Infinity and Void:
Architectural Ornament and New Space

PHILIP BEESLEY
University of Waterloo

NEIL FORREST
Nova Scotia College of Art and Design

Philip Beesley and Neil Forrest present the position that ornament has a refreshed role to play in contemporary expression. To explore a return to informed ornament, we concentrate on a new ceramic project titled Hiving Mesh by Neil Forrest. In Hiving Mesh, Forrest has constructed an architectural screen, a work of ornament. Hiving Mesh draws upon Islamic ornamental tradition and at the same time inflects these sources with states of a contemporary psyche.

Neil Forrest's work focuses on expanding, limitless systems that function as ornament. These expanding systems are rooted in pattern-making. As a ceramist, Neil Forrest has long been fascinated by two traditions in Islamic art, the Iznik ceramics of the Ottoman period, which present curvilinear vegetal patterns, and the earlier 'girih' style (Persian for 'knot'), a highly formal mode based on Persian interlocking star-and-polygon geometries. Both the 'girih' and Iznik modes inform Hiving Mesh. Using texts from this past century's streams of surrealism and psychoanalysis, this essay undertakes to find a refreshed relationship with these historic traditions.

Hiving Mesh is a hanging array of fired porcelain clay forms with glass paste tile inserts with its aligned surfaces forming an outer face. Behind this crust is an interlinked matrix of hundreds of small ceramic objects, densely compressed fragments resembling plant bulbs and body organs. The fragments evoke primordial life - *Ur* forms. A delicate meshwork of stainless steel wire struts connects each fragmented element to its neighbour, making a cloud of forms like a mass of molecules hovering in open space and immersing the space of the viewer.

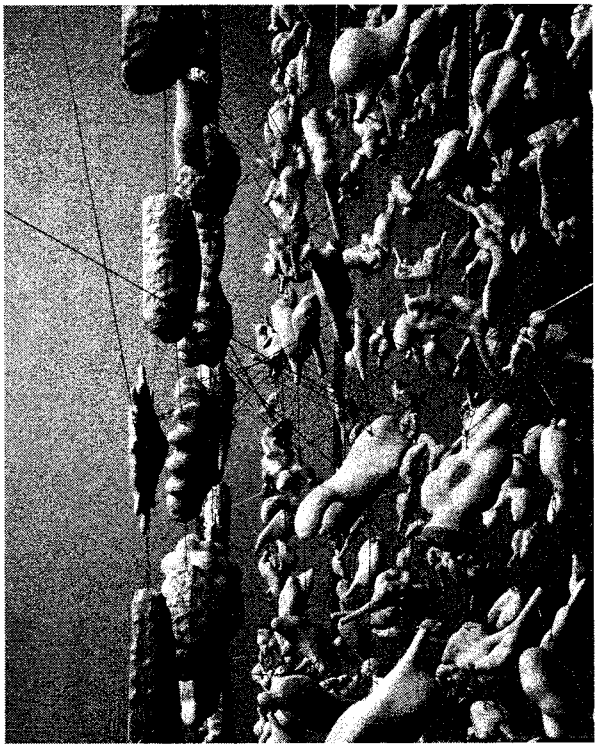

Fig. 1. Hiving Mesh, Neil Forrest, 2000: detail view

Neil Forrest found pines deformed by severe winds from the ocean - trees holding masses of ulcerous cones growing in dense clusters blurring into innumerable oblate lobes, dissolving into each other. He took these forms as the basis for a new work exploring a special porosity where fields of space intermingle, melting the borders between discrete elements. This expanded structure has a peculiar anatomy - it is a work of crystalline geometry whose lattice structures expand out in a radiant mathematical efflorescence, and at the same time it is built out of natural organs making a complex flesh with a living presence. This expanded formal space and poetics renew the traditional medium of

architectural ceramics. They act as a refreshed ornament asserting a new kind of architectural space. A crystalline society populated by dispersed and fragmentary individuals.

A complex floating crust stands at the front of the installation, covering the interlaced meshwork of cones. A mixture of ceramic forms is interspersed on this surface: pillow shaped squares, funnel shaped ovals, and shields. The funnels, ringed with knuckled protrusions, are an enlarged version of hive entry formations that bees make.

