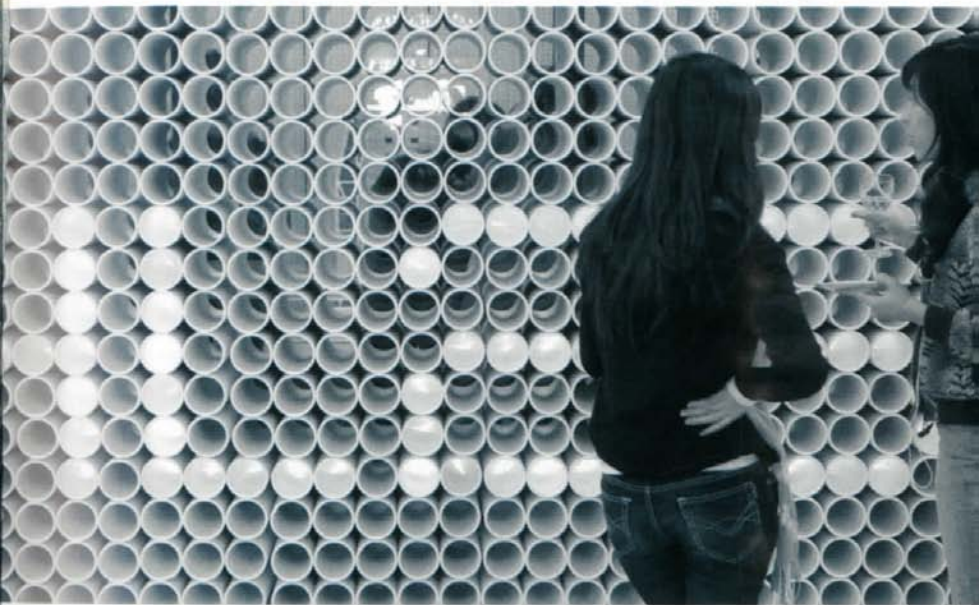
*JWW*: Let's talk about your recent *Fluoroscope* installation at SCI-Arc. In an article about that project titled "Solid State" in *Architecture* magazine you pose the question, "Can light be rendered dense enough to be recognized as a solid?" Was it a study in form, effect, or manufacturing?

By the time you've been working for twenty, twenty-five years, things just kind of continue. Your obsessions continue; you're resistant to fads and trends because your focus becomes sharper and sharper.

ND: I think that project, like all projects, had manifold micro-narratives to it, and in this case it *did* have to do with a limitation. The back story is this: SCI-Arc has this great exhibition program, in which they give you a room and they give you \$6000. You get to do whatever you want, but the intention has always been not to just make an installation of your work, but to construct something. I saw most project teams taking the \$6000 and asking, "What can we do with \$6000?" Well, they can get certain kinds of materials—two-by-fours, rope, things like that—and they can get those certain kinds of materials to do certain things. I had no interest in that, so I was staring at a budget that couldn't contend with what we were interested in doing, even though I didn't *know* what we wanted to do. [laughter] I was thinking that if \$6000 buys you X number of two-by-fours, I really wanted to have a machine-made two-by-four. We went to a lighting manufacturer with whom we have a good relationship and had them custom design four-foot florescent lighting fixtures, and we could, in theory, have as many as we wanted. We did a scheme and we asked for four hundred of them. So that became the "stick" or the working element. They're machine-made, and Bartco can custom manufacture almost anything because you simply give them the file, and they upload it to a CNC machine and they can cut these things out to order. Once we knew that we had an unlimited number of these lighting elements that weren't two-by-fours, that weren't inherently about only tectonics and structure, we asked ourselves how many of these could we pack into a particular space in an elegant way. And the conceptual query was then, *could you make it so bright, could you make it so dense that light was no longer a wave or no longer a particle?* That's a poetic question—it's obviously not a question to pose to physicists. [laughter] It became a project about effect. And then we added another parameter: how could we assemble these lights with the least amount of structure so that we could foreground the lights and nothing else? We designed it based on that. The particular geometries and profiles



