

From Riegl to Wroughten

She could never bring herself to trim [the fabric] to any pattern; so she shifted and fitted and mused and fitted and shifted them like pieces of a patient puzzle-picture, trying to fit them to a pattern or create a pattern out of them without using her scissors, smoothing her colored scraps with flaccid, putty-colored fingers.¹

Current discourse has provoked questions about the coherence of the architectural object and how its boundaries are defined. The notions of surface that pervaded the discipline over the last decade began to dissolve the physical and disciplinary boundaries of architecture into a landscape of external contingencies. Architecture's disciplinary concerns were addressed through a new subjectivity of immediately consumable surface effects. As a critical response current thinking has prompted a return to metaphysics in an attempt to recuperate architecture's formal and disciplinary distinction.

The following pages outline a shift in contemporary architectural thinking and production, moving away from the epistemological notions of surface to the ontological status of objects. A similar shift in aesthetic production was identified by the nineteenth century theoretician Alois Riegl and is conversely related to the metaphysical permutations pervading architectural design and discourse today. Riegl's speculation on the trajectory of early aesthetic production is transposed, moving away from a subject-centered view of the world to a discourse relating to the acknowledgment and manipulation of objects. Rather than defining architecture by its subjective contingencies and external relations, architecture's autonomy its reasserted through its discrete qualities as a thing.

THE SURFACE PROJECT

In the early 1990s, Gilles Deleuze's *The Fold* established a model for expression in contemporary aesthetics, and more specifically a dictionary of operative terms for architecture. The introduction of this text in collaboration with the ubiquity of virtual communication and advancements in digital design technology aspired to interpret the world "as a body of infinite folds and surfaces that twist and weave through compressed time and space."² The implication of this new paradigm was that individual things do not exist; instead everything was part of the same warped surface differentiated only in degree, not kind.

Architecture translated these ideas theoretically, but also literally as supple building forms. Relying on the power of surface modeling software and other computational tools, the digital project of the early twenty-first century created new possibilities for architecture

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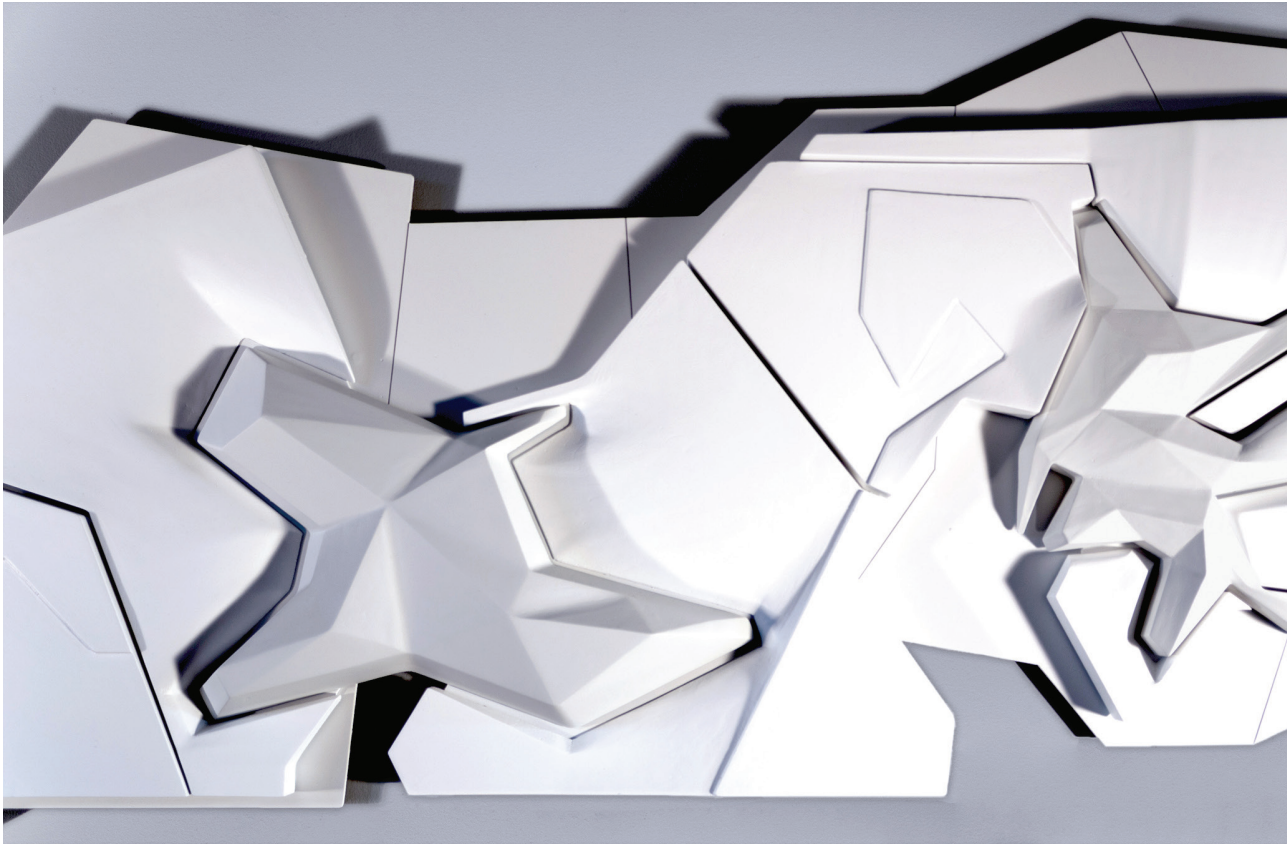
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by incorporating a full spectrum of shapes. The topological surface that resulted resisted formal complexity through differentiation and collage; instead intricacy was inherent to the curvilinear logic of a surface under continuous and gradual transformation. Any building form could be conceived as long as it obeyed the geometric principles of a singular surface logic.