INFINITY

The profusion of the assembly makes a thicket. The ceramic forms, numbering nearly a thousand, float in a three-dimensional hexagonal array several feet thick. They hang connected by a radiating matrix of fine stainless steel wires fitted with miniature eyelets and snap connectors that converge into formed steel eyebolts inserted within the bodies of the porcelain forms. The structure is an expanded beaded curtain. It traces out a primary organic geometry of converging triple and quadruple joints making hexagonal groups grouped into a three-dimensional space-frame.

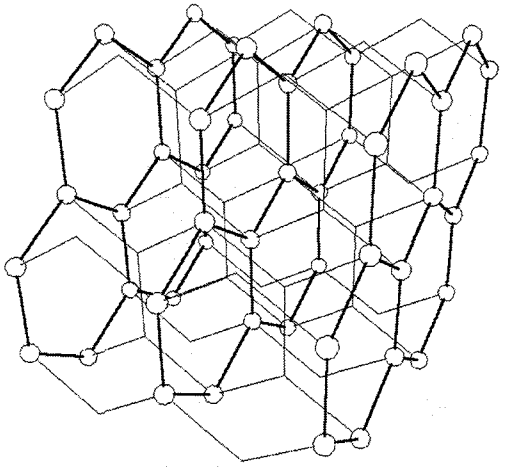

Fig. 2. Ordinance geometry for Hiving Mesh: tetrahedral mesh

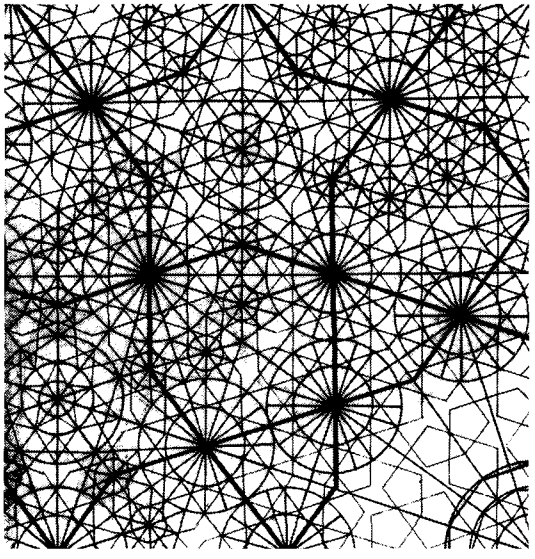

Fig. 3. Girih Mode of Geometry (Topkapi Scroll)

Forrest drew upon the 'girih' mode of geometry to organize Hiving Mesh. The Topkapi Scroll, Gülru Necipoglu's comprehensive treatise on Islamic ornament, describes infinitely repeating geometry as a historic cosmology that drew together Muslim monotheistic theology of the utterly transcendent unique God and Plotinus's doctrine of the One (the First Cause, or Pure Light) that generates the whole order of the universe through an emanation of the light of Reason. According to Necipoglu, writings of Plotinus were translated into Arabic as early as the mid-ninth century and helped inspire a model of the universe as a *"hierarchy of superior forces emanating from transparent celestial bodies, divested of matter with their dazzling lucidity and luminous purity."* [1]

A fundament to this conception is the paradigm of *Tawid*, the absolute unity and oneness of God. One is reminded of E.H. Gombrich's insight into 'the sense of order' within decoration: *'that pattern suggests infinity'*. [2] This phenomenon is what Islamic artists and craftsmen pursued in the *girih* mode – the understanding that infinity could be suggested in the decorative order as a metaphor, and that infinity could be accomplished by applying geometric designs to the skins of pottery and buildings. Similarly, an absolute order lies within Hiving Mesh. Each point within the matrix is stabilized within three-dimensional space by four angled vectors making a radiant crystalline structure. The tetrahedral matrix that defines this space is the fundamental system of organic form, an absolutely efficient and stable space-filling system.