come from the continuing research of geometry in the office. By the time you've been working for twenty, twenty-five years, things just kind of *continue*. Your obsessions continue; you're resistant to certain fads and trends because your focus becomes sharper and sharper. That was simply a convergence with contingencies with an opportunity to raise the standard, because it was the first project in this whole series that took material and technology as artifacts in themselves, (even though we assembled it with a group of students). It got leveraged into a world that was related more to forms of technology, both in terms of what it did as well as what it looked like. Andrew Zago did a beautiful, beautiful project, a kind of Labyrinthine project of stained two-by-fours, and I was just not interested in testing what we could do in that vein since it had been done so well. So the ambition was, quite frankly, to figure out a way to increase the budget. In the end, the thing probably cost about \$60000—ten times the budget—but it was all donated. I think we made \$1000 actually—I probably shouldn't have said that. [laughter]





**JWW:** You also collaborated with Bartco on a project that explores what you call “tech-transfer.” Can you talk about that collaboration and the technology transfer between engineering and architecture?

**ND:** ‘Tech-transfer’ is a term from at least as far back as the 1960s. Reyner Banham was one of the first to talk about ‘technology transfer’ in architecture. I’m thinking particularly of his writings on the work of Archigram and others who capitalized not only on the post-war rise of new building technology but on the excitement of the Space Race. Even though NASA was still building things in aluminum and steel and carbon fiber wasn’t around, there was a perception of brand-new materials because conventional technology was being applied to a different program. Typically speaking, technology transfer would be looking at, say, a double-hull construction made in a foundry in Hamburg and using that naval architecture to build forms that have rigidity, that have certain lightweight qualities. But that’s not so much technology transfer as transfer of design principles. Milling and carbon fiber are different: they are more applicable to product design because the expenses are high, but they appealed to people like Buckminster Fuller whose ambition was lightness. He always said architecture is too heavy. And that comes from somebody who innovated in terms of designing vehicles and tensegrity frames—somebody who didn’t care much about applying that to formal systems because tensegrity structures and the geodesic structures were primitive—they were simple platonic things. People like Fuller predicated their whole design world on being able to use the most innovative tools and the most innovative systems applied to certain types of design problems. That’s one of the tenets of twentieth-century innovation, including prefabrication of elements like that. I think architects today are simply trying to employ whatever means necessary, within an expanding market of possibilities. If a certain company that makes a widget finds the possibility of making something





for architects, then they'll make widgets *and* widgets for architects so that they can expand their marketplace. And that's a very slowly emerging market because, quite frankly, you still have to go back to conventional systems. Technology transfer has *imagistically* been out there for a long time when you think about it. Today routing and milling can generate an end product that looks like something that could previously only have been injection-molded. And that typically is only going on in the product world where you're making hundreds of thousands of injection-molded widgets.

**If you always say *no*, where's the project? It's deeply embedded in the physical artifact.**

**BN:** You engage the process in an unusual way. You go to Bartco, or some other manufacturer, learn their processes, work with their ideas, and find a role for an architect that may not typically be there.