The geometry of curved surfaces promised a new architectural formalism as well as wider-reaching implications. This new formal conception was liberated from its architectural registration by subverting planar surfaces and resisting ideal geometry altogether. Windows, structure, and other articulations that previously interrupted the surface were redefined as apertures, strands, and meta-seams which accentuated the curvature and continuity of the surface. As a result the topological surface became a tabula rasa onto which architecture could project its hopes, fantasies, and desires. Architecture's disciplinary concerns were free to absorb discourse previously considered taboo in the prior century.

Taking cues from Deleuze's study of the Baroque, architecture reached as far back into the discipline as possible to redefine some of its disciplinary autonomy. The significant congruity between classical conventions and emerging digital techniques exhibited the potential to project shape, provide topological transformation, and generate spatial heterogeneity. The classical notion of *poché* provided insight into the material thickness of and between complex surface topology. This and other proprietary devices, such as ornamentation and rustication, found contemporary relevance as transcendental design mechanisms, introducing a historical context to the discourse by generating innovative, but recognizable, expressions of space and surface.

Figure 1: *Wroughten*, Exhibited at the SCAD School of Building Arts, 2014. Photo courtesy Iain Gomez.



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Complicit in accepting the effects of ever-expanding urbanization, the transmutable quality of the topological surface began to dissolve the physical boundaries between architecture and context. Architecture, no longer defined by its boundaries or as boundary-defining, became an instrument of expansion and inclusion defined by its relations to other entities, able to participate in the socio-cultural milieus of interconnectivity and globalization. The topological surface was the embodiment of a continual space of communication, transforming the built world into a virtual environment of flows, networks, and processes.

Uninhibited by long-standing concerns of interiority, architecture was able to provide for other external contingencies. New engagements with technology allowed architecture to be included in a larger design discourse that was more prevalent in other industries including aerospace, fashion, film, automobile and marine design. As the boundaries between design disciplines were reshaped, other external references and cultural influences could be readily absorbed by architecture through visceral engagement, not intellectual propriety. Although this permitted architecture to look to the future by interfacing with the perceived global network, it conspired intentionally or inadvertently to undermine architecture's autonomy as a discrete thing.

RIEGL IN REVERSE

The resurgence of metaphysics today addresses these concerns of architecture's waning formal and disciplinary distinction. However, unlike previous engagements, metaphysics is now being approached as an ontological status of reality, rather than an epistemological question of presence. The latter assumes that presence is inherent to the architectural object, an assumption which can be questioned through representational and subjective illusions. These epistemological concerns have forced the architectural object into extreme positions, dismantling it to reveal deeper meaning or dissolving it into a contingency of external relations. The former assumes the opposite; reality of architectural (and all other)

Figure 2: *Wroughten Detail*, Figural objects and tight and loose-fitting joints. Photo courtesy Iain Gomez.



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objects is fundamentally withdrawn from human perception and cannot be fully known, only revealed partially through illusions of its own agency. “[B]uildings, as objects, should be understood to have vast numbers of qualities, properties, and even relations...but that their full reality can never be reduced to a single, simplistic observation.”³ This suggests that the architectural object always holds something in reserve and cannot be fully consumable or comprehended through experience or empiricism respectively.