IMMERSION, UNION OF FIGURE AND GROUND

Another set of relationships can be seen in the contrast of the uniform solid geometry of the hexagonal array of wire supports and the ceramic cones and hive forms. The ceramics act as 'figures' immersed within the wire mesh 'ground', and speak with different languages - one pictorial (hives and cones) and the other pattern (geometry of the supporting wires). A shifting variety of forms prevents us from dismissing the work as purely mechanical repetition, but at the same time the intensive repetition of types of forms, and the evident labour of this hand-worked installation, gives a poignant, apprehensive aura around the individuals pictured here. The unique elements are nearly entirely subsumed within the massive array. This particular balance moves us away from E. H. Gombrich's familiar treatment of pattern as a counterpoint: *"Pattern-making is, in its most general form, characterized as an ordering of elements of identity and difference."* [3] Instead of a classical distinction between figure and ground, we move to immersive, knotted fields of space.

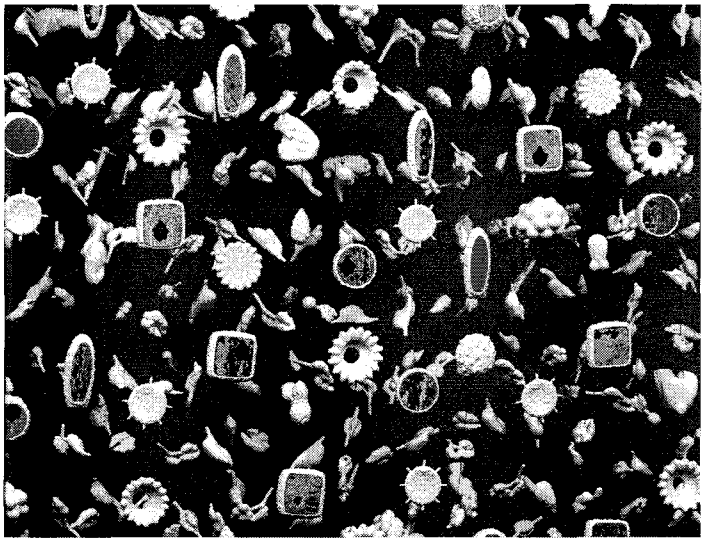

Fig. 4. Hiving Mesh, frontal view.

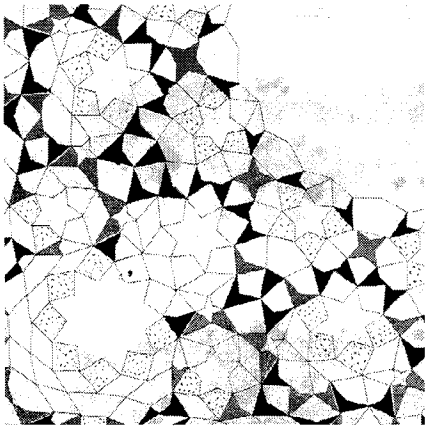

Fig. 5. Girih geometry variation: projection of three-dimensional forms in vaulting

In Hiving Mesh, individuality flees. One cell of the mesh is nearly indistinguishable from its adjacent neighbours. Impossible to disentangle. The space Forrest pursues in Hiving Mesh is expansive, informed by 'inshirah', an experience of buoyant immersion. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in his recent 'Islamic Art and Spirituality, says:

> *"In most schools of Islamic cosmology the highest heaven defines the space below it and therefore referred to as that which limits and defines space. Cosmic space is defined in relation to the inner surface of the outmost sphere rather than by any positive object such as the earth or planets. Space is, as it were, carved out from the plenum of cosmic creation and is conceived with respect to a surface that surrounds it rather than object which it surrounds [...] And this experience leads to an expansion (inshirah) which breaks the effect of the cosmic contraction upon the soul and places man before Divinity"* [4]

FERTILE NATURE AND VOID

Hiving Mesh is organized according to geometry functioning literally as a scaffold that holds its population. The pattern language suggests geometry as a landscape, associated with the non-visible world of atomic structure. But while it refers to crystalline formations of molecules and grid-works it is anything but pure. Instead the geometry flexes and twists, laded with variations and corruptions. In turn, the population is of densely compressed fragments resembling plant bulbs and body organs. The fragments evoke primordial life. This is an organization of living things - a metaphor for a colony.