## I never claimed to be a modernist—I use the concept of honesty when it helps me. “The New Intimacy”

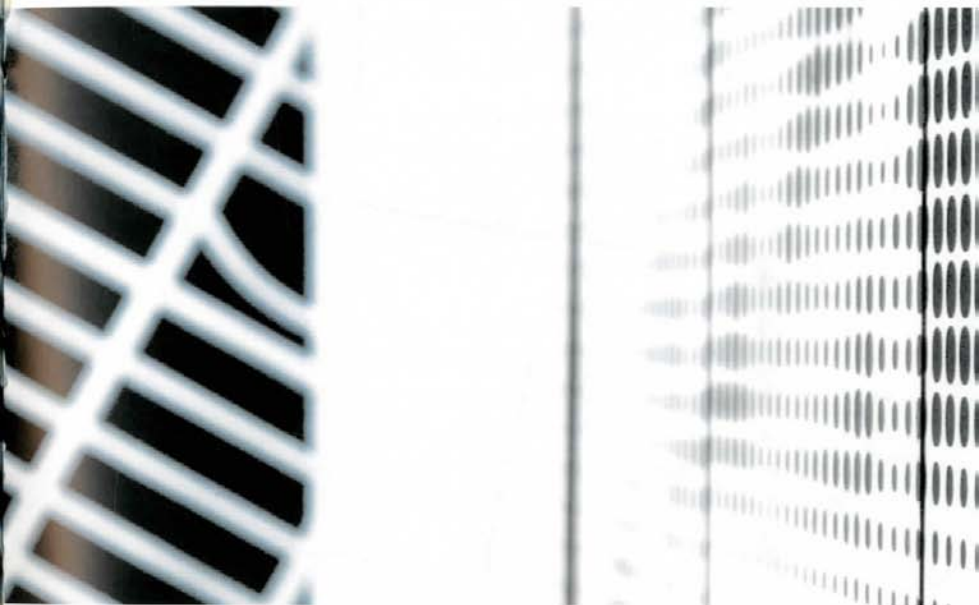
ND: The common reaction is from these manufacturers is, “Why haven’t we done that? That would be great!” It’s like we’re the client asking them to work higher and harder and take it on as a challenge. And when you find people who want to work with you and say, “I believe we can get our tools to do that, and I believe this would help us learn,” those are the moments when projects become successful. In all the projects that we’ve been able to build, there are situations like that: A window manufacturer had never bent their extrusion into a radius—even after being in business for fifty years, no one had ever asked them to do that. I was shocked. We had to do a lot tests—buckling of the extrusion, etc.—but they were *excited* to do that, all just because we asked. In many ways, that’s part of the precursor to the real ideas of technology transfer. I think the show at MoMA is trying to articulate that—that something could become quite useful, quite mainstream, quite viable. I guess that’s what the prefabricated thing is about, but I want more beauty.

BN: In that competition at MoMA the challenge was to produce a prefabricated house that is financially and commercially viable and at the same time “one of a kind.” Could you talk about how the relationships between technology, culture, and manufacturing actually ended up resonating in the form of the house?

ND: That project was based largely on my personal experience of having lived in Japan and having never looked at space or lifestyle the same since. Everybody there lives in less space—less footprint, less physical volume. It makes for a lot less *stuff* to deal with. I became incredibly connected and committed to that. Maybe a lot of you who grew up in middle-class suburbs had rooms in your houses that



were never used, never occupied—I always found that strange. My parents are antique and fine-art collectors, and there were a couple of rooms in the house that were not used very often. They were more gallery-like and my pragmatic view with using space had been supplanted with the idea of making a room in which you can simply enjoy what surrounds you—perhaps a space of luxury. My time in Japan, living in a space with four tatami mats and a little futon, was profound. That's the minimum footprint house—it's 15-feet square, and it's probably fit for one or two people. It's four stories including a roof deck with solar panels on the top, a bathroom and bedroom on the third floor, a kitchen and living space on the second floor, and an office on the ground floor. That nice little slice really is, more or less, the typical section of a house in Tokyo. And many, many lessons were learned there. In our world—especially in North America where cities move laterally because there's always cheaper land at the periphery and mobility allows it—I wouldn't even say it was about making a smaller footprint so that we



