

Limits of Process

Iceberg Project

Iceberg is the collaborative project of James Cathcart, Frank Fantauzzi and Terence Van Elslander. We work with process as a way to think with ordinary conditions and materials. Process interests us as a critical implement; a utensil with which unseen conditions are made manifest. Our collaborative is not interested in making more architecture, or in proposing new forms or styles. Nothing in our work is of direct value to architects, or designers. Not architecture, not exactly art, our work is interested more in the critical ability of process than its formative ability. We reverse or apply oblique processes to situations or to material. We move from form, situation, and or material through a process of reorganization, or a process of logical consequence.

Many artists, and architects, are interested in creating their work through process. Process is the course of becoming, and must be a natural or involuntary path of actions. There is an internal necessity in process, which determines the next step. Process as the motivator of work is not new in the art world. Material based arts: fibres, metal smithing, clay, for example, are heavily oriented to process. In these arts, process guarantees result.

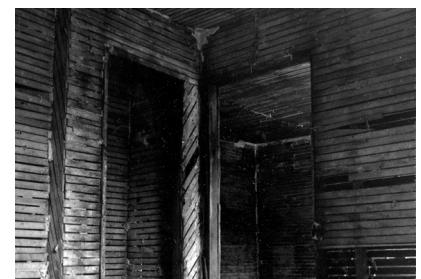
Arts, not defined by material, have also experimented with process. The type and currency of the particular process has been debated, but in all cases used to lend rigour, abstractive value and singularity to the art work,

while eliminating volition. Process driven art is related to conceptual art, in that it places meaning in the formation of the work rather than exclusively in the final form. Process is associated with anti art; interested more in the situation than in the aesthetic object.

It seems obvious that the production of architecture must involve process in some way. During the 60's and 70's there was a lot of discussion about design process. Mostly having to do with programming methods and a social behaviorist agenda. More recently there has been an interest in processes removed from the larger context of architecture, which can directly create form. Beginning from the geometric, plan manipulation processes of the 80's to the recent digitally driven manipulations of shape and form, architects have made increasing investment in 'process'.

Our view is that the interest in process now rampant in architecture and particularly architecture schools has to do with a crisis of legitimization.

From neopunktonic shards to biomimetic nurbs, architecture today is explaining form by association with process. All architects in history have attempted to relate their projections to higher orders but we face the particular historical problem of a world of commodified value. All orders are equal to compete in the market. Now,

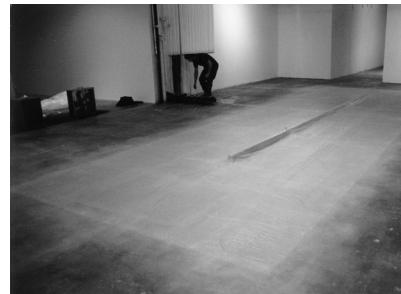
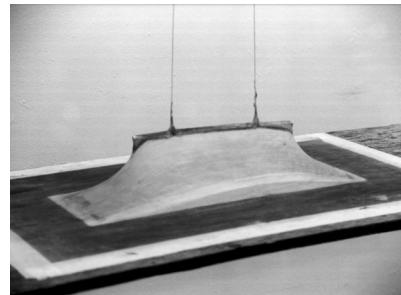
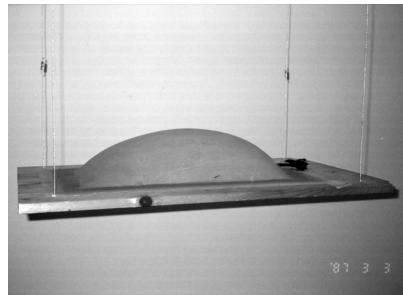




no longer rooted in function, context, economy, or (at least seemingly) gravity, form is entirely problematic. 'Process' lends necessity to a form by associating larger forces with its evolution. Forms are said to be right because they are 'historically necessary,' 'natural,' 'culturally derived,' 'conceptually necessary,' or just have an interesting story behind them.

