

Recycling Materiality

A conversation with Jennifer Siegal of the Office of Mobile Design

How have your earlier more transient structures impacted the design of the Seatrain Residence?

Siegal: To a large extent, it goes back to my training at Sci-Arc, where I received my masters, and it was through that education, I was exposed a lot to ideas around design/build and recycling of materials, and had created and built a project in my final year at Sci-Arc with another colleague of mine, Todd (Erlandson). It was a type five construction course where we ended up creating an outdoor café for the school. Due to our very limited student budgets we chose to work with found materials wherever we could find them, and really began thinking about ideas of AdHoc-ism and working in a way that Rudolphski has described in his book *Architecture Without Architects*. You know, the idea that a found environment can be more stimulating than maybe a designed environment, or one created by less professional means. I had written subsequently an article and did some other research around those ideas. The Seatrain Residence is really a spin off of a lot of my training as a student.

Well, I find that fairly interesting. I'm in the design/build studio here at Kansas State. So I can really relate to what you're saying. Our kind of found condition is this old, rustic basement, and what we're starting to insert elements into these conditions. Also we had a project earlier in the semester where we took old drafting

desk table tops and developed them into seating. So, I can really see where you're coming from material-wise.

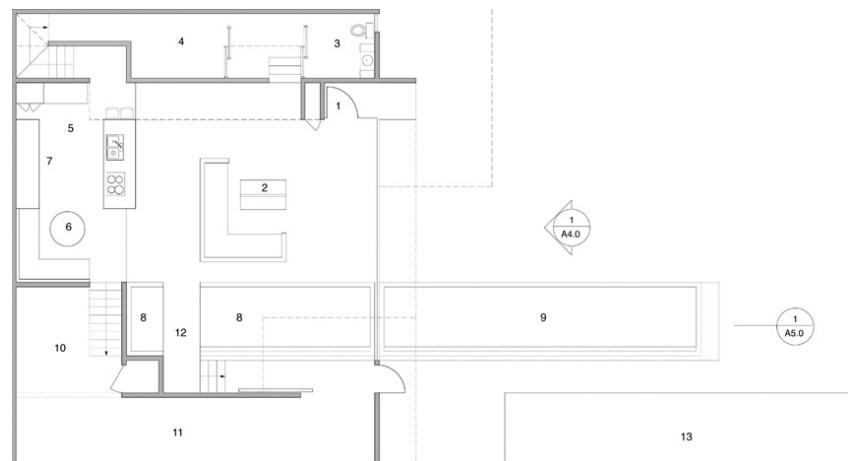
Siegal: And it's really working restrictions or limitations—finding the poetry or the art in what is typically the mundane. And it's also recognizing the alternatives for things that would be considered off-the-shelf products.

Becoming an urban scavenger or something.

Siegal: Right. In fact, someone who's written quite a bit about that, who was also a professor of mine, is Margaret Crawford, who really opened my eyes up to the idea, of the urban scavenger.

How did the design and construction process actually work on the Seatrain Residence? Was it a more established tectonic set of drawings that you were working off of?

Siegal: Well, I also haven't come out of that environment of Sci-Arc; of really a sort of understanding of materials and hands-on construction. Even after I graduated I taught design/build studios, I still do occasionally, when I have some time. The thinking in my studios, and the way I set up the problem is very much aligned with the way that the Seatrain Residence was constructed. So, an example of that might be that there's no set idea. That it's a constant work-in-progress, and as one thing gets built and you



notice the relationship of one spatial experience or one material rubbing up against another, you might change your mind and move in a different direction. I encourage that thinking a lot with my students. It's really in the final form and it's pure tactility that you only understand what the potential of the architecture can be, and that is the way that we built Richard Carlson's house. But, we had a schematic idea. We had models. We had drawings, but they weren't stuck in stone. It was very much about constant dialogue at the site, everyday. Talking about how one piece might be moved. How another window might be cut open based on view that we hadn't seen before. Something else covered up because we decided that wasn't something we wanted to be looking at. The general idea was always there, but the details were very much decided in the moment, on the site.

And do you think that's the strongest relationship, or does that relate back to some of your earlier work? That it really wasn't necessarily that different of a process.

Siegal: Right, exactly.

