

**NEIL M. DENARI / NMDA**  
THE BAUMER LECTURES

**SOURCE BOOKS IN ARCHITECTURE**

KNOWLTON SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE  
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
BENJAMIN WILKE, SERIES EDITOR

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# BAUMER LECTURES, PART 1

*The following text was extracted from a series of conversations between Neil Denari, Justin Diles, and the students of the Knowlton School of Architecture during the 2015-2016 school year.*

NEIL DENARI: I think that the Baumer Professorship is about relaying the pathways and pitfalls that you might find as you progress through the discipline; by looking at some of the things I did in the beginning you may derive some ideas about how you choose to engage similar challenges and how you may or may not address the discipline after your schooling.

JUSTIN DILES: Let's begin with the topic of writing. The idea of the seminar was for each student to read everything you've written, with each individual student looking in-depth at a particular piece.

DENARI: I think it's relevant to stop and think for a moment about writing as a medium or form of expression. Why would an architect bother to write anything? Even one word? Architects are seen as—if not public intellectuals—at least responsible for persuading someone to do things or for explaining what they do. Because we're not artists, right? And while you can commission yourself to do whatever you want anytime you want to, you can't go and build a building unless somebody commissions you to do so ... though, we still feel compelled to speak about the reasons for or against a museum or some element of a museum. So why can't this form of speaking get rethought or recast into written words? Architects do actually write, they just don't often write it down. But through speaking, we're making texts. Another reason that writing is worth considering is this: within a world that is partly defined by teaching and partly defined by practice, writing becomes a way to force one to come to terms with the rhetoric that you have to understand when it's time to persuade or explain.

In the '80s, I was probably less conscious of or confident about what it meant to write something, or

especially to write something well. As architects, we aren't frequently judged on our writing in the same way that Zadie Smith or Jonathan Franzen or Jonathan Lethem are judged. I think it's important to try to do this though, as opposed to just creating images and then letting critics figure out what they are. I think I remember Jeff Kipnis writing a letter for me for tenure and he said, "Great guy. The only thing is that he should write more." I think we should be more compelled to come forward with written ideas and arguments and to place them in the public sphere and to become vulnerable to attack and cross-examination. That's what makes all of this fun.

The earliest pieces that I wrote were on machines and the idea of how technology was a discourse in architecture. What I was doing was—oddly enough—a kind of postmodernist discourse on technology at the same time that we were dealing with the conservative dark period of the twentieth century. It was this strange conservative time in which modernism as a methodology and as an experience of placelessness was challenged by academics like Colin Rowe and Michael Graves and championed by Phillip Johnson. What a number of us were doing at that time was searching for the ways that technology could become even more confrontational than it was in the refined aesthetics of modernism that was practiced by somebody like Richard Meier. We were interested in the ways that the corrosiveness of that idealism was more effectively communicating what technology was about. I always saw that particular time as an ambivalent time; it was ambivalent toward the present and ambivalent toward the future. This was also the beginning of my taking on independent projects. I was working in an office, starting to have exhibitions at the Storefront in New York, and doing drawings. I still didn't know what it meant to be an architect in a conventional sense, except that I was interested in

being part of the cultural conversation that in many ways is still the same. I also began teaching at that time. I didn't graduate from school assuming—and I don't know if this was the case for you Justin—that I would ever be a teacher. I thought that I would get work and at some point somebody would give me a commission and I would start building stuff and move on from there. This is when I was asked to go teach at Columbia (in 1985). I was pretty young and it made sense to me at that time that teaching, working, and writing all went together. You are being taught by people who follow that same model. The people that you're being taught by are not escaping from anything, okay? Because there is no refuge. School isn't a refuge. Teaching isn't a refuge. As Heidegger said, "Teachers want to learn more than students." That's why we teach. So I'm here to tell you that I hope to learn more than you during these conversations.

**STUDENT:** When you began writing, did it help you refine your ideas? Did it help you figure out how to explain things?

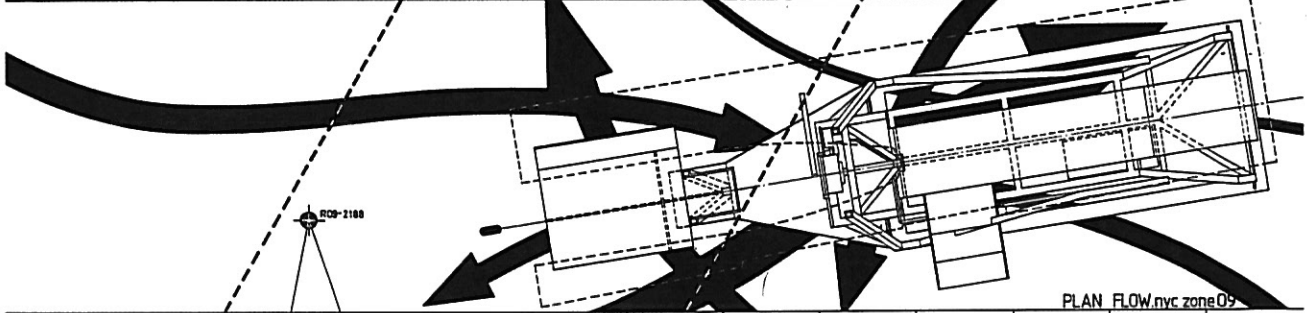
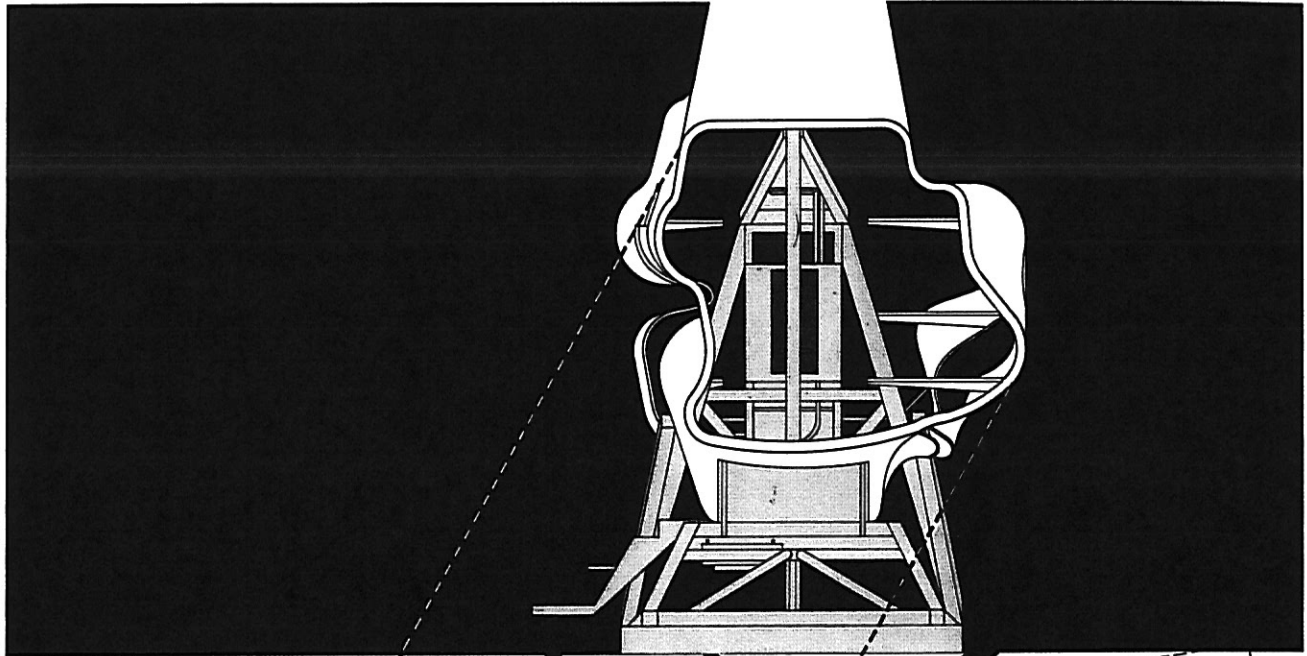
**DENARI:** Yes, and I think the earliest writings I wrote were solely for myself. I was the audience. Though when anything early did get published, it wasn't a narcissistic enterprise. It was more or less me—as an intuitive architect—searching to reverse engineer the ideas and the logic. I was trying to figure out the world that I was interested in and where these ideas were going to land. To see it in printed words was a way for me to then become a reader of the work. I read it often enough that I could see with dispassion whether something was clear or not or where something was provocative or just didn't seem to carry any weight. When you write and read your own writing as an activity, you're really forcing yourself to connect images and text because everything's based off of what the work is. You're connecting speech to what's in your head and sometimes to random thoughts. You're connecting it to written language that takes on a particular tone. In those days I wanted to write academic philosophy. That is clearly opposed to what I'm writing now, which is about a range of voices from the first person or the third person, etcetera. Sometimes it's storytelling, sometimes it's expository, and sometimes it's blunt. But in the

