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Evan Douglis **Autogenic Structures**

Taylor & Francis

Autogenic Succession
David Ruy

at times, utterly fabricated, capacities as *raw* because they are acts of generosity that await one's applications. Focus in on any of the individual experiments, and one will encounter a savvy intellect enumerating tactical responses to a panoply of contemporary topics. Though the individual moments abound with sharp polemics, the general arc of the investigation cannot be assigned to a single thesis or be relegated to a specific segment of a topical discourse.

These experiments are not exclusively about formal systems, nor are they exclusively about the architectural signifier. Problems of sensation are studied side by side with problems of instrumentality. Both efficacious and excessive in its churning of design methodologies, the body of work defies easy categorization. Yet despite the alluring indeterminacy of its final intentions, the physical evidence displays a remarkable consistency that can only be assumed to be artifacts of an absolute trajectory, and it remains to be seen where this line of flight will land.

Though these experiments have been conducted within the confines of academic institutions, the results cannot be attributed to a mere pedagogy for training competent professionals. The stakes are much higher, the gamble more risky. The kaleidoscopic interests and the promiscuous techniques service transformative propositions that target the very source of the architect's commitment (a potlatch ritual for his students). At all moments testing the limits of architectural powers, a most remarkable ethic exudes from the work—an ethic of succession, where every stale assumption restraining the possibilities of life must be overcome. The massive expenditures of energy evident everywhere in this book cut a path through the overgrown brush of dreary agendas to reveal a glimpse of the incandescence that compels us towards what we are not. As John Hejduk did before him, Evan Douglis forges a precious territory in architectural education where culture is constantly renewed under the camouflage of architecture's prosaic interests.