Alois Riegl speculated that “the production of art in different historical epochs was governed by the different sensory organs which were primary in perception.”⁴ According to Riegl, haptic artifacts were usually closed forms with discrete boundaries and thus concerned with their own interiority. Some time around the Renaissance “Riegl’s model of a universal haptic approach to artifacts was superseded or concealed by a universal optical relationship.”⁵ Optics is concerned with external perception of an object from the informed position of the subject. “Where prior philosophy engaged in vigorous debates as to the true nature of substance...philosophy became that of how subjects relate to or represent objects.”⁶ The shift from a haptic or ontological predilection to an optic or epistemological inclination moved away from the description of things to the description of relations between things.

This change in thinking largely emerged in response to the invention of perspective at this time. According to Peter Eisenman, “perspective was a way to mediate the object-subject relationship—the mediation between man and nature between what man sees and how he sees.”⁷ In Riegl’s terms perspective is an optical device and therefore conforms to the way things are seen and processed in the mind from the vantage point of the subject. Haptics, on the other hand, are not only concerned with the tactile, but more importantly the status of a thing as a substance, whether it is perceived by humans or not. This would explain the compressed space and flat, floating arrangements in medieval representations as opposed to the Renaissance representations of deep space on a flat plane.⁸ The representational

Figure 3: *Wroughten* Detail, Resilient adjacencies. Photo courtesy Iain Gomez.



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dimension of optics forced architecture to be defined by its relations to other things. The material dimension of haptics, on the other hand, affords architecture the ability to embrace its specificity as an object.

The reference to RiegI does not suggest a return to dialectal reasoning or a return to medieval forms of expression, but rather a radical shift in thinking that has not been present in architectural discourse for some time and might “offer a decisively new theoretical perspective from which new strains of diffuse architectural ideas and languages might emerge.”⁹ This suggests that aesthetic production is on an inverse trajectory, validating the move away from a subject-centered epistemology to an object-oriented ontology.

WROUGHTEN

Speculation concerning the ontology of objects has provoked questions about the coherence of the architectural object and how its boundaries are defined. These questions were raised in my digital design and theory seminar in the spring of 2014, the result of which was the installation entitled *Wroughten*. The students were challenged to produce a project that

Figure 4: *Wroughten* Detail, Gouges imprinted by visitors in the surface. Photo courtesy the author.

Figure 5: *Wroughten* Detail, Fingerprints imprinted by visitors in the surface. Photo courtesy the author.

would question the idea of the subdivided surface in architecture, reinterpreting it as a constellation of objects. The project's patchy composition does not become a continuous field as Deleuze and Guattari established in, "1440: The Smooth and the Striated;"¹⁰ rather, is defined by multiple and distinct boundaries. The resultant 'crazy' configuration¹¹ is an assortment of discrete objects interacting in diverse and unexpected ways.

In his essay "Apertures", Greg Lynn argues that apertures and other articulations modulate a surface, making its qualities of tautness and continuity more apparent.¹² Two examples he uses to identify this phenomenon are Louis Sullivan's Merchants National Bank in Grinnell, Iowa and Josef Hoffman's Palais Stoclet in Brussels. "The massiveness of the volumes in each of these cases is lightened and made taut, both by the ornamental filigree and by the cookie cutter-like apertures cleanly punched into the surfaces."¹³ What is important here, contrary to the disposition toward continuity, is the separation and distinction created between the surface and its articulations.

In the case of the Merchants Bank building, ornamentation and mass switch their traditional material roles. The heavily encrusted oculus, liberated from its role as ornament, disengages and floats on top of the smooth, taut masonry surface. At the Palais Stoclet, the high-contrast line work that outlines the edges of the building and punched openings turn heavy stone mass into thin planar sheets. The apertures are cleanly projected into the surface of the façade, but are no longer part of the façade's gridded panelization. Instead the apertures are allowed to 'swim' in the same planar surface and in some cases break the boundary of the façade, puncturing the roof line. In both projects, the apertures and other articulations operate with their own agency that works against the logic dictated by the underlying surface.

The unique expression of form in our project is developed through various 'wrought' techniques (e.g., stuffing, nestling, packing, thickening, etc.) and does not obey a single surface logic (is neither smooth nor striated). Instead, the articulation of hard and soft edges, assisted by the chalky painted finish, creates a material indeterminacy that is simultaneously soft like pillows and hard like panels. Although there are no apertures, the articulation of tight and loose-fitting joints create separation and distinction between elements through resilient adjacencies, not compositional strategies of conflict or convergence. Unlike ornamentation which merges with the surface of the wall and largely goes unnoticed, the surface articulations cannot be mentally processed as background noise. There are also no overlapping elements or optical illusions of depth to suggest a phenomenal transparency. Additionally, a flat panel with an irregular boundary loosely arranges each figural object and allows the entire composition to disengage from and hover above the surface of the wall. The subtle distinction between the flat panel and the wall works to deny the legitimacy of the wall as an all-encompassing architectural field. The various articulations begin to act with their own agency, pushing and pulling surfaces and edges, defying any decisive geometric logic. Moreover, the project's various geometric and material inconsistencies provoke a more tactile subjective response, made evident by the fingerprints, scratches and gouges imprinted by visitors on the surface.