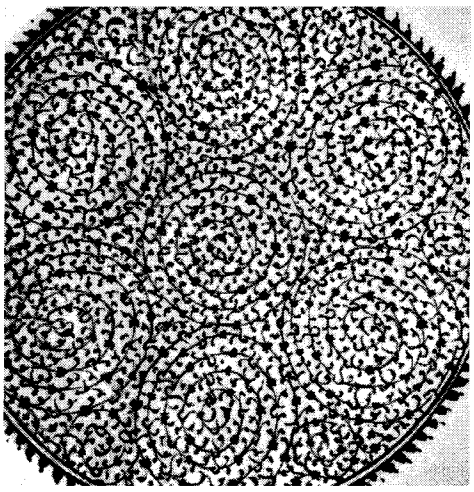

Fig. 6. Tugrates spiral style: porcelain decoration

Forrest referred to a particular strain of Iznik tile decoration called the *Tugrates* spiral style or 'Golden Horn' as a source for his pattern. A distinct sense of *anima*, primal life force, infuses Iznik decoration. The concentration of tile and pottery decoration in Iznik, south of present-day Istanbul, transformed traditional pure 'girih' geometry by infusing patterns with arabesques of fluid gestures, rendered as if they were sprouting vines redolent with growth. Uncanny tension results: on one hand, the vital energy and intensity of the vegetal imagery in Tugrates work inflects it toward dense, saturated darkness, the realm of grottoes. At the same time, arabesques of air and space are infused within the pattern, creating buoyancy. A metaphysical play of tension and compression results. Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes this quality as embodying fundamental truth:

> *"The arabesque enables the void to enter into the very heart of the matter, to remove its opacity and to make it transparent before the Divine Light. Through the use of the arabesque in its many forms, the void enters into the different facets of Islamic art, lifting from material objects their suffocating heaviness and enabling the spirit to breathe and expand. Likewise, the arabesque, through its extension and repetition of forms interlaced with the void, removes the eye from the possibility of fixing itself in one place and from the mind the possibility of becoming imprisoned in any particular solidification and crystallization of matter.*[5]

Forrest's journal states:

> *" It is an installation intended not for central focus but instead for peripheral vision. Not the clarity of discrete forms, but at the dissolving margin of the periphery. Hiving Mesh is not a story as such. It is not a composition in the sense of a narrative with a focal point and action happening. When dealing with things that are porous you are not restrained: you can move through without any absolute surfaces to relate to. We are surrounded by foam."*[6]

The terms 'foam' and 'porosity' describe a new class of free space. A century ago, Marx said, *"all that is solid melts into air"*. Those words, from the Second Communist Manifesto, celebrated the dissolving modern world and effectively defined the technological project of the century. Searching for optimally light structures, that same mission was embodied in a mid-century manifesto issued by the American engineer Buckminster Fuller.

> *"In order to make the resources of the earth adequate to the needs of all people, we must increase the performance per pound of those resources in a very big way, thus giving man environmental controls. This must be done to accommodate all the new shifting patterns of man around the face of the earth. We will have to employ nature with much more economical, grand logistical strategies. Emulating nature, man must distribute mathematical information as basic pattern."*[7]

The physical technologies that result from both Marx's analysis and Fuller's research are related. The delicate lattice spun within Forrest's installation remains part of this Modern tradition, cousin to Fuller's work in space-frame geodesic structures. If these qualities were the only ones that were central to Neil Forrest's work, we could understand him as a member of the Modern project, continuing the general quest for lightness and transparency that has defined the past century's 'progressive' mainstream. Instead of standing on the ground, the work is suspended. It introduces the possibility of tensile forces and lace-like openwork to a class of construction in fired clay that traditionally has known mostly compression and mass. However, other qualities in Hiving Mesh lead away from Modern qualities. Refreshing a ceramic craft that has usually concentrated on precision, clarity, density and continuity of surface, the installation explores new kinds of space based on diffuse boundaries.