An up-close encounter with the spectacular models in this book confirms the suspicion that this work touches some vital desires in contemporary culture. The proof is in the excitement—the stirring that's not entirely in the eyes, the inclination for unfound joys, and the pull towards the stranger possibilities at the horizon of human practices. Though masked in the guise of rarified experiments, the apparent and not-so-apparent extensions into design practice reveal calculated challenges to the status quo, but also a most beautiful faith in architecture. Incendiary manipulations of the arcane formal logics of architecture breathe new life into tectonic possibilities. Demonic repetitions, synthetic saturations of color and form, and, most of all, the astonishing suppleness of modular development that collapses what seems now to be an artificial separation of structure from ornament, contribute to an expression that is as remarkable for its provocations as it is
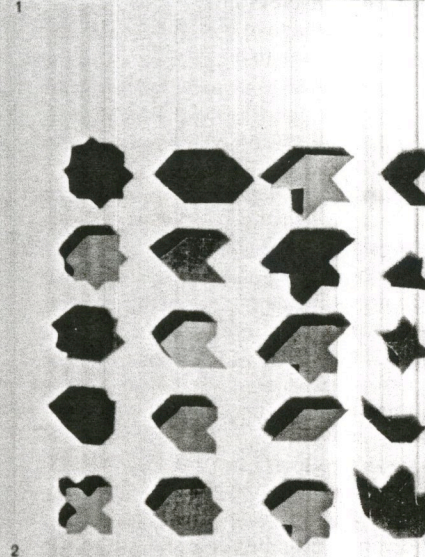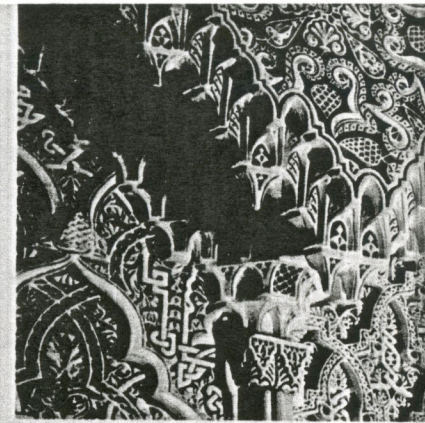
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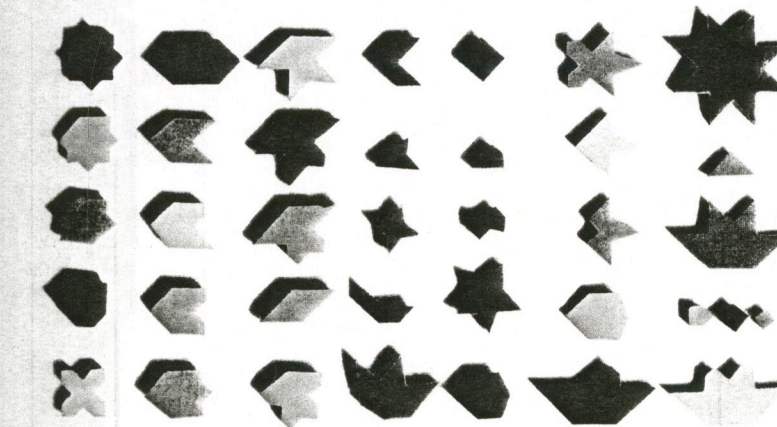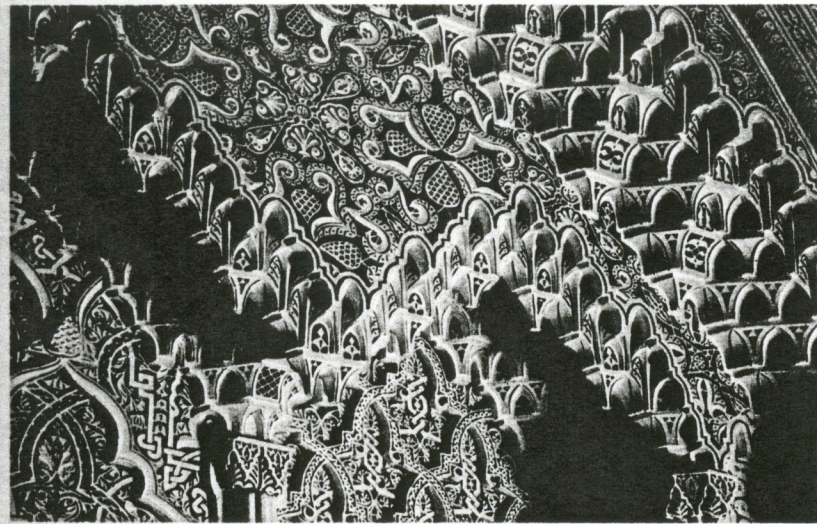to be explored i
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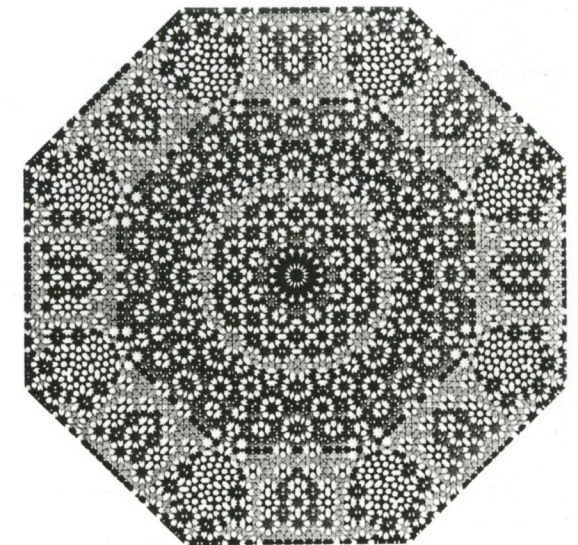y, and it remains to be seen where this

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for its unfettered optimism in the persistent power of architecture as a vessel of human expressions. There are many issues to be explored in the particular relevance of this ongoing architectural experiment for contemporary practice. Some are obvious. Some are not.

Excessive Parameters, Multiplicitous Organizations

To begin, let's look at one of the more obvious features of the work—repetition. A phenomenology of multiplication seems

responses in the viewer: they seek to draw out the vague impersonal signifiers latent in unformed matter.