Wroughten's incongruous qualities prolong the initial engagement with the form, even if only momentarily, allowing it to separate from the wall and become visible to attention as discrete object. This kind of agency does not originate from an internal logic or critical engagement, but rather materializes through the deception of an object's variety of qualities, properties and relations. Order and perception (intrinsic to the realm of the subject) are obscured by the unpredictable ways in which object qualities can manifest. The incidental, opposed to the intellectual, is inherent to architecture's status as a thing. This suggests that subjects don't necessarily precede objects, and that some forms of subjectivity are mediated by the agency of objects themselves.

This project denies the authority of the architectural surface as a continual field of communication, creating a diverse space of coexistence where multiple heterogeneous objects interact in unexpected ways. *Wroughten* refers to the role of the haptic in contemporary form making. Descriptively, the term encompasses that which is carefully formed or worked into shape. Conceptually, the project references Alois Riegl's study of medieval metalwork and its role in the early history of aesthetic production.

CONCLUSION

According to Siegfried Giedion, figure-ground became the fundamental configuration of aesthetic experience when ornament and furnishing began to be incorporated into the wall.¹⁴ *Wroughten* challenges the prevailing notions of figure-ground that have emerged since then, resisting the tendency to participate in an epistemological understanding of the wall as abstract plane of difference or consumable continuous field. The project speculates that architecture's autonomy resides in its coherence as an object with discrete boundaries. These boundaries are not erased through assimilation or broken apart through collage. Formal complexity is established through architecture's inherent ability as a discrete object to create separations and act with exceptional resilience.

Although the goals of the surface project were noble and discourse was engaged that had previously been ignored in the discipline, familiar architectural themes are reiterated that have not changed much in the past five-hundred years. Topology and intricacy are not unlike the logic of classicism where the whole is only explicable in relation to its parts, in fact their expressions, as mentioned previously, are quite similar. Additionally, the Deleuzian notion of 'the fold' is not unlike the totalizing effects of the International Style, in which a formal system of abstraction assumed an aggressive role in coordinating external concerns raised by industrialization. Although these themes have been the impetus for multiple formalistic and stylistic expressions throughout the history of architecture, they reinforce the tendency to validate architecture as a consequence of its relations to smaller parts or larger systems, rather than by its own autonomous qualities as a discrete object. "The measure of architectural design is [not] the degree to which it exemplifies a theory or philosophy, [but] rather the degree to which it continuously produces new architectural effects."¹⁵ If architecture is to continue as a progressive endeavor, i.e. productive in its ability to project new forms, the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings prevalent throughout most of the history of architecture should be reconsidered.

ENDNOTES

1. William Faulkner, *Sartoris* (New York: Random House, 1956), 151.
2. See book jacket notes. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Trans. Tom Conley, 5th ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
3. Mark Gage, "Killing Simplicity: Object-Oriented Philosophy in Architecture" (*Log* 33, 2015), 102.
4. Jacqueline Gargus. *Ideas of Order: A Formal Approach to Architecture* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1994), 21.
5. Christopher Wood, "Riegl's Mache" (*Res* 46, 2004), 168.
6. Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 16.
7. Peter Eisenman, *Feints* (Milan: Skira, 2006), 50.
8. Ibid.
9. Mark Gage, "Killing Simplicity: Object-Oriented Philosophy in Architecture" (*Log* 33, (2015), 100.
10. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "1440: The Smooth and the Striated," in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), 476.
11. Refers to a quilting technique of patchwork that lacks repeating motifs and seams that are heavily embellished.
12. Greg Lynn, "Apertures," in *Form*, Ed. Mark Rappolt (New York: Rizzoli, 2008), 80.
13. Ibid.
14. Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 304.
15. Jeff Kipnis, *A Question of Qualities* (Cambridge: MIT, 2013), 302.
16. Project Credits: Xavier Ramirez, Tessa Watson (Project Designers), Bradley Green, Tim Jarnvik, Samson Johnson (Project Leaders), Valeria Flores, Ian Kemler, Jessica Samaniego (Documentation), Zelig Fok, Iain Gomez (Photography), Olisa Agulue, Kuhane Blackburn, Henry Cowdery, Jessica Gualpa, Robert Hon, Alex Knight, David Lisbon, Dany Nguyen, Austynn Machado, Priscilla Pere, Anh Pham, Audrey Reda, Mariana Rinicon, Lucy Zhang (Production), SCAD School of Building Arts.