No doubt process is a useful and apt tool for design instructors. Process driven studios can develop rigour, and enable the student to follow a string of consequence. It also helps evaluate student's work and frames the questions: why this form? and, is the form justified? In school process appears to offer a way out of formalism. It helps in the struggle to make architecture appear necessary or crucial with out dealing with the messy and irreconcilable conditions of actual building, in concrete places, for genuine purpose.

We are sceptical of the role process actually plays in the production of architecture. This is especially so in the production of academically or journalistically validated architecture. It is likely that process here has a symbolic, or representational role. If an architect convinces us that her form is driven or spontaneously created by deep, inexorable forces we will buy it, and if we buy, it must have value. In truth the vast production of architecture is not open to 'formal





process.' External forces control it: bylaws, budgets, contexts, programmes, profit all shape architecture more than architects. The midwifery, which is architectural practice at its best, is more fluid, experimental, and probing than processed forms resulting from closed logic and fashion. By narrowing process to formal manipulation architects miss the real lesson.

We like process because it is dumb. In our work process removes the individual, emotion and will. We use process as a way to dislocate authority and to create a position outside of the object in question. We are not recuperating or improving. We are not looking for a better, newer, or more attractive commodity. We hope our work gives a higher value to temporality than to form. We place importance on the discontinuous, and contingent. We look for cracks and try to open them. The following description of some of our work begins to describe how we use process and how it inscribes our work.

Fly Survey New York 1990, starts from one of the practical problems of summer living in a non-conditioned building in Brooklyn: how to deal with the flies? It is an example of the disinterested value of process. An objective insight into conditions not easily accessed or noticed as consequential. Sticky flycatchers were randomly distributed in the same locations on all floors and basement of a three story residential

building. Being summer, the windows of the building were generally open. The distribution of flies captured varied in relation to height above ground level. The work maps not only the atmospheric density of flies, but also by inference the sectional density of organic matter (fly food). Flies are not random; they are knit into the fabric of the city and its services. The economics of flies and people are inversely related. Poverty for one is wealth for the other.

Our take on process is non-mechanical; it is a shapeable and participatory action. Resolution derives from choices given by technology. Catenary Arch, New York, 1998, similar to Cantilever, San Francisco, 1996, and Department Chairs, Ottawa, 1997 is a project con-

cerned with the building potential of Shrink-wrap. This is an inexpensive product, elastic and strong in tension. Catenary began by driving through the boroughs of New York and collecting as many discarded objects capable of resisting compression as could be found in one day and fit in one van. The objects and rolls of shrink-wrap were brought to the installation space. Beginning simultaneously from the two columns in the room the objects were bound against each other with the shrink-wrap. The random nature of the objects forced a continual adjustment and calculation to grow the cantilevers, experiment, compensation and investigation within the technology of the shrink-wrap, developed the catenary form. The crucial issue was

the mating of materials to keep the structure in compression until the two sides met.

Reversal is a potent process, often employed in our work. Watching a film played backward, action becomes strange and elegiac. The consequence of the plot is made clear but the intention made opaque. This has to do with inverting chronology. Seeing the result before the cause.

St. Cyril, Detroit 1989 was created with reversal. Houses are made, planned, constructed. They coagulate desire, regulation, potential, oppression, projection, need and profit. They are the joints of the city. We are accustomed to seeing the house as finished.





Architects imagine their designs as completed, static, objects and only rarely as, constructions or processes, especially as processes beyond their involvement. The surplus home, the abandoned dwelling, is a source of discomfort, and is usually kept from view or quickly erased.

Detroit was full of abandoned dwellings. They could not be demolished fast enough. Between the moats of the interstate, mostly out of white sight, were acres of field, abandoned homes and tenacious folks. We bought a house on St. Cyril Street, near Van Dyke and I-69. It cost a dollar, had no electricity or heat and the belongings of the last occupants, forced out by a fire, were strewn everywhere. The house was frozen solid so we started with axes, chopping out the clothing and furniture. We burned these in barrels in the back yard. We needed to keep warm. Next the lath and plaster; sledgehammer work. The plaster was shovelled into barrels and the lath bundled and stacked. Then the roof. A couple of us climbed up in the attic and settled on a method of kicking off the roof sheathing and shingles while swinging from the rafters on our elbows. We pulled the material away from the sides of the house and the sheathing boards were stacked and the shingles piled. This was slow, dirty and difficult. A house in Detroit usually demolishes in an hour. We were into our 5th day when we pulled down the exterior walls. We used

ropes and yanked them inward. We had worked from the inside out and when the inside was gone we were there. This was Detroit.