beginning I wanted to write in the manner of those things that I was reading, in terms of style and tone. I wanted to make sure that it sounded academic. So there was a tremendous pretense to it on the one hand, which I'm not ashamed of. I thought that what I was doing was heavy and not light, and maybe that's youth and hubris, you know? Like, "I got a rock band and you can't stop me."

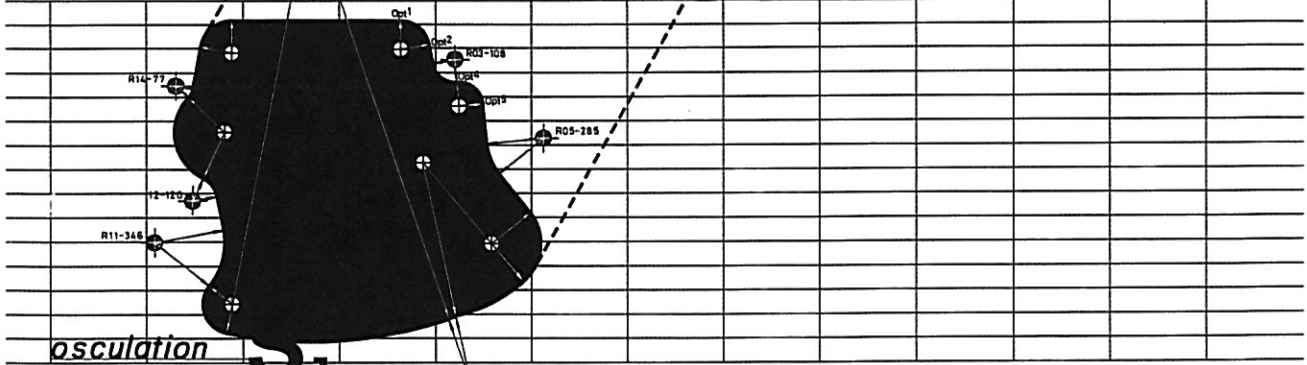
At that time I was interested in the concept of entropy that was coming from science and thermodynamics. It wasn't just about a building falling apart and deteriorating because that's what physical matter does, right? Yes, weather will collapse your building at a certain point, but it wasn't that. It was about the idea of a continuous vitality. Maybe I was, in a latent way, talking about timelessness, which is an idea that I have a lot of problems with. These thoughts eventually led to my own meditations about time. There were theories in the late-19th century about the conceptual possibility of the reversal of time. Even Stephen Hawking at one time believed in the reversibility of time. What on earth would any of that have to do with architecture? Architecture is about designing space, dealing with form, site, context, and so forth. So I'd search for anything that I could meditate on. I spent my time trying to write these thoughts down, because then I could design a bunch of stuff, look at it, and establish whether or not it fulfilled the criteria. There was always a disconnect, but it was okay because—and I didn't particularly participate in this—the reading of Derrida and texts about deconstruction was very popular. I was more interested in the idea that the text means what it was saying and the deconstruction stuff was suggesting that the text never means what the author intended. One could say that if you come back to some of those issues, that that's when you stand up and present your project. You might say, "I made a fire station on the corner. It's red because fire trucks are red and it's got two doors where the fire trucks go in and out. And it's got a number on it because that's what fire stations are supposed to have." And we as critics listen to you and we nod our heads and we agree, but we're also seeing something

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OPPOSITE: Neil M. Denari, Details Design Studio, 1993



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that you don't tell us, right? We read into things. At that time, I was very much against the philosophical idea that everything was an open text. I was coming at it from a much heavier and maybe even pseudo-modernist idea that you need to write the text down. I discovered later that I was already always working with the idea of an open text even though, philosophically, I wasn't agreeing to that condition.

It's a long-winded way of talking about the value of an expository text. Maybe you say, "I saw a fire on the freeway and this is exactly what happened." But then you go on to say that the flames were fifty feet tall when they were really only three feet tall. Writing in an expository way allows you to inject a value system into your thinking and doing. To me, that was what I was writing back then. I didn't have commissions. I didn't have clients. I didn't have budgets. I didn't have a lot of things that now get folded into the narrative of a project. The first five years out of school were me in my horrible apartment in New York, drawing and reading and going to look at buildings and paintings in the city. If I hadn't done that, I wouldn't be where I am today. I wrote my thesis at the GSD and it was called "The Origin of the Scientific Species in Architecture." Of course, I had to make it sound super imperious. I had to make it sound so imperious that you'd kind of gloss over it and go, "I'm not gonna read this stuff."

[Laughter]

The idea of what it meant to make an argument for the existence of projects was on my mind a lot. I was really obsessed with all that because I thought that was what architects did. You make things and then you try to argue that it's inevitable, right? I was pretty obsessed with the idea of the architect as having the burden of explanation, even early on. Even now, you guys get up in front of your professors and you have the burden to explain, right? You can't say, "I listened to a song and I made a sketch and here it is, thank you." That's not allowable until you're so famous that you can just do anything and everybody goes, "Yeah, perfect."