could have more free land; it was about being able to create an autonomous house with the possibility of producing a higher level of density. They could be closer together; they could share exterior spaces. Our project was about the verticality, it was about living in less volume, but at the same time it was also about knowing that we could make a 30-foot-tall prefabricated wall panel—a panel reaching the typical height-limit for a house in L.A. We could put eight of them together very simply in a tilt-up fashion and put the floors in. But we didn't want to just accept 'the box' of the Japanese model, partially because the footprint is actually 12½ feet at the base and the box is 15 feet, and partially because we were seeking an industrial design profile; it returns to a tapering at the top because I'm quite uninterested in the prefab world that forces you into a shipping container formal logic. Wall panels are wall panels; they're clean and efficient and so forth, but I'm committed to pushing that further at every level. We were one of the finalists for the MoMA competition but unfortunately they wrote back and said that our house didn't fit into their agenda. It might have been because of this insistence on a particular formal elegance, which could have been seen as a form of disposability, like 'you don't really need that.' And I argued, "I'm just getting rid of the volume, I'm shrinking more and more and more, and that's producing a particular visual effect." I thought there was a strong correlation there.

**I think about the act of reading a book. It's not about depth, it's not about illusion—it's just about black ink on a white surface. It's about profile.**

**MP:** You were seeking to utilize prefabrication without simply accepting the understood forms of prefabricated buildings.

**ND:** We wanted the house to look more like a piece of industrial design, something that would be shipped in a container, not like the container itself.

It should visually refer to handheld products more than architecture itself and in this I would say that its smoothness and bilateral symmetry do a lot of work towards that end.

**AL:** You talked a bit about modes of perception and in your work there is an interest in merging the surface flatness of graphics with the fullness of architectural depth. You've called this *formagraphics*. What are some of the ways this emerges in your practice and what perceptions or discoveries has it enabled?

**ND:** I'm interested in a variety of aesthetic experiences, and I would argue that deep down we are all enigmatic in many ways. One of my favorite painters is Robert Ryman, who is known for painting only white paintings since the early '60s, falling theoretically into some sort of Minimalist — Color Field world. Whenever I tell anybody he's one of my favorite painters, they don't get it. They say, "You're all about a lot of stuff going on—how does that translate?" I don't quite know, but I think that we have a wide range of aesthetic experiences and aesthetic reactions. My favorite films are really long and slow—like you're going to fall asleep unless you're really into it. A typical Hollywood film has 110 pages of dialogue and runs through about a page a minute. *2001: A Space Odyssey* has 45 pages of very minimal dialog, and it lasts two and a half hours! If you fall asleep it's because no one's saying anything, because how else can you fall asleep with that visual world in front of you? For me, those types of filmic experiences are really powerful. The opposite is a giant blockbuster where you're saying *wow* every second—CG everywhere and full retinal burn. A lot of my colleagues in L.A. prefer films like that because they're about effects. In that medium, *wow* holds less interest for me. But *wow* does have a strong effect on me in graphic design because graphic design, especially in the world of advertising, has to send messages at many levels, sometimes very deep levels. I think architecture can and should operate at a lot of different levels.



So the idea of the formagraphic is that I'm really looking for a legibility to the work. That invokes issues of reading, but it's not about stories or comments or messages. It's non-narrative.

**BN** Or one frame of a multi-frame narrative?

**ND** I do believe that architecture has the ability to be played-out in a relationship between a state of stillness and repose and a state of action and movement. If you find yourself walking around a building that you like, you pause. You look at it from a particular point of view. It's like you're taking a still photograph. You look at it, and you've lined up a particular perspective of the world. We all do it. Then you get into that world of moving through



the project and understanding things at a particular rate, a particular speed and also a form of duration. The moment that you're standing back and looking at a building, you essentially stop time. Your mind might be taking in something, but visually you're in a moment of repose, and I want to put you in a moment

of repose not because you've stopped moving, but because the building itself seems to be in a moment of repose. You'll see projects that display the sectional cut—not only at the perimeter of the building, but within the interior of a building—in a variety of ways that most typically would be seen only in a drawing of a section. Unlike a rendering or a photograph, the section is not about a point of view. It's not an historical model of the illusionistic form of the point of view. You're outside it, so now you can scan it.