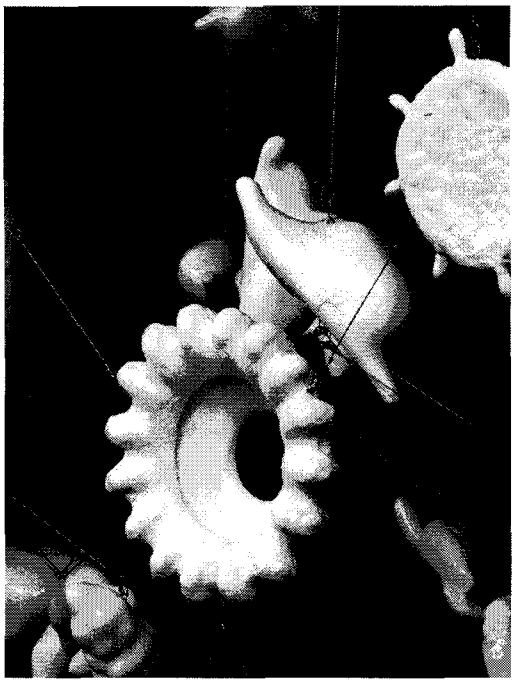

Fig. 7. Hiving Mesh, detail

DISSOCIATION AND VOID

The patterned faience laid into the pillows and shields lining the front layer of Neil Forrest's construction show brood cells in their larval stage and their food storage containers made of arrays of close-packed spherical tubular cells. The graphic rendering of this imagery is scattered into a field holding shards and fragments of discrete images: an archipelago. The individual fragments are dispersed, but together they make a coherent picture plane. The front skin is a cut through a three-dimensional formation, and the action of this cut exposes a front face made of saturated colours speaking of an inner anatomy. The porous solid of the formation is split open - the plane of the brilliantly coloured shapes orients us to this space of soft curves and austere whiteness of the cones. The atomized mass is cut and cauterized. This is a face for the work, but the face violates any sense of a decorous presentation for a public gaze. An oscillation results for the viewer: intimacy, and at the same time voyeurism. Forrest says,

> *"In Hiving Mesh, we are mapping human transit on top of animal behaviors, on a ground that is indeterminable, holding a promise that might be of beauty or one which is horrific. It may turn on you: nothing is guaranteed. We fear this: disease that is embryonic holds the possibility of the grotesque, and of long lasting destruction. At the same time hope lurks everywhere in this piece: the colour, the smoothness of the glaze. Diffusely erotic."*[8]

'Lurking hope' and 'embryonic disease' are Romantic terms. Within these sentiments lies a quest for immersive encounters with living presence vastly larger than us. The use of such language during the last two centuries accompanied a cultural anxiety that came from the power to engineer nature. Modern quests of this sort inevitably come tinged with a loss of innocence, because the substance encountered may be artificial; the experience may have been constructed. The possibility of interminable banal repetition looms large. Alongside benign natural presence, there is the brutal reality of infinitely repeating systems of construction.

Another kind of void

Sigmund Freud wrote vividly of this fundamental ambivalence about religion in Civilization and its Discontents. In his discussion of the 'oceanic feeling' referring to primary religious experience, he presented his classic binary model of a 'rational' ego underpinned by an unconscious populated by primal urges: ecstatic infinity, accompanied by dread:

> *"...a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded-as it were, 'oceanic'....it is a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole... Originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive - indeed, an all-embracing feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it. If we may assume that there are many people in whose mental life this primary ego-feeling has persisted to a greater or less degree, it would exist in them side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity, like a kind of counterpart to it. In that case, the ideational contents appropriate to it would be precisely those of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe- the same ideas with which my friend elucidated the 'oceanic' feeling..."*[9]

While Freud's material is eternally charged, his universe is hierarchical: conscious light stands above, superior to the dark of the Unconscious. Rejecting this human-centred cosmology, the Parisian surrealist writer Georges Bataille strengthened the acute ambivalence within such experience, alternating between ecstatic immersion and an alienated sense of loss. In a passage written in 1943 he says:

