Young Architects 6

if...then

Architectural Speculations

Foreword . . . Stan Allen
Introduction . . . Anne Rieselbach

Fernando Romero . . . LCM
Tom Wiscombe . . . EMERGENT
Anthony Piermarini and Hansy Better Barraza . . . Studio Luz
Keith Mitnick, Mireille Roddier, Stewart Hicks . . . Mitnick Roddier Hicks
Gail Peter Borden . . . Borden Partnership
Tobias Lundquist . . . Miloby Ideasystem

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Executive Director, The Architectural League of New York

If...Then is the Architectural League's twenty-third Young Architects Forum, an annual competition, exhibition, and publication of work by architects ten years or less out of undergraduate or graduate school. Inclusive in intent, format, and content, the competition draws entrants from across North America. Winners are selected for outstanding work, built or unbuilt, as well as for clarity of intent as expressed in their response to the exhibition theme.

Each year since the program's inception, the theme has been shaped by the League's Young Architects Committee, comprised of past winners. The committee also selects leading members of the design community to serve alongside them on the competition jury. The League would like to thank 2003–04 Young Architects committee members Stella Betts, Makram el-Kadi, and Eric Liftin for their time and expertise.

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Foreword

Stan Allen

Architect; Dean of the School of Architecture, Princeton University

The title of this year's Young Architects competition derives from the language of the computer program. "If...then" is the contingent phrase built into the architecture of programming. With its origins in mathematical reasoning, it is the logical gate that indicates distinct pathways through the intricate structure of the computer algorithm. As such, it signals that architecture is entering a new phase in its complex relationship to digital technology.

The definitive history of architecture's relationship to the computer has yet to be written, but it would necessarily start with technology transferred from the military and engineering disciplines in the immediate postwar period. In recent decades, as the computer's impact has shifted from the purely technical, it is possible to discern three distinct phases in architecture's ongoing efforts to come to terms with what is still an evolving technology. In the first stage, under the influence of cyberpunk and deconstruction, the engagement with digital technology was primarily metaphorical. As access to the Internet expanded in the 1980s, many architects were fascinated by the potential of networked interconnectivity and fluid personal identity promised by this emergent technology. The problem was that in reality available computer technologies were slow and expensive. Architects tried to capture some of this new sensibility through experimental projects and installations, sometimes incorporating images of new media, but these projects were for the most part realized by conventional means. It was not until the mid-1990s that new modeling software (developed in some instances for digital animation by the film industry) began to be widely available and, more importantly, taught in schools of architecture. This represents the second phase, in which the effect of digital technology is primarily formal. An interest in continuous surfaces and formal

complexity characterizes the work produced in this stage. A new virtuosity emerged as architects excitedly explored the formal potential of these rapidly developing modeling tools. As visually compelling as this work could be, it was often criticized for its limited engagement with the realities of construction and for a sometimes naive relationship to actual architectural programs.

I'd like to think that we are now entering a third, more mature phase in our relationship to digital technology. Thanks in part to a new generation of architects who have been educated entirely within the digital regime, and on the other hand to the first generation of digitally trained architects who have continued to evolve their thinking, the computer is beginning to have a practical impact, beyond the formal or the metaphorical. We are now entering a stage in which digital technology is understood in terms of its strategic and operational potential. In part this is generational, and in part it is a product of the advancement of the technologies themselves. In both of the first two stages, the computer retained something of a cultlike status. It divided architecture into believers and non-believers, a world of high priests, disciples, and enthusiastic converts. Today, all that has changed. Digital technology has become democratized. Hardware and software are cheap, widely available, and user-friendly. A new generation that has grown up with digital technology has created an enormous reservoir of expertise.

None of the architects selected for the competition specifically identify themselves as "digital" architects; for this generation, the computer is not a new technology to be either celebrated or deconstructed—it is simply a fact of life. They have absorbed its logic into their own practices and habits of thought. Hence it is entirely appropriate that the work of this diverse group is assembled under the sign of the computer algorithm.

"If...then" suggests that the complexities of contemporary architectural practice cannot be effectively met either by the self-assured certainties of modernism (which in many cases turned out to be wrong-headed), or by the ironies of postmodernism (which in many cases turned out to be trivial). In a move that has little to do with the literal incorporation of digital technologies, but everything to do with a new way of thinking made possible by the penetration of networked technologies into all aspects of our everyday life, these architects suggest that what we need today are robust and flexible architectural propositions: statements that are contingent rather than definitive; propositions

that recognize uncertainty and unpredictability, and that presuppose an architecture that is interactive, responsive, and adaptable.

Some of these architects are learning from the flexible algorithms of the computer and developing forms of practice that are more agile and responsive. In this case, "if...then" implies new strategies of implementation that go beyond architecture's traditional architect/client/builder relationships to position architectural practice more strategically and proactively. Building program is seen through a similar lens. Use is not stated definitively; rather, architecture is seen as an adaptive scaffold that can evolve over time, open to the contingencies of contemporary life and capable of sponsoring a variety of activities. Other architects engage the very real possibilities of digital fabrication that have emerged as a productive new design territory. In this case, the computer's effect has been extended from visualization to fabrication, with a direct impact on the making of buildings. What we could say about all of these young architects is that for them, the most important question today is not new forms, but new forms of practice.

In the end, the work has been chosen (thankfully) for quality and not for conformance to the stated theme. However, in this instance the theme captures a pervasive mindset among younger architects, and perhaps signals a larger paradigm shift. That a collection of the best work by young architects can be logically assembled under the contingent phrase "If...then" suggests that one of architecture's most urgent tasks today is to face uncertainty not with vague propositions or old models of flexibility, but with projects that are architecturally specific and programmatically indeterminate. This is evident in the formal and operational virtuosity of Tom Wiscombe (who signals his interest in information technology directly through the name of his studio, EMERGENT), as well as in the inventive programmatic strategies of Gail Peter Borden and Miloby Ideasystem. Fernando Romero, who was steeped in operational strategy at OMA, proposes to reinvent his architectural practice from the ground up. Mitnick Roddier Hicks finds overlooked potential in marginal urban sites. Studio Luz engages the new possibilities of digital fabrication, not as an end in itself but rather as "a dynamic web of alliances and oppositions." Each of these practices offers an individual take on the speculative proposition "if...then"; collectively, they sketch out a future in which new forms of architectural practice might emerge.