I approach every project with the attitude that of all that goes into making a building, *nothing* is a burden and *everything* is an opportunity. It's only then that you have the possibility of innovating.



You only inhabit a section insofar as you project yourself into it. The tyranny of the perspective is that you're already in it; it's *your* eye that dominates. During my education in the '70s and '80s, when you actually had to draw each perspective by hand, I found myself drawing fewer perspectives and drawing more sections so that I could withdraw from the weight and the tyranny of the point of view. I think that's come through in built form. I also think about the page of a book. It's not a very deep space. There's typography on the page. It's black ink on a white surface. It's not about depth, it's not about illusion, it's just about the profile of all of that stuff on the page, and I'm deeply interested in that idea of an optical figure-ground, and things that are quick as well as allow an unfolding degree of complexity. That's one of the unique aspects of the work. We use these axes—both the vertical and the planometric—to tell stories about chaos or about flexural conditions that I believe the world is challenging us to represent in some way. I want to make an architecture that has codes which make those things relevant. I'm just really interested in getting to the issues of perception.

SK: Could you expand on your interest in semiotics?

ND: Architecture, throughout history, has included the installation of rhetoric into the building—decoration, sculpture, narratives being played out. When you see a frieze on a Greek temple, that's media. Those narratives are not only aesthetic forms, they are cultural forms and in that sense less about meaning. They were just surfaces on which to inscribe things. Various epochs and eras of architecture alternatively embraced and rejected forms of communication and expression. We know about the modernist rejection of that—the project of the decorative as a vulgar and corrupt thing—and the idea that architecture should be more prosaic, more straightforward, more disciplined. Architecture that is now experimenting with indescribable forms of communication like effect is a return to the possibility of architecture becoming communicative,



except there are no specific messages. It's a new post-abstract world. Even if you are obsessed with nature and reading your Ernst Haeckel book every night, you're not necessarily saying, like Frank Lloyd Wright or Bruce Goff did, that architecture should be organic. Rather architecture should be changed, it should be new, it should be different. I think there's a semiotic discourse going on that hasn't been well identified because formal regimes are being invoked. It's a territory of new opportunity. I've always appreciated Venturi's claim that the importance of form comes not from the aridity of abstraction but from the richness of rhetoric. Rhetoric and semiotics are at the heart of *Learning from Las Vegas*, but Venturi used only forms culled from the stockpile of history. I believe Venturi's project is still going on—except no one knows exactly where the stockpile of stuff is to be drawn from. Parametric design, abstract forms of nature, and general

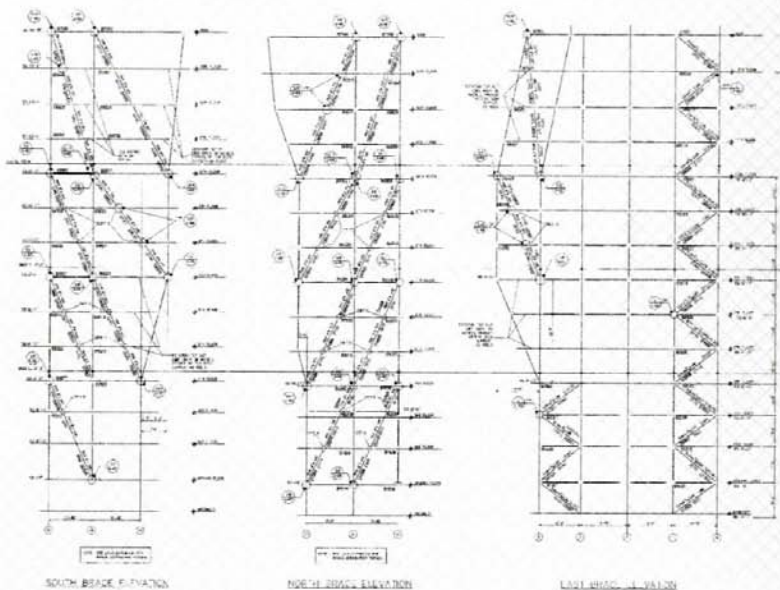
contemporary concepts like fluidity, each have a formal regime but not one that has been realized in history through architecture, so we can't cull from history. The project has been converted into an indescribable set of references, conditions, and codes, but it still is the Venturian project, which is fundamentally one about communicating something. I don't think our culture can—at this point in time—figure out how to articulate that question. In my lecture tonight I'll try to do a bit of a semiotic analysis of the work in a shorthand way to talk about issues of sign form and how they relate to forms of abstraction like the logo. It has always been, as long as I've talked about it, a fairly provocative conversation. I contend that it is deeply embedded in everything that we do.