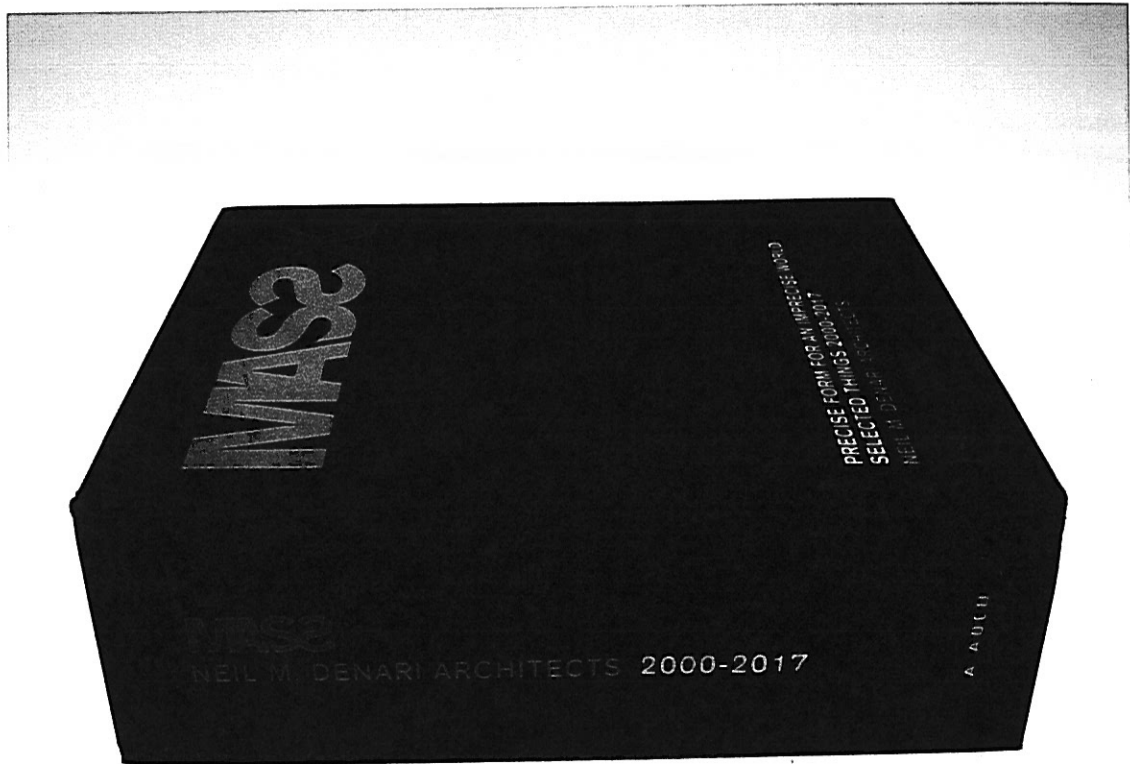
STUDENT: Do you think that your writing allowed you a different sort of criticality when it came to your work as

opposed to when you were in the middle of the design process?

DENARI: Are you referring to the stuff I was doing in the beginning?

STUDENT: I mean did it allow you to reflect differently upon it and have different ideas about what it really meant or could mean moving forward?

DENARI: Yes. But we want to build buildings, right? And we make images of buildings that get built or don't get built. We lecture on them. Then we write about them and so forth. There are different audiences for what we do. Being able to process the directions and pathways for ideas that are generated is very valuable and writing is one way that allows for this. I think it allows me to see how ideas move in different directions or have shifted from past thoughts. Your question though, it implies something like, "Here's a bunch of new ideas, we'll design something to accommodate those ideas. Done. Next one: here's a bunch of new ideas. We'll design something for those." It doesn't work that way of course. Architects work, more often than not, in a continuum. Being able to write something about what you have done is frequently also the text about the next thing to come. It's never purely retrospective because if there's something that embodies a certain number of ideas that you make clear, then you also open up questions that allow for more projects to be developed. I think that's what writing has been able to process in my work: certain themes and so forth. I would have to say that there was a period of time where I didn't actually commit that much to writing in terms of complete texts. The book that I'm about to publish (*MASS X*) was predeeded by years and years of notes and aphorisms and lectures, the latter of which are very much treated like projects. The more contemporary thing that I have been working on—maybe the most important contribution—is the problem of the 2D in architecture. I'm a person who believes in the depth and robustness of space and time and materiality. Someone might ask how the world of the immediate and the graphic work in my projects and I'll point out a number of specific ideas. Do all of those together prove what I'm talking about? No, they don't. But they do open up certain



possibilities and problems and discussions. I don't know of any architect who writes a text and says, "That's the theoretical blueprint, now we'll build it."

Tom Wiscombe and I were talking about object-oriented philosophy, which I came to a few years ago. We both agreed that it worked as a return to a new way of thinking about objects. I always thought of architecture and buildings, in essence, as having a life and having their own autonomy ... and that they exist when you don't look at them, and so on. Tom and I agreed that the existence of this particular text doesn't make architecture happen, but it does allow us to position what's going on in relation to other things

that we're already doing. I think that's really the case for most architects. As an example, look at Eisenman reading Deleuze in 1989. He discovered these writings about the fold while he was actually already working on geometric problems that resembled what the text had to say about it: things about the plane of eminence and the line as the moment between the past and the future. One could read that and say, "That's what I'm doing." We all work with source material and incorporate that source material. The best architects don't simply co-opt it and say, "Thank you Gilles Deleuze, you wrote

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ABOVE: Neil M. Denari Architects, *Mass X*, 2017

a text that I wasn't capable of writing, so here it is as architecture and I now own this by proxy." We write academic texts that we try to take somewhere with respect to our adjacent discipline, and that's what he did with his writings on those subjects. Those articles are still influential today.

There's a book that I recommend about the relationship between writing and images called *The Fashion System*, written in 1967 by Roland Barthes. It talks about speech, writing, and images in the world of fashion design. Picture a fashion magazine: there's a photograph of a model and she's wearing a particular outfit. There's a belt and a blouse and so on and the text next to the image is very specific and says something about the relationship of the white belt with fur on the edge to the green blouse and how it works really well for spring time occasions. Is that true or not true? You read it and say to yourself, "That's true." Right? But what the hell does a belt and a green blouse—

[Laughter]

What does it have to do with anything? Except that somebody designed it. Somebody puts it into a context and a fashion critic or a writer puts that text next to it and you come to agree. You say, "Yes." And it wasn't simply that what you're looking at is a green blouse and a white belt together. It doesn't just say that in a descriptive manner, right? It goes on to say how good it would look together and how good you'll feel when you wear it. Someone could say something completely different, or you turn the page and then there's another ensemble and then something else is written, and so on. Now, you know as well as I do that this type of writing is meant to get you to buy the white thing and the green thing. It's part of a world of seduction. For me, the best writing is seductive and not explanatory. I want the writing that I produce to persuade you to walk away and say to yourself, "I just don't see how there could be anything other than that thing in the world."

What if you're asked to design a fire station? You might say that the building is red because the fire truck is red. What if I said that my fire station's skin is made out of wood, which is ironic because it could burn. But really,

it's metal painted like wood and it will never burn and I wanted to send a different kind of cultural message. Who's more correct in their proposal? The person who says the fire station is red because the fire truck is red? Or me and my story of material irony? Who's right? No one's right. Who persuaded you more? I think I just did, right? Because it's going to be the only fire station made out of something that looks like wood.

Remember these things about architectural writing: your audience, the degree to which you have an idea, and how you're going to deliver that idea and under what context. Because we don't write pure philosophy, the writing is meant to be a blend of persuasion, explanation, exposition, provocation, and shock, and it takes a few years to figure out how to get even close to doing that correctly. When you're a young practitioner, all you want to do is try to not feel so naive. But this class is a great format for you to be able to begin identifying these problems. I never had anyone come in and ask what the value of something was and why it's worth spending time doing it and what it was good for. Conceptually, there's a lot of good to almost anything if you have an intention to it. I've been reading *The Fashion System* for so long over and over again that it's now easier for me because I'm older. The relationship between what we say, how we write it, and what the accompanying image is ... there's an interesting triangulation between all of that. You have to remember that you're the fashion designer. You're the designer *and* you're the critic *and* you want to try to understand it as a member of the audience. When you write a text, you do all of those things as opposed to just letting critics tell you what you're doing. I mean, critics will always tell you what you're doing, but if you say more about what you're doing via writing, then critics will hopefully take your argument to heart and approach it from the angles that you set up. Does that make sense? In other words, critics are not a mouthpiece for you. Their job is to understand and help make understood the work as the result of cultural practices.