Contrary to the minimizations of form inherent in the doctrines of efficiency, the results are excessive and present themselves as spectacular blooms of architectural form. The judgments and evaluations here are tethered to qualities, not quantities. Though systems of measure are obviously exploited to the fullest, the targeted outcomes are nothing that can be easily measured, nothing that can have a number attached. The

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intensification of objective formal operations. At some moment in all the projects, rational operations magically invert to become an irrational product of a sensibility attuned to excess.

This inversion is deliberate, strategic, and voices the unspoken perspicacity of what becomes an alternative vision for the parametric or associative modeling idea. Just as we see in the operation of the many recent digital software packages, the dependencies in the geometry follow rigid constraints, and the change orders ripple through the models as parameters change—except that it's faster here. For the CPU cycles are not those of the latest silicon clocks, but those cycles coming from the absolute capacity of matter itself. The updates are in real time—not the simulated, spatialized time of clocks (which always run a little bit behind), but the real time of matter and experience. This is as real as time gets.

The re-programming of materials into an associative model problematizes the software-hardware idea. What was thought to be an exclusively digital problem of how to embed a relational database within a digital description of form becomes a more general problem of embedding virtual conditions in material systems. In these models, the maker uploads their abstract model into the hardware of the materials at hand.

As radical as this project may seem, architecture's engagement with the material world remains today at a crossroads, and we are sorely in need of some new ideas. Design culture continues to search for generative models in the trivial manifestations of digital models; inspired by these experiments, we observe that the only thing that is truly generative is life itself, and we are constantly recoding its instructions. Perhaps the start of a new approach is the notion that in matter and experience, there is always more than what the intellect expects—there is always something in excess of the formal description. The ability of these models to cultivate the excess of material experience is truly striking.

This phenomenology of multiplication and its uncanny expansion of the associative modeling idea broaches organizational possibilities at the limits of what can be tolerated by Western sensibilities. The intense desires for hierarchy and simple figuration, the interpretive habits that prefer one-to-one correspondences between form and narrative, and the aspirations for the embodiment of the ideal in the actual are each conditions of an inherited sensibility that has had a tendency to denigrate and demote multiplicitous organizations. Take this well known case, for example: *For he said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit. And he asked*

devils besought him, saying, Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them. And forthwith Jesus gave them leave. And the unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea, (they were about two thousand;) and were choked in the sea.[1] This passage from Mark is certainly one of the most disturbing passages in the New Testament. Among its many messages and interpretations, it is most simply a story about singularity dominating multiplicity. Beyond this edgeless observation, it is fascinating to observe just how powerful the affects are in the imagery: the multiplicity that speaks with a single voice *(My name is Legion: for we are many.)* makes the skin crawl. The very same story is reprised in more recent science fiction horror stories *(We are the Borg...)* and continues to exploit an innate recoil we have when encountering the hive mind.

The still tenuous acceptance and exploitation of multiplicity in contemporary practice is just one of many issues considered by the experiments in this book. *A dispassionate consideration of the powers of multiplicity,*[2] of the merits of vague relationships between form and narrative, and of the efficacy of non-hierarchical collapses of figures and fields are the hallmarks of the postmodern age. It is this difficult prolonged stare into what was once considered a diabolical world of possibilities that opens up new regimes of expression and, without a doubt, new manifestations of architecture. As we acquire ever more powerful sensitivities to the computational infrastructure of material experience, these experiments delay the hysterical implementations of digital methodologies, and assert the continuing relevance of architectural thought and its material practices as we move towards new frontiers.

Supersaturation: Form and Color

The second prominent feature of the work is its state of supersaturation. Like a liquid solution that can hardly accept another molecule of dissolved matter, the spatial envelopes of these models can hardly accept another modulation of form or any intensification of its hue. The specific architectural innovations of this feature remain to be discussed, but it is useful to pause on how this maximum concentration of formal modulation and color intensity exploits some of the recent tropes in digital design.