I guess a question for you; after having read some of your other work and talking about this nomadic lifestyle—did you find some sort of greater desire through the design and building of the Seatrain Residence to become a much more fixed kind of individual yourself?

Siegal: Wait, what are you asking me? Have I stopped moving around?

Well, is there more of a desire to find some sort of 'place'?

Siegal: I haven't really thought about that, and the project, I mean, it's not

my house, it's a house for a client. Even though it's a very collaborative project. And that's the other thing I wanted to add is that, I think it's important, especially for your student population or your readers to understand. That it's the relationship between the architect, subcontractors, the contractor, the client, the people that actually build the structures—it's that dialogue that has the utmost importance in the whole scheme of things. That you have to be able to work with the people that might know a lot more than you do, and be able to understand that the way something is built or crafted might take precedent over some theoretical design idea. So, somehow, I like to have that idea evoke 3D or something in this piece. The students kind of go out there. But I think a lot of students at your school understand that because of your design/build exposure they get.

Right, taking folks' expertise where they can and using that as the potential that it is.

Siegal: But to go back to your other question of my nomadic lifestyle. This project was a kind of looking back, and maybe it was like the past, present and future rolled into one because the project is not so much about nomadic pieces, but more about the client who lives a nomadic lifestyle. This is one dwelling, and he travels the world visiting his different houses, or different interests at the time. We were joking that there's levels of nomadic lifestyles, from people that are homeless, to people that chose to live lightly, to people that are hyper-ly rich that just spend there days traveling the world. So, this is more of an expression of someone who lives in different places, and comes to rest occasionally. What is interesting at a material level about this project is that