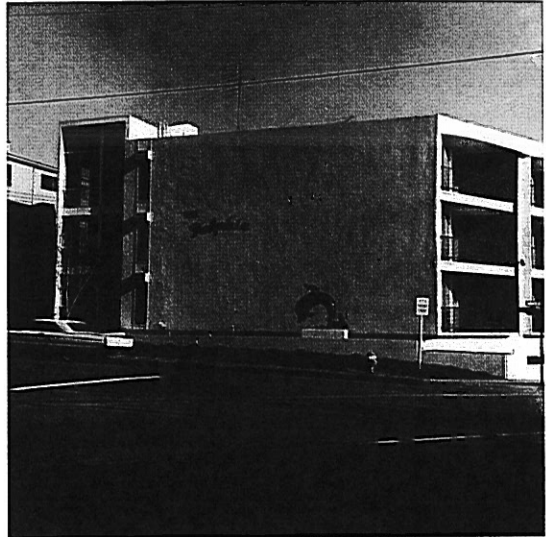
DILES: A discussion on drawing would be productive for a couple of reasons. The first reason is because if we look at it in a historical context—at your early days in



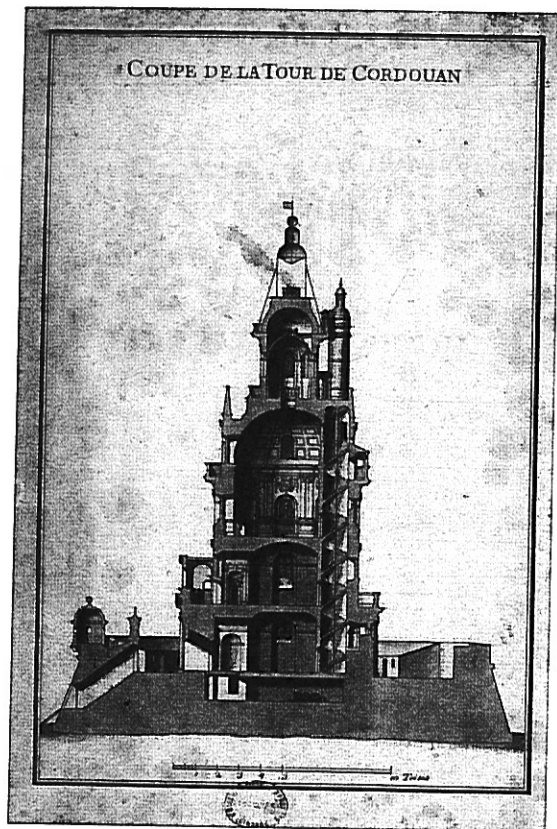
New York when you were writing, drawing, and making speculative projects—drawing was one of the big tools that you had available. I think that a pretty big evolution happened over the span of those early projects in terms of thinking and writing, but also in your approach to drawing and representation. The second reason is that I would say that drawing is another form of writing and there are these issues that, through these key words you used when talking about writing, stick out as likely having been very important—the idea of seduction, for example. The term *narrative* could also be applied to your drawings from that time.

DENARI: The closest I ever came to some sort of crisis was at that time. It's maybe a little dramatic to put so seriously, but I guess you could say it's true. We didn't have computers, right? So everything is coming from you and whatever tools you may have. The tension that I felt in school, in my own education and in my own interests, were very classical in terms of a certain type of expressionism on the one hand—whether you tracked it through art or sculpture or even architectural drawing—and the idea of drawing like a computer with no soul that resulted in something scientific and mechanical. It's a classic tension for us to have and I always wanted to embody both. I had never painted or anything, but I wanted to have painterly qualities. At the same time, the engineer in me wanted something else. I knew that if I were going to make a drawing, then I wanted that drawing to embody both of these ideas somehow. When I got to New York, I started drawing and was influenced by Steven Holl and the like. I was drawing in pencil, and the pencil can be personal and so expressionistic. I did that and then for six months I thought about drawing and representation. At some point, I said, "Okay, I'm gonna be this person." I put the pencil down and decided that I didn't want to have representational emotion. I wanted all the emotion to go into the design. The ambition was to design eccentric things and present them in non-eccentric ways. The thought was that there would be no filter between you and what I was drawing.

There were references, mostly in photography. I was very interested in Ed Ruscha, who made books in the '60s where he just went and photographed these



ABOVE: Ed Ruscha, 708 S. Barrington Ave. [*The Dolphin*], 1965



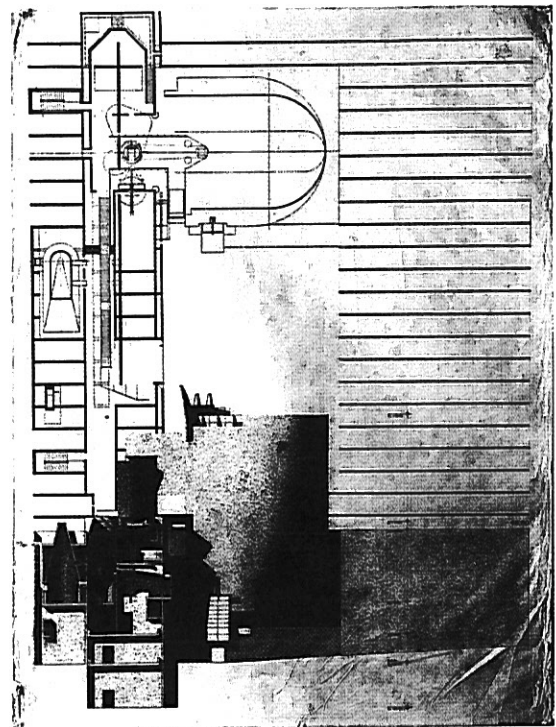
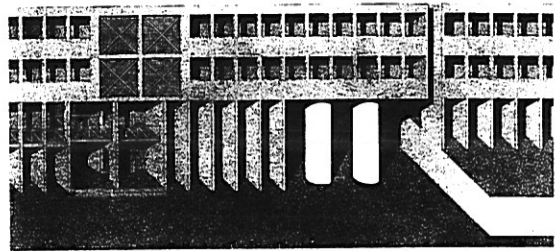
dingbat apartments and things like that. It's work that simply depicts the object, and I became really obsessed with that. And still, I employed tricks to find ways to incorporate emotion. It was almost like I was playing a game with myself. If you look at Beaux Arts drawings from the 19th century—the watercolor drawings or even somebody like Michael Graves—when you look at the section cuts, you see that poche that's red or pink and there are always really deep shadows, right? It's beautifully done, and it's always really straightforward as a plan, section, or elevation. There were fewer perspectives. I wanted to make a Beaux Arts drawing, but I wanted to do it in a very clear way. Beaux Arts drawing, if you want to imitate it, can only be done in watercolor with quite a bit of subtlety. I took the Beaux Arts drawing and crossed it with a scientific manual and turned all of the shadows black. Not gray, black. The one mediating reference for me at the time were the '70s drawings of Aldo Rossi, who also used black shadows and chiaroscuro and ink spray and his drawings were objective and scary and provocative all at the same time. I thought that there was emotion in those drawings, but not as if someone were merely scratching around with pencil lines in order to say, "This is me." Because that part should go into the design of the building, right?

I wasn't totally unaware of the specific emotions and feelings that were perhaps conveyed when you looked at these drawings. I used ink spray in the monastery drawings, which was a way of me trying to say, "It's not like I've got a pencil in my hand." I put a toothbrush into some Rapidograph black ink and my lines were the same as your lines, done in the same ink. Except, it's a little like Jackson Pollock. Because it's not color, you can look at it and still see an objectivity colliding with some sensibilities of a hand drawing. Between the monastery project and six to eight years later, I went even further away from the hand, using color and applied film—we'll talk about color at some point. But you look at these and you see the colors involved and the typography and I know as well as you do that I'm starting to make a unique voice, even though the motivation was to be voiceless. That became, and in many ways this still is, one of the trademarks of what we do. It's the deadpan-meets-the-eccentric, but in ways

that then create a bigger whole than what it is. It was a very conscious period of thinking about my own identity as an architect. By that time I was working on projects that were motivated by references to aerospace and things like that and I didn't think that you drew projects referencing aerospace with a pencil. You just don't do that because it would produce the wrong emotion. It had to be harder-edged and there seemed to be a lot of obvious logic in that.