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emerged in the mid 1990s as a standard
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studios carefully assessed the conceptual implications of
this new geometry. The fluidity and suppleness of a surface
deformation became a general conceptual problem with
correlations far beyond the mere technical study of a software
package. The study of deformations became as much about
the liquidity of social and cultural forms as it was about
the geometric entities appearing on the computer screen. The
comprehension of form in NURBS geometry through the
convolutions and involutions of a UV grid became the model
for a critique of the gridded superpositions that were emerging
as the instrumentalities of a world going ever more virtual
in its systems of control. As digital technique transitioned
from a static world governed by solid logics in an absolute XYZ
coordinate system to that of a temporal world governed by
surface logics in a relative UV coordinate system, the studios
found a fertile conceptual structure for exploring transgres-
sive, hybridizing scenarios of material production.

It was right at the onset of the curvilinear movement that we
saw the first neoprene models at the Columbia GSAPP
End-of-Year Exhibit. It was a revelation. The formal logics of
advanced digital techniques had unexpectedly found a home in
the manipulations of a rubber sheet. Eminently digital in
character, the models looked like they had just jumped off the
computer screen. The first models were enigmatic and power-
ful. They exceeded the intricacy possible in the digital hard-
ware of the time (CPUs were still relatively slow, and digital
fabrication was an unknown territory), and it was initially a
mystery as to how they were manufactured. Algorithms were
run on the hardware of the human being and compiled through
the obsessively trained fingers of the maker. These models still
stand as remarkable emblems of digital design even though an
actual computer, most of the time, never entered the workflow.

In these models, the excessive intricacy of the surface
modulations results from the incorporation of recursion. The
overall surface of the model is made up of smaller surfaces.
Though it can be straightforwardly described as an associative
population of a component on a surface, in the context
of these studios, these surfaces are worlds within worlds; and
if fingers could be infinitely small, and the durations of the
studios infinitely long, the recursions would never end. In this
esoteric understanding of the project, the desire to supersatu-
rate the envelope is tantamount to a desire to suffuse that small
world with infinite possibilities.

that is tentative because the coloration of these models is
just the opening move of what will probably be a very long
chess match.

A consideration of the effect of digital technique on architec-
tural color is a topic that is still relatively new. The techniques
of applying color to a design changed dramatically when
digital rendering techniques entered the workflow. The digital
model in its undressed wire-frame state shows itself as noth-
ing more than an abstract scaffold that has to be rendered to
expose its possible affects. Almost an accident of software
design, under the hood of rendering engines is an oftentimes
bizarre framework of parameters that disembodies colors and
textures—affects without bodies waiting to be dropped onto
pure geometry. The craft of digitally rendering a geometry
becomes an odd mapping problem where these disembodied
shaders have to be mathematically coordinated. Even though
the skillful renderer can still maintain the ability to locate
painterly sensibilities in this numerical process, it remains
a strange process of working where form is absolutely
segregated from its affects.

When a single shader is dropped onto the entire project, it is
the culmination of a monochromatic prejudice in architecture.
These models display the extreme saturations of color that
are so emblematic of architectural representation after the
computer. Dropping that shader onto actual matter begins the
speculation about how the problem of architectural color might
go through a transformation in the digital age. Rather than
hopelessly chasing the simulation of the real on the computer
screen, it seems far more interesting to see to what degree
our design interventions on the real can be influenced by the
peculiar aesthetic conditions of digital production.

The Dissolution of Structure and Ornament

Maybe the most interesting progression in the projects
presented here concerns the gradual disappearance of the
distinction between structure and ornament. In the early
models, one sees crude framing elements that serve as rigid
structures for delicate ornamentations. With each subsequent
project, these framing elements get thinner and more figural
until, at last, they disappear altogether. As the structures
fade, the delicate ornamentations gain more capacity in their
ability to form larger consistencies—they don't merely repeat
themselves. In the final projects of this collection, these
ornamentations extend themselves to a radical degree—
to the point that they become modules of a floral space-frame;
or tendrils connecting floors to ceilings; or the irregular

ornament distinction.