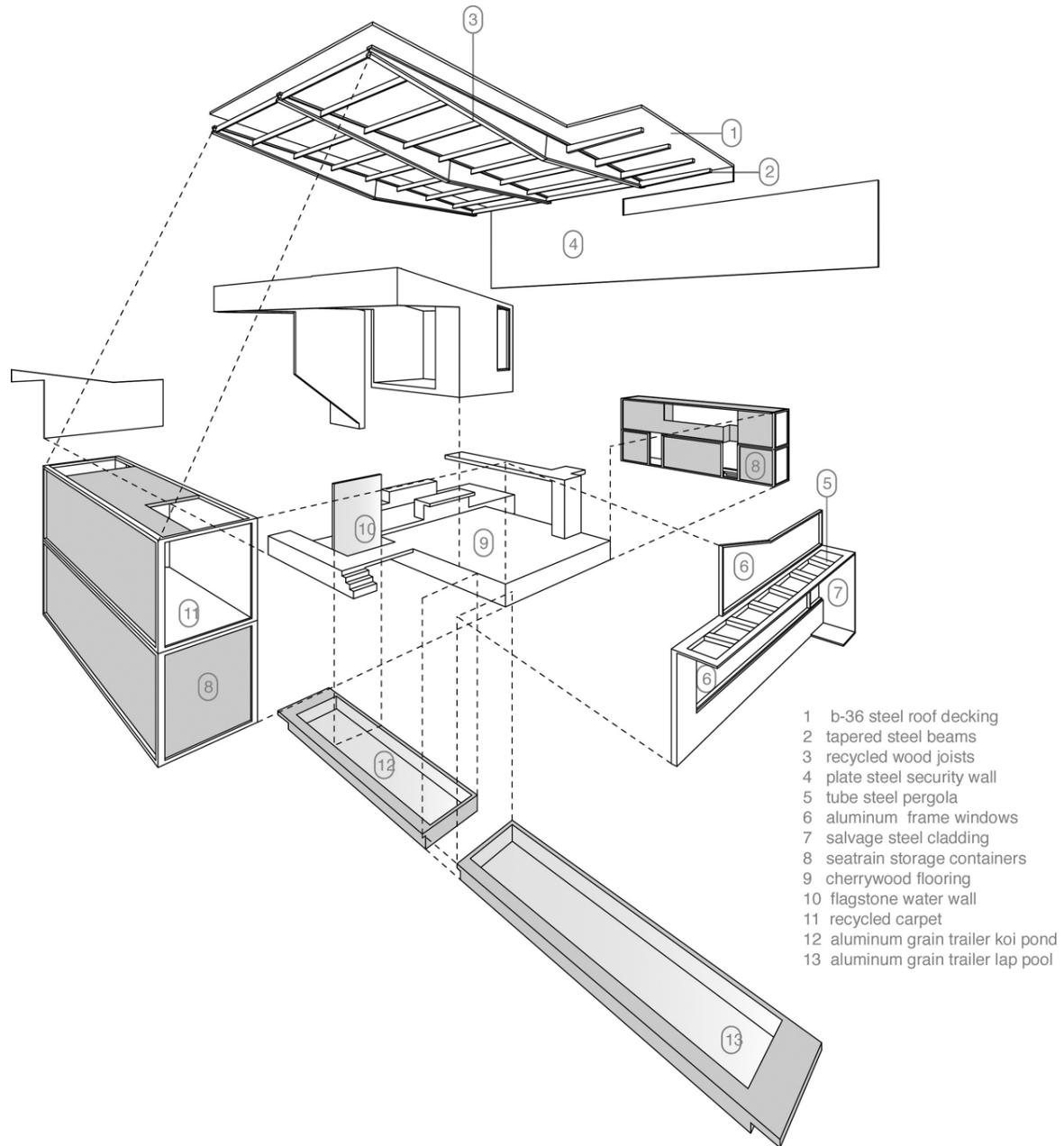




it is made up of objects that are typically meant to be moving, and that these grain trailers and shipping containers that proliferate our kind of industrial landscape have, for the moment, found a resting spot. This might not be their last hurrah, but it's an idea about thinking about, I guess, not industrial waste, but industrial products that respond to the width of the road or the leftovers that one might find in a junkyard or someone who's consumed with the idea of movement or mobility. But I don't see this as a direct response to some of the other work that is purely about movement or kinetics or deployment, portable things. It's probably something a little bit more latent, and more in keeping with my architectural training and background.

Do you find that the work that you've done — is there something about Los Angeles that has made an impact on it?

Siegal: Yes, most definitely. Los Angeles is a state of fluidity, and what I love about living in the city is the diversity of culture. I am a traveler at heart, and I feel I can move from country to country all within a thirty-mile radius and be completely embedded in an area where all of the signage and the food types and the dress and people are different. I feel like I'm in Tokyo or I feel like I'm in Bombay, and I really enjoy that about Los Angeles quite a bit. The other piece that is a big influence is the freeways, in that I spend my time driving, as so many Angelinos do, but





I'm constantly looking at what's on the freeway, and what is around me. The trucks are what I'm specifically talking about. I've become fascinated with truck design and automobile manufacturing processes; and trucks being possibly some of the most innovative, creative out there. Each one is different,—you're looking at the back of some oil tanker, and it has this giant, shiny, elliptical form and it's reflecting the traffic in a really interesting way. It's like an incredible space for thought and creativity as you're driving around. So, I think Los Angeles has been an tremendous influence and is a great place to practice architecture because of its temporality. It doesn't necessarily need a solid base. Here you can practice new ideas, and challenge some of the more conventional architectural precedents because there is the financial backing. There's also the use and creativity that goes along with the Hollywood film world. Does that make sense?

Yes, I think it does. You described this mobility of people, but it's the nature of people to have a place where they've established their roots. We were just studying in Italy, for instance, and you really see that ingrained in the people, going back to their heritage. What does that, really do for your architecture?

Siegal: I'm not suggesting that by any means. I think that these ideas supplement a static landscape. This is not a suggestion that we all hit the road. I think it's a response to a combination

of conditions. Some of them have to do with technology, and the way in which technology has fed our mobile lifestyles. The thinking that, here we are working on the road, but we're not actually bringing our architecture with us or that people haven't really reconsidered that possibility as they had maybe back in the early seventies. So, that's one thing. Can we have options? Can there be alternatives? I'm also a big proponent of things like trailer parks or RVers—the Snowbirds—and people even at Burning Man. People that form these instant communities on the road, that have these common interests that might come to rest for a day, a week, a month, a year in a particular location, and move on. And maybe form tighter bonds and alliances with that immediate community that they've helped to create more than they would with their next door neighbor that they've been at war with for the last five hundred years. But, I think that there is something to do with choice in terms of who we feel a sense of community and connection to. I know many people, in particular a lot of my students, spend maybe more time in chat rooms connected to somebody halfway around the world than the person who's sitting next to them at their desk. So, I think community and communication is found at many different levels, and not based on a stone house you've occupied over the years.