I think that when you sit down and you make your drawings today, you usually do so on the mandate of a course requirement or a professor who says you must draw in a certain way. In my studios over the last few years, everybody has to make a drawing the same way. Part of that is to get a big gestalt project. Everybody's design is different, but since they all are drawn in the same way, you walk into the room and you see difference immediately despite the incredible veneer of similarity. As a studio professor, it's my way of saying that students can draw it however they want when they get out of the studio, but in the studio there are things to work on and I think that these issues—which are representative of my particular ethos—are important. It's not just a random, independent thing. I think the point is that representing ideas is what we have until we get to build them. Everything else lives a life in the world of illusion. I think that we should be super conscious about what that is and be responsible for it. I've tried to have a very heightened awareness of these issues from very early on. My advice to you is to try to understand what the value of a particular strategy is beyond being cool or being something that you're good at it, even if you're just appropriating something. Drawing is another way of talking about representation in general, but it gave me the foundation to work with when we started working with the computer. I really feel like it's the same ethos.

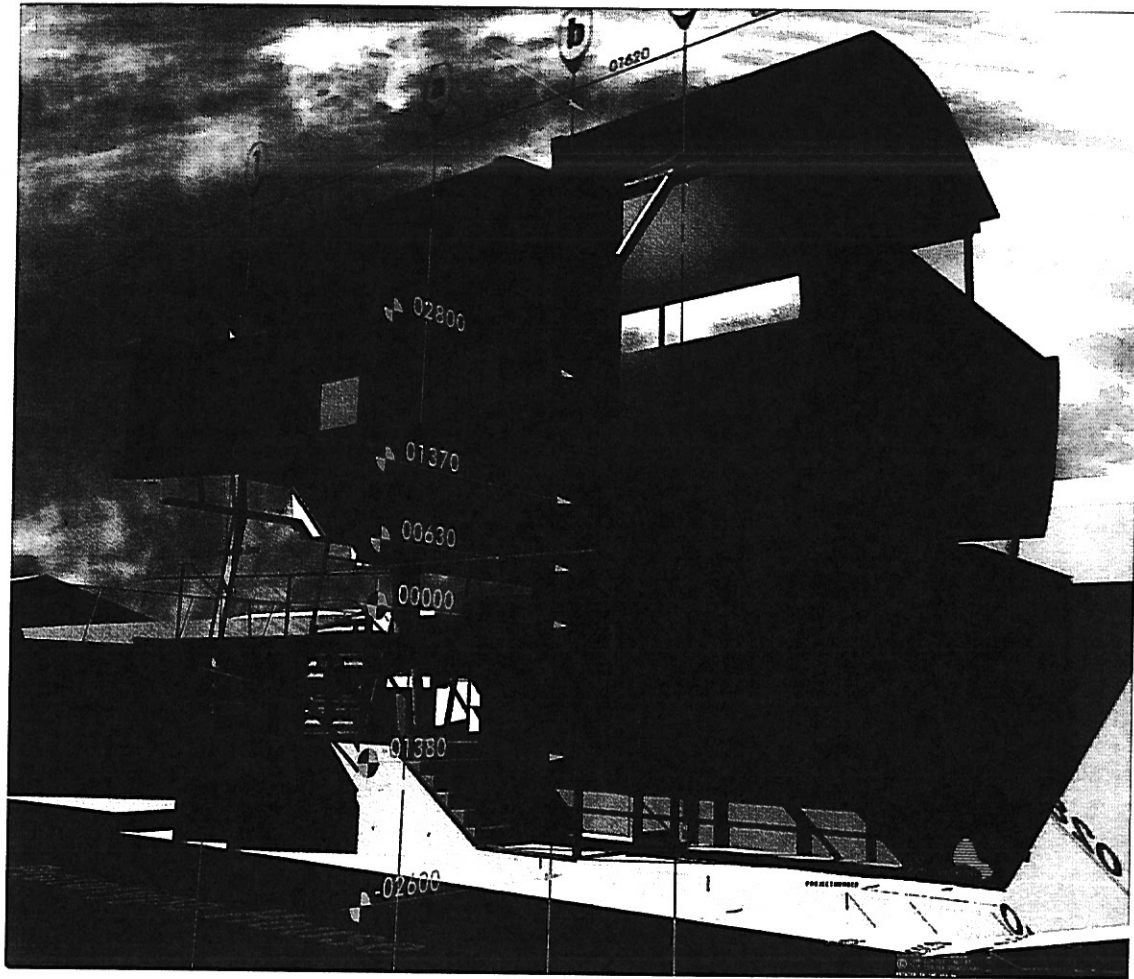
**STUDENT:** At one point you started moving away from drawing perspectives and toward drawing flat sections. I read that you called the perspective "the tyrant of drawing" since they're so heavy. Was that shift about removing emotion from the representation? A perspective can carry emotion because a person could occupy that space. But a section or section perspective can't be occupied physically.



ABOVE TOP: Aldo Rossi, Gallarate Quarter, 1966-73

ABOVE BOTTOM: Neil M. Denari, Monastery NYC, 1987

OPPOSITE: Section of Cordouan Tower with the new iron lantern, 18th Century



ABOVE: Neil M. Denari, Massey Residence, sectional perspective view, 1994

DENARI: It's almost like a planted question because it raises another point that came up during that time that was an issue for a lot of people. A perspective, when you look at it, has the viewer wearing a ball and chain, right? You can't move. It's not animated. It's not a movie. You're in a fixed position. It's a deadening device. This was understood in relation to what was happening at the Cooper Union at the time, where they never did perspectives. They only did plans and sections and elevations. Hejduk used section perspectives from time to time, but the world of the projection drawing was the world of the 3D, such as cabinet projections and isometric projections and so forth. The argument was that if you cut a section, then your eye can move anywhere it wants. You're not in the building. The eye is on the page in what's represented. You can move beyond the perimeter of the building and you can scan across and so forth, right? So while I did do perspectives, I found myself much more interested in this idea and spent a lot of time drawing in 2D, which did not negate or influence the idea of depth or spatiality. This was important.

The irony is that the perspective sends a message that suggests it's real when in fact it's a big illusion and the viewer is fixed. The section doesn't send any messages that suggest that it's an illusion. It's not an illusion. It's simply a case of one cutting cleanly through a building and being able to look into it and see spatial relationships. That's all it says, right? There was an idea developed by Brecht about the concept of a theatre of defamiliarization, which says that when you go to a movie and you go into the black space and you shut off for two hours, Hollywood wants you to buy into everything that it shows you. It uses escapism and fantasy. Then you go back into the harsh reality of life and it has done its job. Brecht wanted to say that when you're in a theater, you're watching a bunch of people in a room, and when you go outside on the street, you're watching a bunch of people in the street. They don't have lines to act, but it's the same thing. It was an idea that attempted to strip away the fantasy. And later in the '60s, there were a few films—by Godard and Jerry Lewis—where the camera was placed outside of a frame and you looked at people acting in a frame. It was a one-to-one relationship with the viewer looking at

actors, like in a dollhouse. It was a conceptual argument against the idea of romanticizing or capitulating to the humanist need to search for empathy and comfort in everything. You can analyze every photograph that you've taken and understand where you were in relation to the subject matter or space, but what I find fascinating about all of this is that this is everyday life. I'm sitting here and I'm looking through that window, and I'm looking into the parking garage and I can see the cars beyond. I might see something going on and I'm not in that space, but we can all still experience that world together, right? If I'm in the parking garage, it's a different story. If I turn around and look back and I see you in the room then there are still many layers of interaction and relation. There is a lot of distance perhaps, but we're still in a visually-shared space.