Because we inherit this sharp distinction through the potency of our recent Modernist past, we often lose sight of just how recent this distinction is. Though ornament and structure have been recognized as important architectural features since the early days of architectural history, the difference between the two was never fully realized as a meaningful difference until the late nineteenth century. As Anne-Marie Sankovitch insightfully points out in her discussion concerning the Gothic cathedral St. Eustache:

Structure is the recessive, unrecuperable, unstable presence that finally we cannot work back to; ornament becomes all that we can clearly see, but we can never remove it, see past it, without destroying the structure, which is essential. They are both there but do not coexist in the simple oppositional way that so many modern texts would have us believe. [3]

In design culture today, aware of the many pitfalls of a thinly-applied decoration, architects question the triviality of ornamentation in favor of more deeply embedded expressions. If ornamentation is to fully return from its banishment, it will only do so as an internally generated feature essential to the expression of the whole. More bluntly, it needs to be autogenic. Further, recent discourse requires a complete separation of the word *decoration* from the word *ornament:* one is understood as externally applied and extrinsic, while the other is understood as constitutive and intrinsic. Nominations of decoration are often associated with a cynical interest in kitsch, whereas ornamentation is usually a preliminary term in the pursuit of unadulterated architectural expression.

Addressing some of these long-standing difficulties concerning architectural ornamentation, two types of argumentation have recently surfaced. One asserts the intangible function of ornamentation as a delivery mechanism for affects, though what that exactly entails is never clearly articulated. Nonetheless, the return of (seemingly, strangely) Art Nouveau ambitions to conjoin mood and material is fascinating. [4] To quote Klaus-Jürgen Sembach in his discussion concerning the ambitions of Art Nouveau architects, *They represented a bold attempt to make economic necessity into an aesthetic experience, or, to put it rather differently, to make the purposeful pleasurable.* [5] Coming at this problem from another area

of architectural discourse, we also see arguments, made by vigorous evangelists of digital technology, that architecture's economy of means have undergone radical change, refuting, at long last, Loos' criminal accusations. [6]

Though all of this clears the path for ornamentation to return, these types of arguments tend to reinforce polarities in the theoretical distinctions. In both cases, the categories of architectural judgment are never in question. The concern is more weighted towards vindicating the trivial or ephemeral as a cultural problem on one hand, and as a economic problem on the other. To reiterate, the most interesting opportunities looming on the horizon appear to lie more in a radical dissolution and reformulation of some of these key distinctions. The projects on display here in Evan Douglis' studios point in this direction, and we'll have to see if some of these young architects can seize the opportunities.

To leave behind hackneyed *form versus function* debates, the nascent intuition of a deeply embedded architectural ornamentation needs to fully articulate itself. This is anything but trivial. We want to see a deep ornamentation—something beyond the superficial applications of incidental decor. But whether or not we're prepared to accept the consequences of such a transformation remains to be seen. Despite the innumerable ways in which recent architecture has seasoned the distilled abstractions of Modernism with complex forms and thorny narratives, ornamentation, the most obvious channel of excess, continues to be a problematic topic.

Modern design does not need ornament! [7] Thanks to the brief and tragic life of PoMo, we hear statements like this less often these days, but any quick survey of the contemporary scene shows that stories of modernism's demise have been greatly exaggerated. However, it is a modernism that has endured the postmodern critique and submitted to an uncomfortable process of beautification. We find a modernism reluctant to proclaim overly ambitious utopian futures, respectful of cultural perspectives, mindful of hopelessly insoluble cultural differences, but, most of all, willing to be adorned with a properly contemporary ornamentation. Some would argue that it is a modernism that has become more comfortable with the ornamentation that was always there [for example, Mies' infamous, superfluous I-beams adorning the curtain wall of the Seagram Building [8]]. In this regard, the new and improved modernism has made some concessions to the end users of architecture. And it is this market-driven decoration of architecture that becomes a new battlefield for the postmodern critique.