> *"a character of dance and of decomposing agility (as if made of the thousand idle futilities and of life's thousand moments of uncontrollable laughter) situated this flame "outside of me". And as everything mingles in a dance, so there was nothing which didn't go there to be consumed. I was thrown into this hearth; nothing remained of me but this hearth. In its entirety, the hearth itself was a streaming outside of me... And yet I have little concern for myself, of the impossible spider, not yet crushed, that I am, so poorly dissimulated in its network of webs. In spite of it the spider, lurking in the background, is horror having become a being, to this extent that being night, it nevertheless radiates like a sun..."*[10]

This approach moves us out of the oceanic depths that historical Romance plumbed. But the human-centered strains of Modernism that might have replaced those values also afford little comfort. While the art that works to support this experience employs modern technologies including mechanical systems and repeating structures, the pursuit has changed. Powerful, unified states have disappeared. Instead the work seems deliberately delicate. In recent writing, the Catalonian writer Ignasi de Sola-Morales has proposed a substantial approach to ornamental work based on a kind of strategic 'weakness':

> *Experience can no longer be founded on the basis of a system: not on a closed, economical system such as that of the classical age; not even on the illusion of a new system such as that which the pioneers of modern design sought to establish... Together with the precarious nature of the event and this untimely fold of reality, what we have called weak architecture is always decorative. Decoration, then, or the decorative condition of contemporary art and architecture, not in the sense of vulgarity, of triviality, of the repetition of established stereotypes, but as a discreet folding back to a perhaps secondary function, a pulling back to a function that projects beyond the hypothetical ground of things. This is the strength of weakness; that strength which art and architecture are capable of producing precisely when they adopt a posture that is not aggressive and dominating [this posture allows] sudden, unanticipated coagulations of reality, events that are produced not through linear and foreseeable*

organization but through folds and fissures. That in some way afford the refuge, the tremulous fluttering of a brief moment of poetic and creative intensity."[11]

The 'weakness' that de Sola-Morales describes, and the buoyant, interlaced void illuminated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Isnik decoration are cousins. Ornament, then. But this ornament is not laid over a form: there is no edifice to decorate, no functional vessels to amplify and elaborate. The residues of those institutions remain all around us but their authority has vanished. We move, instead, back to a hollow surface. By expanding and contracting, and folding and flexing, this surface makes its own topography, its own gravity. This void (and at the same time very substantial) site describes the 'new ornament'.

Thus Hiving Mesh has several implications. One is an expanded picture of natural forms, arranged artificially, increasing and mutating. A contemporary kind of nature. Another is an expanded space, a space that questions boundaries. And another speaks of architectural ceramics itself, reclaiming ornament as a contemporary art.

Neil Forrest is a ceramist who works within architectural spaces. Philip Beesley is an architect and artist whose practice includes a focus on ornamental systems. Both have collaborated on a number of teaching initiatives with craft and architecture students.

NOTES

[1]Gülru Necipoglu, Mohammad Al-Ashad, The Topkapi Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture, J. Paul Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995, p. 187.

[2]E. H. Gombrich, The Sense of Order, Phaidon Press, 1979, p. 75

[3]Ibid., p. 72

[4]Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Islamic Art and Spirituality, University Press of New York, 1987

[5]Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Islamic Art and Spirituality, University Press of New York, 1987, p. 186

[6]P. Beesley discussion with the artist. October 2000.

[7]Buckminster Fuller, quoted in Your Private Sky: R. Buckminster Fuller: the Art of Design Science, Joachim Krausse, ed., Lars Muller, Zurich, 1999, p. 494

[8]P. Beesley discussion with the artist. October 2000.

[9]Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud Reader. 725

[10]Inner Experience, Georges Bataille, trans. Leslie Bolt, SUNY Press 1988, 'Ecstasy', p. 128

[11]Ignasi de Sola-Morales, 'Weak Architecture', in Differences: Topographies of Contemporary Architecture, ed. Sarah Whiting trans. Graham Thompson: MIT Press, 1996