I wanted my particular project to be about trying to understand and imagine spaces and places together and to facilitate the participation in a world in which architecture serves to collect and embrace people while recognizing the tensions and distances that we have. It's almost a way of saying that the decisions I made about drawing thirty-five years ago were not strictly about whether they were in ink or color or whatever, but that they were about the relationships that exist when you view something.

Today, when we build projects, we try to understand some of the same issues and try to build in some of these questions. If you can get hold of some instinctive ideas early on, you'll find that you'll really just be elaborating on those ideas and trying to evolve them when exposed to changes that occur in contemporary life. That's what it means to have one or two ideas. Not an idea that you protect, but ideas that evolve over time. That's what Le Corbusier said as well. If you look at a plan from 1928, it appears again in 1968 and on and on. I think it's a good discussion to not only talk about, but for me to remind myself of. We make renderings in the office and I don't operate now the way in which I operated then because I can't work as an architect if I walked in and said, "No perspectives, we're just gonna do sections." It would be absurd. But the way in which we set up the camera when we do an image is super specific and very particular and not random at all.

DILES: There's a drawing of the monastery in which you draw the frame. It's an aerial perspective of the monastery and you draw the cockpit—the interior of the cockpit of the helicopter. Cedric Price did this with the Fun Palace as well. I was showing that project to my students and realized he was dealing with a similar issue. Or at least he made a similar drawing.

DENARI: Oh yeah, that's the one where he's in the helicopter. I know that drawing. In my particular drawing, you're looking through the instrument as though the instrument is a window, but I drew it into the gyroscopic horizon. It was like a head's up display that you're looking through. I was searching for incredibly obvious ways to be able to incorporate the things I liked and was interested in. That particular drawing had to do with optics and the point of view of the observer. These concerns helped steer the trajectory of the work. I would spend as much time drawing the border and other details as I would actually drawing the building. To put it through the filter of technology, that was the game. Cedric Price was doing it, and a few people had something similar. That technique was able to produce the aura that I was interested in.

DILES: So the interest was in describing what the instrument sees?

DENARI: Yes. That's not through the eye of the pilot. It was a view through the instrument. It was a way of taking that as an interface of an objectified device, as opposed to your point-and-shoot version of the image. Speaking of which, I was just looking online this morning and there's a twenty-megapixel camera that you can plug into your phone and it turns the phone into an SLR where you can change shutter speeds and white balance, etcetera. At the end of the advertisement it explains that the selfies you can take are amazing.

[Laughter]

What was interesting was that I kept trying to figure out how to put it on a tripod? Right? Nobody puts a cell phone on a tripod. Of course, that's not the point because this thing is really small and you don't carry a tripod around. Mostly it reminded me of the fact that

today everybody is a photographer. We have our own lives and our own subject matter and you can post directly to Facebook and Instagram. I am interested in what that means for representing architecture. I can't quite get to the point where we adopt the true, unselfconscious, amateur, badly backlit image. We've done renderings where they look like they were done with a phone, cockeyed and off somehow, but I'm not there yet. Sylvia Lavin would say, "Well maybe that's what your next step is." But for now, that would be a commitment to a concept that would produce less than beautiful images and I prefer beautiful images. I say all these things because my job is to help you consider what you're thinking about and where you will go with it or how you will use the tools available to you. All of this is to say that this stuff is important because it has to do with how you communicate—or post to social media—and all of this is very relevant to what we do.

STUDENT: Some of your earlier work was inspired by the parts of machines. Do they still inspire you to work or has your inspiration grown beyond that?

DENARI: I think that work met a threshold around 1990 when I started to feel exhausted by what I was doing. Partly it was exhaustion, but it was also curiosity about other technologies and the fact that things were starting to melt into air. What does an architect do if they want to participate in that world? In some respects, it was mystery. The fact is that everything was melting into the air and, in terms of industrial design, there were discussions around exposing versus enclosing. There was a greater and greater sense of technology beyond the push button: things like voice activation, where it's not about the drama of moving parts or a Newtonian explanation of how anything works. It felt like it was okay for technology to be mysterious and provocative instead of self-explanatory. I think everything since then has evolved away from a number of those issues. In some ways it was simply being an architect and not being able to rely on extraneous things to generate effect. There are budgets and you can't just

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OPPOSITE TOP: Neil M. Denari, Monastery NYC, 1983

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Cedric Price, Fun Palace, 1959-61

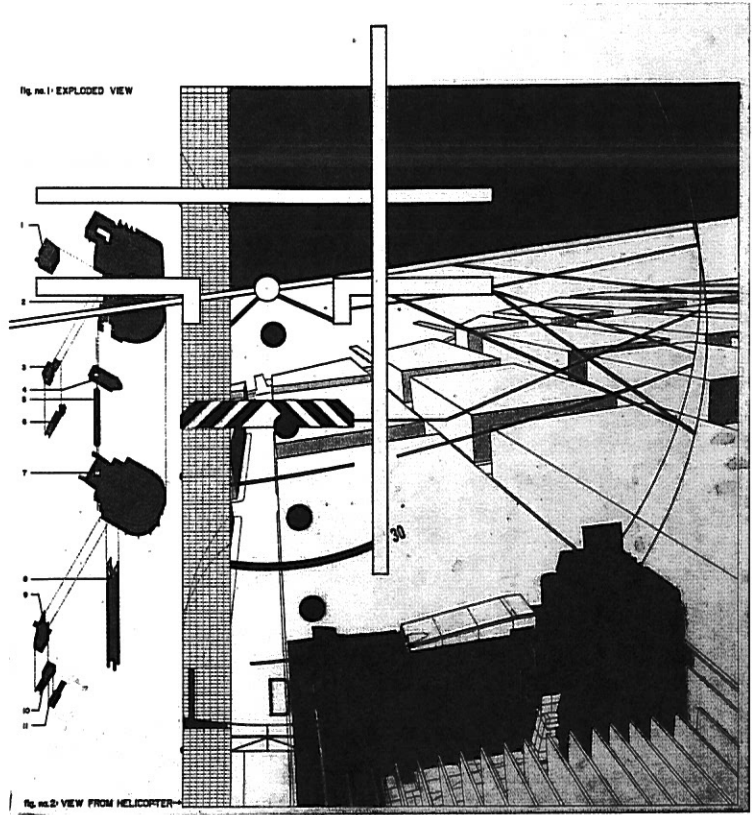
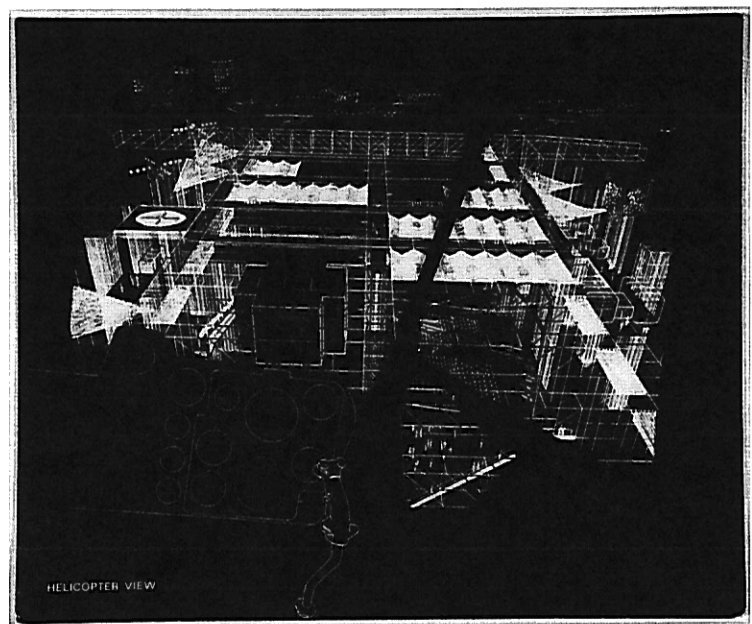