A note to close on; how do you feel about movement and time and circumstance?





How do these elements play into your architecture?

Siegal: Can you be a little bit more specific?

I guess, with the theme of “sequence” — this idea of someone moving through space. How does that become some sort of phenomenon to design around?

Siegal: Well, I think that in terms of the materiality, and the language of form, and the conceptual spaces. Things like that I’ve been working with over the years. This huge influence from the Modern architecture movement here in L.A., probably elsewhere, but people

such as Ray and Charles Eames, Neutra, and Schindler and Gregory Ain who were really thinking about the relationship between the exterior and the interior. And how there’s a kind of blurring or blending between those two spaces, and the use of lighter materials, stronger materials; steel, glass. Definitely a big interest for me is sustainable and environmentally friendly materials. Materials that are more sensitive to human beings and the environment. I think those qualities of the modernist architecture movement are very present in the work that I do. I think in some ways that the Seatrain house could be seen as a sort of homage to the fifties. In that way the thinking is

about cleaner lines, more open spaces. I was very much influenced by the work of Donald Judd, where I had spent a summer as a resident at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, and overwhelmed with this idea of less is more: the difficulty of being more minimal in your approach to architecture. The way that you position yourself on the ground is, for me, a challenge that I find quite appealing. Though I’m not sure how you make a direct correlation between that idea and sequence, but that’s your challenge. I mean, it would be easy to talk about the sequence of spaces moving by if you’re talking about a pure mobile environment. That the landscape is constantly changing, or your view of the land and the relationship to the human being and the ground is a series of frames. That would be a kind of interesting idea about sequence, I suppose. But, the ultimate sequence for me is about placelessness and that it has something to do about timelessness as well, and the ability to exist anywhere at any place at any time, and bind it with you. That would be something that is important for me to convey.

Seatrain Residence

Recently completed, this 3,000 square foot custom residence playfully uses traditional commercial, industrial materials. Using storage containers and steel found on-site in downtown LA, Office of Mobile Design created an oasis without abandoning or disguising the industrial landscape that

inspired the design and provided the materials.

Situated across the road from the Brewery, a 300 loft live-work artist community, large panels of glass throughout the house were employed to open up the space, allowing natural light to pour in, and connect to the rest of the artists’ community. In keeping with the artistic spirit of this community, the project was a collaborative experiment between the architect, the client, and the fabricators, using a design/build approach where creative and structural decisions were made as the house was constructed.

This home literally grows up from the land around it, engaging with and incorporating the industrial history of downtown LA through the use of found on-site materials. Just as this area of LA reinvented itself, so too did these materials. Grain trailers were transformed into a koi fish pond and a lap pool. Large storage containers were used to create and separate the dwelling spaces within the house. Each storage container has its own individual function: one is the entertainment and library area, another is the dining room and an office space overlooking the garden below, another serves as the bathroom and laundry room, and yet another is the master bedroom, a visually dramatic protruding volume that wraps around the upper part of the house. This unfussy space allows for the dynamic interplay of materials

and forms, the contrast of corrugated metals, industrial containers and exposed wooden beams, all highlighted with warm, calm green hues.

All of the containers used in the house were altered in surprising ways. Some were severed into separate pieces, while others were added onto, layered or wrapped, showing the myriad design possibilities in re-purposing these materials. There are wrapped design elements throughout, including a 12-foot high steel plate fence that wraps around the entire site. At one point, the fence lifts up, stretching to become a canopy that gives shade to the entrance, creating the feeling of a ground plane being tilted upward.

In this residence recycled materials are not just practical and cost effective, but their use creates a unique, dramatic architectural vocabulary. The innovative combination of recycled storage containers, grain trailers, steel and glass results in a house that is highly sculptural, open and LA modern.

Project Credits:

Principal: Jennifer Siegal Senior Designer: Kelly Bair Assistant: Andrew Todd Creative Director/General Contractor: Richard Carlson Interior Design: Arkkit Forms/David MocarSKI Landscape Design: James Stone Interior Water Features: Liquid Works/Rik Jones Waterscape Design: Jim Thompson Steel Fabrication: Steel Man/Don Griggs Glass Fabrication: Penguin Construction/Gadie Aharoni Artist: Phillip Slagter.

