

international concrete design competition for students 2003/04

ROBUSTNESS

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INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL SPEAKS

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Can you tell me something about yourself, your career?

I studied literature and philosophy in university but I have worked exclusively in the areas of design education and urbanism. After completing a Ph.D. in 1993, I became Senior Editor for ANY (Architecture New York), an architecture group headed by Peter Eisenman that held conferences and published books and magazines from 1991 to 2001. I was there for about two years, writing for and editing ANY magazine. While there I started the "Writing Architecture" book series and edited the first two books in the series, Bernard Cache's Earth Moves and Kojin Karatani's Architecture as Metaphor. I taught at Harvard GSD and Parsons School of Design before moving to the Netherlands for a year where I was attached to the Architecture Faculty at the TU-Delft. Afterwards, I returned to the US and taught in a number of schools, including Columbia University in New York, before coming to Los Angeles in 1997 to become the Director of the Graduate Program. While in the Netherlands I was involved with several exhibition projects including the 9+1 exhibition at the NAI and with several magazines including Archis, de Architect and Wiederhall for which I contributed a number of essays. It was a very exciting time to be in Europe and in the Netherlands where the new young offices were beginning to have a huge impact. When I returned to the US, I curated several exhibitions of the work of these offices including BIG SOFT ORANGE, an exhibition of four young Dutch offices - Max.1, Crimson, NL Architects, and One Architecture - which toured the US in 1998.

And where are you now and what are you doing?

I am currently the Director of the MR+D (Metropolitan Research + Design) Postgraduate Program at the Southern California Institute of Architecture in Los Angeles. I founded the program four years ago when I was the Director of the Graduate Program at SCI Arc in an effort to create an urban design curriculum that was experimental but that also sought to address real issues shaping the

metropolitan condition. The course of study is one year (12 consecutive months) and is organized around a different theme each year. We have about 28 students in the program each year and they come from all over the world: from India, Germany, Thailand, Lebanon, China, the US, Argentina, etc. The program focuses on how architecture and urban design can offer innovative design strategies for existing urban situations but also for situations that are only beginning to emerge or appear relevant. We are especially interested in emerging situations that will define the important urban issues in the future. That is why we focus on generating what I have called "design intelligence" in two areas. First, digital design and CNC milling are very important because they allow us to rapid prototype designs in such a way that thinking (creating design concepts) and doing (fabricating them) are blurred in an interactive process. It allows us to produce and test designs quickly and cheaply. Design is thus not a final product but an interactive process of innovation in which the product is as much the technique that is developed as it is a final design object. We also create "design intelligence" through scenario planning, a narrative based planning approach that allows us to project research we have conducted on existing conditions ten or fifteen years into the future. This allows us to produce "urban intelligence," or knowledge about what might happen under certain circumstances. We are not interested in predicting what will happen but instead in creating plausible truths, scenarios of what might happen, not what will definitely be true. This intelligence informs and makes robust urban design strategies that are strong enough to guide action but flexible enough to change over time.

What does concrete mean to you and how did you get involved with the Concrete Design Competition?

I became involved with the Concrete Design Competition after discussing the program with Siebe Baaker and Hans Kohne of ENCI in the Netherlands. Concrete is a remarkable

and remarkably ubiquitous material in many parts of the world and so developing innovative uses for such a material was especially interesting to me, especially given the kind of research conducted in my program. We are very involved with digital design and with new fabricating technologies and concrete presents an even greater challenge because its very qualities seem to mitigate against using it with these new technologies. One of my MR+D Program faculty, Marcelo Spina, worked with concrete in a digital studio last year using CNC milling and vacuum forming and produced some amazing results. I edit a series called "Design Intelligence" for the Japanese magazine a+u and the January 2004 issue will feature an interview with Marcelo as well as the concrete garden project and an apartment building in Rosario, Argentina, that Marcelo built this past year that is equally innovative. The garden project is an exterior installation made of 144 concrete tiles that simulate a micro ecology that evolves over time.

It was also clear in the conversations I had with the organizers that the Concrete Industry is keenly interested in designing and thinking outside the normative parame-

ters to discover new uses for existing products and products in development. And it was clear to all of us that the greatest potential for developing those was in the schools and universities where future designers are being trained and where the most exciting experimentation is now occurring. I was invited to become the curator because I have been involved with developing innovative educational curriculum in both the United States and in Europe. Also my curatorial and editorial experience was considered important because in addition to the competition and workshop we will publish the results in a book. The competition presents an exciting opportunity for industry and schools to work together in a highly stimulating and experimental environment and structure. The ultimate success of the competition will not only be evident in the designs themselves but also in what the industry learns from the student designers and instructors and what the students and instructors learn from the industry and from each other. In that way the competition can be seen as a year long research project culminating in a workshop that will prototype the results.