Fig. no. 2 - VIEW FROM HELICOPTER



keep adding things in a decorative way in the hopes that if it looks more like a machine, then people will believe that it is one and it will be just like the rest of the technical world. I think it was partly just growing up, but it was also timely because of the problematics of many architectural cultures that were forming. Everyone who was interesting for me—Eisenman, Kwinter, etcetera—were pretty much looking at the world and declaring that the old paradigms were simply not going to work anymore. I was influenced by that and I wanted to help the conversation. The whole idea of being an individual is one thing, but we're all part of the tide that raised the boat, so to speak. I think that I always knew that I'd be able to find a voice that would help that, but it had to be more economical and it had to be materially plausible. So I had a lot of motivations even at that young age. Not only did I want to be relevant, but I was also moving toward what I knew was going to be an architectural practice, assuming a few things fell into place.

**STUDENT:** Would you say there was a switch when you started working in the digital realm with AutoCad and 3D software? When you had this new tool, you must have had to reevaluate how you thought about presenting drawings and your work.

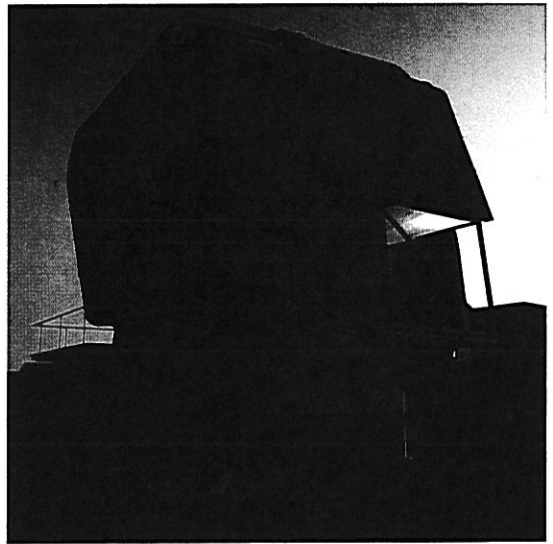
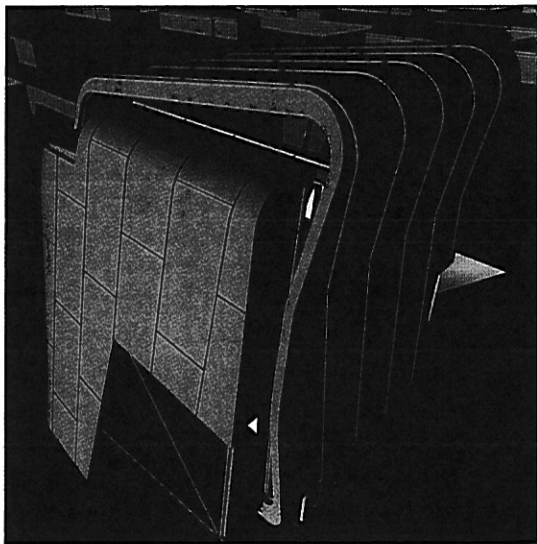
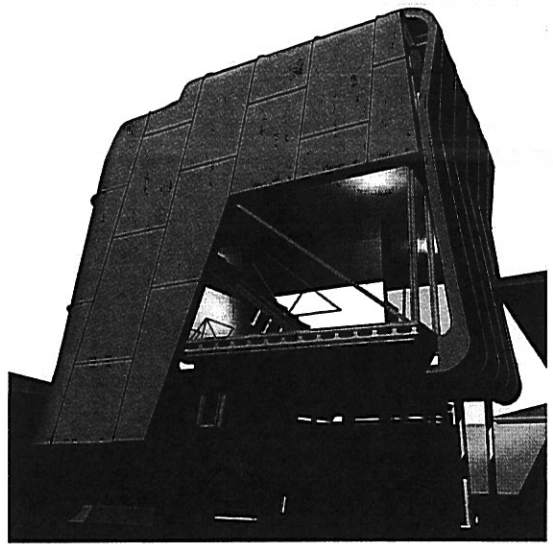
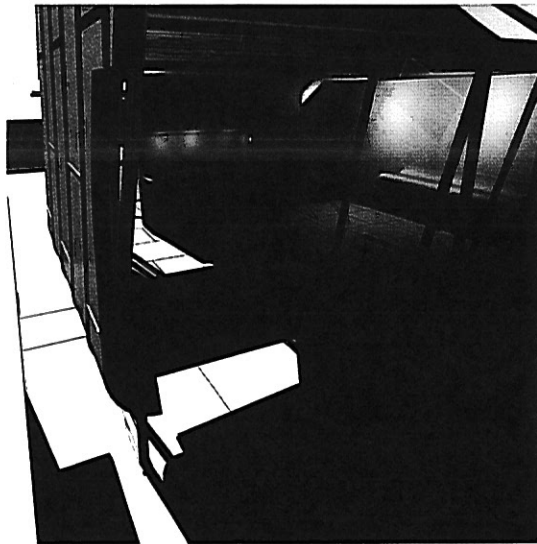
**DENARI:** That's a really well thought out question because I think that when we got the first modeling package, there were actually only a few other people tackling the same thing, and we were all in L.A.—Greg Lynn was one for instance. I wasn't using it for form generation. The geometric project was more of a simpler intellectual project. But being able to model something and then simply spin it as a wire frame and in real time was a big thing. We had to start making up our own ideology about what we were gonna do with it because the freedom of being able to toggle four windows back and forth—top view, side views, perspective windows—was curious, because I was still thinking about issues of profile and the specificity of the radius and things like that. Then all of a sudden we could model something and spin it around. I certainly did that for the first few years because it was a necessary experimentation: moving the camera inside the space, moving the camera outside the building, toggling the ground plane off, looking at it from below

etcetera. It was a bizarre, free fall world. I thought it would be foolish to not exploit it or accept it. It was like the tool supplied some freedom, as opposed to the intellectual position of saying how the perspective is limiting. I could make as many perspectives as I wanted. I could animate them instead of laboring over one monumental image a day: set it up, move the camera, up, right, set it up, again, and so on. It never felt like a ball and chain.

Just as important was the fact that a digital model would yield a nearly infinite number of images. That was the way in which I got around the intellectual issues I had with it. The perspective was no longer about a fixed point because it was any point you wanted. You had to select points of view and that's really when the world of cinema and photography became a huge set of references for me because that's what we were doing, right? We were taking pictures of a scene that we were making. It's still exactly the same thing today, even though we are now years away from it being new.