We placed the material of the house and occupants in a space in the Cass Corridor and left it for viewing. Each material was stacked, piled, or contained according to its logic and placed in order of removal. This was a house in Detroit.

We use rotational process as somewhat similar to reversals. The difference lies in directionality. Rotations return to the beginning. They create inversions and circular displacements. As position becomes problematic, one becomes aware that things, us, buildings, are not fixed. Rather they and we are charged with movement. Rotations capsize memory.

Our work, Slice-Spin-Still, Buffalo, 1999, recovers the original spatial composition of a particular building by rotation. This 90-year-old structure, a school of architecture, and previously an asylum, had been renovated many times. The renovations, which in our instance divided a large assembly space with a wall and partial floor, had created a type of numbness. A forgetful discarding. From the realization that what were now two spaces had been one, and that the dividing wall was not original and not structural we looked for ways to open but not remove it. We designated a 10 meter by

1.5 meter portion of the wall, applied a bracing structure and axle and sliced it from the rest of the wall. Once cut we rotated the wall about a vertical axis 90 degree to its original position. Whereas a removal of the wall would erase the past, spinning the wall made the building aware of its history, it revived the latent intelligence of the building. The work archaeologically recovered the original space. The reciprocal experience of flat, then deep space moves the viewer temporally through the building.

The work Pushpull Buffalo, New York, 2001, starts with a material and a fascination with the potential space between paint and substrate. Latex is a milky exudate in a water base, which coagulates into a very stretchy skin like material through evaporative drying. Latex gives off a strong, ammonia odor while curing. When dry the surface adheres somewhat to touch. Our desire was to deal with the ability of latex to stretch and to understand space created by tension. We investigated the potentials of latex by creating and testing models at various scales, and in different conditions. We painted latex into corners and cracks, onto boards, walls and floors, and then attempted to create space between the latex and surface. We found that the material could be stretched with the compressive force created by air pressure and by the tensile force from vacuum. The material always took the most direct shape possible.





When we understood the performance and possibility of the material we painstakingly rolled 400 liters of latex onto a 260 square meter concrete floor in 17 layers. Each layer was allowed to dry before applying the next. In one section inflation valves, cut from bicycle inner tubes, were layered into the latex coats. In another section a 50mm by 100mm steel beam, lift hooks attached, was immured under the latex. When all coats were applied and the latex fully dried, air was pumped into the inner tube valves of the one part and the beam of the other was reattached to the ceiling. The latex negotiated the applied force and the inherent resistance of the material,

into an inarguable form. One created from vacuum, the other blown. The latex skins charged the space they were located in. They drew or exerted pressure. At the end of the installation the two bodies were experimentally destroyed. The pulled form was tunneled into and also stretched to the point where the steel eyebolts split open. The blown form was weighted, bounced on and pierced. The skin linking the two was pulled and stripped from the floor.

We have noticed that *Quickcrete* bags are potential building blocks. The bagged form could be considered as a masonry material. One could build

something and just leave it alone. The rain would wet the bags and harden the concrete. Time, wind, and settlement, would adjust the form.

The work *Hive*, Buffalo, 2002 began with this interest and 800 donated *Quickcrete* bags. We were also given the use of a field near a forest, in which to work. To build cover in masonry, requires centering; a formwork to support the arch.

To build this centering we gathered deadfall. We mounded these logs, branches and limbs into a vault like shape and laid the *Quickcrete* bags, like masonry, one over two and two

over one, over the mound. Periodically we skewered the bags with rebar pounded in at varying angles. We then left the arch exposed to the elements to hydrate and solidify. As the organic matter, the deadfall, deteriorates and collapses, as passers-by pull out the pieces, the arch is sprung. This is a process, in which time, gravity, rot, chemical action, and happenstance conspire to slowly capture form. Wound and released.