**NA:** How does this relate to your mindset of looking for opportunities rather than being burdened by specific parameters? To what extent do the opportunities come from the client and to what extent do they come from outside sources or internally from the firm?

**ND:** I would say I'm the most assertively *uncommercial* architect working in the commercial world. It loops back to the beginning of the interview. We say *no* to a number of projects for a variety of reasons because ultimately, we know it's not going to line up and make the kind of project we want. I can do that because I don't work to keep my office at a certain size. If somebody says, "Do you want to have a hundred people?" I'll say, "If a hundred people supports the best projects, then it will be a hundred people. If it's five, it's five." It's definitely not a commercial ambition and the editing of these things happens in the very initial phases of a conversation with a client. You can know quickly if somebody has the real commitment it takes to make a project with you in a collaborative way. At this point I have no qualms about sitting down with somebody and having a very frank conversation about what they really want—whether they understand the context of what we do and how we can actually help them. More often than I'd like to admit, at the

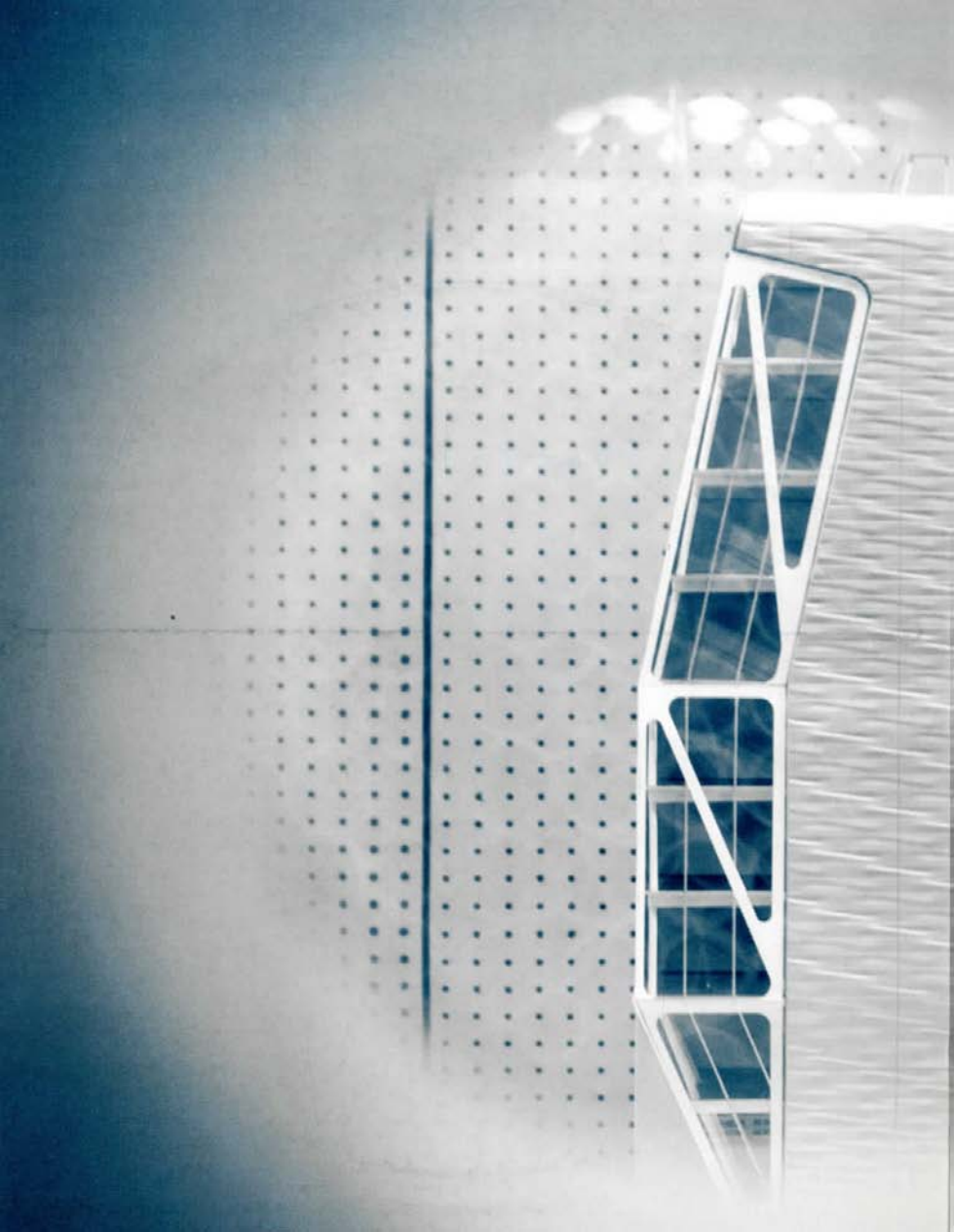
end of the conversation I have to say, "We're not the right architects for you. You should hire architect X. Architect X does what you want really well." It's a means of preserving sanity and embracing the axiom that life is too short to waste on stuff you don't want to do. And from a business point of view, we know that the more strictly we limit our work to that which has an exceptional level of intensity, the more those other needles in the haystack will somehow find their way to us through all that hay. That's the real marketing side of it, and it all comes through that level of connection to the work. Regardless of whether or not we have to do it, a building for sale in New York or a private house, everybody has to come at it from understanding the value of what we want to do. We just have to have mutual consent that while solving all the problems and getting the