So, you could say it was a monumental shift, but you could also say it was just a sloughing off of the limitations and embracing the possibilities of points of view from a variety of different locations. Of course, we rendered elevations and we did sectional perspectives and we just exploited every possible angle with the camera, each time knowing when we made a rendering that there was a camera doing it. It's not a drawing, right? I was very happy when those tools were available because that's really always what I wanted: a device that's an interface. I didn't have to touch a pencil anymore. It's the user deciding and making commands. You decide how to find your voice within the tool. A few years later, Columbia was the first school to do the paperless studio. Even at that time, people like Jesse Reiser or Stan Allen—people in my generation—knew this was an interesting thing, especially based on the cultural desire to be very straight forward versus expressionistic. At the time, it was suggested that they'd only ever use the computer for computation, because that's what they're built for. They'd never use it to make a rendering because a rendering would be a capitulation to an artist making a painting. And I said, okay, well that's great, but I was just interested





in embracing the possibilities and didn't want to have any limitations as to what it was. A lot of people were using it more for form generation with animation tools while I was modeling ideas that were not predicated on those processes or tools. I already existed in a slightly different camp. That's a little bit of an enlightenment into the dawn of that time. There's a project at the CCA called *The Archeology of the Digital* where they've curated twenty-five projects from the late '80s to the

mid-'90s. That will be the initial documentation for you guys that explains what the hell happened at the dawn of architectural digital technology and who believed in what. It was very liberating because it was a nearly infinite number of perspectives that made it seem like it was a lighter world instead of one that was so heavy.

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ABOVE: Neil M. Denari, *Vertical Smoothhouse*, 1997

**STUDENT:** Have you ever explored physical modeling or has the advent of 3D printing had any effect on any of your work more recently?

**DENARI:** Good question. Part of the preference—then and now—for working digitally is not about any sort of disinterest or hostility toward the model as representation, whether it's one-to-one or miniature. The issue, to me, in terms of process, is feedback. What does a physical model give you in terms of feedback versus a drawing? Feedback is a way to talk about information or knowledge and is used in a lot of different disciplines, whether it's biofeedback or intellectual feedback or visual feedback. We don't just think up something and then represent it and walk away because we've represented it. We look at something and it gives us feedback, right? I'm talking about our responsibility as producers, not as audience members. What is a model versus a drawing for somebody in a museum? I will tell you that, for the most part, people like to go look at models rather than drawings because they're tangible objects and they generally give more feedback to a lay audience. I've looked at people in MoMA's gallery. I've stood there and watched people look at the drawings and move on, and then they go over to the Fallingwater model and they really dig it, right? So that's feedback. I think most architects who use models extensively draw on the idea that the model will produce more emotional feedback for most members of the audience.

But let's analyze feedback. Walking around a model versus spinning a digital model on the screen? You might suggest that's the same thing. Well, no, it's not. Because in such an instance I'm walking around in space looking at a 3D print or model versus looking at pixels. Isn't the physical model going to give you more feedback because you're a physical being and you're in space? My argument is that it does not. I personally get just as much or more feedback through the illusion of 2D as I do walking around a physical object, and I don't say that ideologically. I don't wish it on you or anything like that. That's just me. I've always had a tremendous comfort level with the particular feedback of drawings. It doesn't mean that models don't have their place, it just means that through economy—and I literally mean a necessary economy of resources—I can do more in

my office. I invest more in computers than I do in 3D printers, etcetera, because that's the preferred mode of generating feedback in our process. I personally do not get much feedback on a small 3D printed model of something. This is just my personal diet and my way of being. I tend to need things to be more concrete and more material ... more real. In the old days you would make a white foamcore model for a number of reasons. Foamcore is already planar and in the form of a wall or a floor plate. Is the building white? No, the building's made out of brick and wood, but we would tell ourselves that we're looking at a simulation of the space in white foamcore. I personally never got that much feedback from such a process because it was a deferral mechanism to saying, "Well, let me get the space good and then everything else will come after." I don't operate that way. I like everything in all at once. In the office, I don't look at wireframe models unless we're just talking about how the geometry comes together. No emotion, no nothing. As an example, we might do it to figure out how we get a cone to transition into a corner. Then I'll look at the model and we'll spin it around. Otherwise, if I spin the wireframe model around with the team, I'm only looking at it for very acute and specific things. I hate to ask you this question, but how much time do you spend spinning your wireframe models around? Like 99 percent of the time, right? And you're making judgments on something that has no seduction, right? To me, it has no seduction. I don't know what it is. I don't know what it's made out of. There's no shadow. Models—even the wireframes—don't give me enough feedback in the production process.

Maybe I'm the only one who says that I don't really get much feedback from all of that. I do think that my position is unique. Almost everybody else in my generation who uses digital tools—but who weren't trained with them—rely more on models than on the illusion of the image. I think that's true almost uniformly. Or maybe there's just some secret envy that I have. I don't have 6,000 square feet with a model shop in the back. When you go to Morphosis? My God! Thom Mayne's got everything! He can make a drawing, but he can also make ten-foot-tall models of his towers. And you know what? There's a lot of feedback there because they're obsessed and they're insane and they

make these big, amazing, beautiful things. If I snapped my fingers, I'd probably say that I'd want all of that tomorrow. I would find a way to find feedback in all of that. If you're Frank Gehry and you're the master of the giant model, you've got to rent the room to hold the model and these things cost thousands of dollars a month. You need to have a budget for these things. For now, I need more phenomena to be able to make judgments faster. With schedules being what they are, it's just the way I've always worked. That's why we're very exacting about every pixel. I really do like insanely precise and beautiful renderings. I don't get much feedback out of folk art renderings or things like that.

These are all very good questions. They're incredibly relevant questions for you right now. Maybe one last, slightly off-tangent, generational-time-frame thing before we move on to the next topic: I have a fifteen-year-old daughter and she's into the '70s—she's a fashion hound. She always shows me what she buys because I like talking with her about all this stuff. She showed me a Led Zeppelin shirt she bought and I asked myself a question before I said anything, "Does she have to listen to Led Zeppelin's music to wear the t-shirt, or is it just okay to wear the t-shirt?" I asked myself that. I truly didn't know what the answer was, so I never said it out loud. I didn't come in all imperiously and go, "Well, pfft, you can't wear that t-shirt unless you listen to them enough and you proclaim them brilliant because they're the greatest band in the world." I'm of two minds on certain things and music is always a good example. I was watching a documentary on punk rock a couple of days ago, and in 1974 and 1975 CBGB's had started happening, along with the Ramones. This is 1975, pre-internet, pre-everything, you know? I'm imagining myself back then: I'm in a bar in Houston, Texas and I'm drinking a Lone Star longneck and in the background is the Marshal Tucker Band or something. It's some kind of country music. In New York they're going crazy on punk music, right? I have no idea because I'm in Houston. And then there's the moment where you discover something and it's all yours. Only you and the other punk and the other weirdos are into it, right? How great is that? But when you're dialing in your music on your phone it's not the same because you have access to everything, right? Is it better to live in the world I lived in

or in your world? I would argue that it's better to live in your world of total accessibility.

The issue is to find joy in what you curate into your world. Part of this joy is the knowledge that you share some interests or obsessions or discoveries with some people. Almost everybody knows about everything at some point, but everyone has to choose what to pay attention to. This sometimes makes it harder to decide to eliminate certain things or focus on certain things. Maybe it has to do with how you see—or are taught to see—contemporary life or how you receive culture or information. I'm just here to say that you're leaving school and that the choices you make and the things that you curate into your life will help to determine which way your design identity will steer. Anyway, I'm gonna go back to my daughter and I'm going to say something like, "Okay, you should know at least these four songs."

[Laughter]

Because that will be good enough. You don't have to be a scholar of Led Zeppelin to love them. You can decide in two months, or just add the few songs that you like to your queue.

DILES: "Black Dog?" You can at least suggest some of the songs, right?

DENARI: Yeah, exactly. I'll say something like, "Well, this is the one where Jimmy Page was playing the guitar with a bow, so you need to know this one. And your friends will try to tell you that he copied that from this other guy and—" And do you know what? That's just me trying to get her to see what I saw and to have it be as impactful for her as it was for me. But this is what parents and teachers and people who are interested in the world do.