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Notwithstanding some early flirtations with raising the dead
of architectural history, ornamentation is generally condemned
by the postmodern theorists as symptomatic of surrender
to a sinister consumer society. The embellishment of tectonics
is viewed as cynical and in the service of marketing agendas,
reinforcing economic and social stratifications. Though
architects are less apprehensive these days of the pitfalls of
ornament, like an impurity in rarefied space, there is still a good
deal of debate about acceptable levels. Reluctant to sanction
material expenditures on product with uncertain *use*
values, contemporary practices tentatively couch the display of
ornament in the understanding that the excess is nonetheless
functioning on some vague cultural level.

Despite the intensity of these internal debates, for the public
at large, the absence of ornament has always been a bit per-
plexing, and the discourse itself strangely esoteric. The popular
adoration of historical architecture, beyond nostalgia, seems
to be largely born out of an innate desire for intricacy, richness,
and excess in material expression. As mentioned at the start
of this essay, the studio's models touch these desires.
Whether or not design culture will content itself with a superfi-
cial delivery of mechanisms to temporarily placate these
cravings or seek deeper expressions will rest on the uncom-
promised maturation of these fragile experiments.

Conclusion: Autogenic Versus Allogenic Succession

Armed to the teeth with formal techniques and visual
acuities, the unwavering faith cultivated by Evan Douglis has
quietly seeded our design culture with a small army of
designers attuned to the possibilities of a practice teetering
on the precipice of sublime novelties.

A prolific listing of individual lines of architectural thought,
this book enumerates a truly original architectural program
that compiles a seductive and ambiguous code. To take
a reference from ecological thought, we can observe that
change is brought to an environment either through allogenic
succession where foreign influence changes the conditions
of the territory, or through autogenic succession where
changes are brought through internal reconfigurations.
Though what we see built can change—*will* change—both by
forms of succession, it is heartening to believe that novelties
will be born out of architecture's interior. Like a ground
that slowly, without notice, becomes more fertile, giving rise
to a new species, it is the hope that the slow, determined
program of investigation displayed in these studios will
reestablish the milieu within which we operate, and give rise
to new architectures.

Notes:
1 5. Mark 5:8-13.
2 See Greg Lynn, *Multiplicitous
   and Inorganic Bodies,
   Assemblage* 19 (December 1992):
   32-49.
3 Anne-Marie Sankovitch,
   *Structure/Ornament and the
   Modern Figuration of
   Architecture, The Art Bulletin* 80,
   No. 4 (December 1998):
   687-717.
4 James Grady, *Nature and the Art
   Nouveau The Art Bulletin* 37,
   No. 3 (September 1955):
   187-192.
5 Klaus-Jürgen Sembach, *Art
   Nouveau* (Köln: Taschen, 2007),
   22.
6 It is often overlooked that Loos'
   argument in *Ornament and
   Crime* centered around the
   question of labor. Ornament
   needlessly wastes the labor of
   the worker, and thus it was
   crime. It is important to
   distinguish this from other
   banishments of ornament that
   aestheticize functionalism and
   mechanization. See Miriam
   Gusevich, *Decoration and
   Decorum, Adolf Loos's Critique of
   Kitsch, New German Critique* 43
   (Winter 1988): 97-123.
7 The quote is the title of a paper
   by Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. in
   response to an article by
   G. Haydn Huntley entitled *In
   Defense of Ornament.* One can
   find evidence of the debate
   about the problem of ornament
   throughout the history of
   modern architecture. The call
   and response of these two
   articles, in particular, is fascinat-
   ing. See Edgar Kauffman, Jr.,
   *Modern Architecture Does Not
   Need Ornament College Art
   Journal* 6, No. 2 (Winter 1946):
   140-142 and G. Haydn Huntley, *In
   Defense of Ornament College Art
   Journal* 6, No. 1 (Autumn 1946):
   29-36.
8 Farshid Moussavi and Michael
   Kubo, eds., *The Function of
   Ornament* (Barcelona: Actar,
   2006), 58-61.