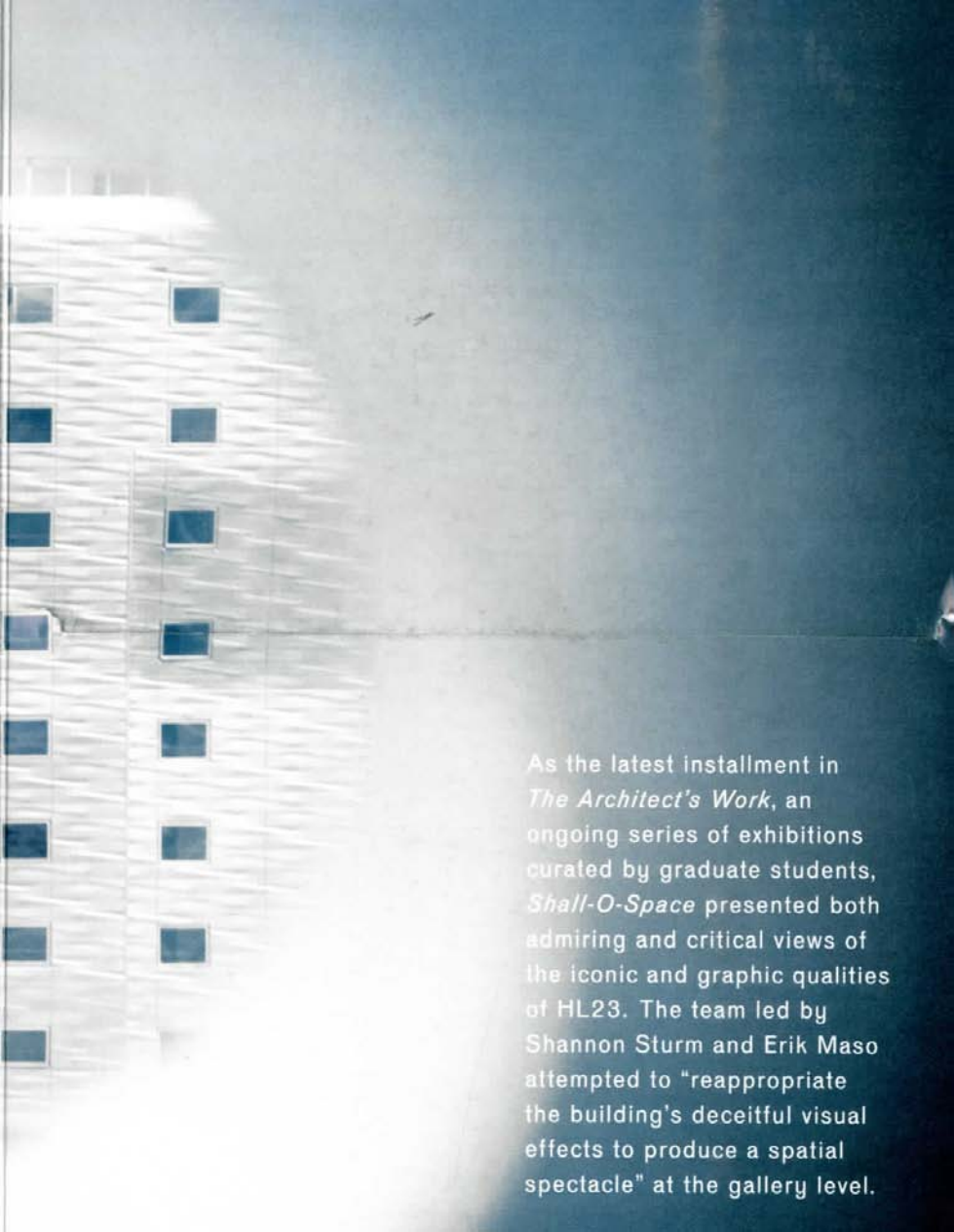
Adding something to the conversation of architecture isn't about bearing the burden of originality. It's just adding something to the conversation. "The New Intimacy"



wastebaskets in the right place and making sure that the plumbing works, we have the opportunity to explore something. A good example is the MUFG series. I have to say I was initially quite unsure what the outcome of our efforts would be. Their customers were between the ages of 60 and 90. We were thinking, "My God! Are elderly people really going to appreciate this?" The team of clients working for the bank were closer to my age, and they had an affinity for the contemporary world. But of course everybody experiences the contemporary world, and even though there's an antique world, and a personal world, and a world of days gone by, they believed that design could be a thing that spanned generations, and that it could be successful. That client bore a lot of risk even though they could have just stopped after the first project and said, "Oh well, that was five million dollars down the drain." But they were willing to risk that, and when every one of these branch designs increased their business by 100% they said, "Can you design another one? Can you just keep going with that?" Some people might look cynically at our attitude toward working with like-minded clients like some sort of luxury. But it's a Darwinian world and you make what you want out of an office and the main thing is to be excited and happy about whatever opportunities arise. That sounds like a platitude for sure, but it's simply the way I am operating. You want to do only your best work.







As the latest installment in *The Architect's Work*, an ongoing series of exhibitions curated by graduate students, *Shall-O-Space* presented both admiring and critical views of the iconic and graphic qualities of HL23. The team led by Shannon Sturm and Erik Maso attempted to "reappropriate the building's deceitful visual effects to produce a spatial spectacle" at the gallery level.