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FORMLESS AS FOUND

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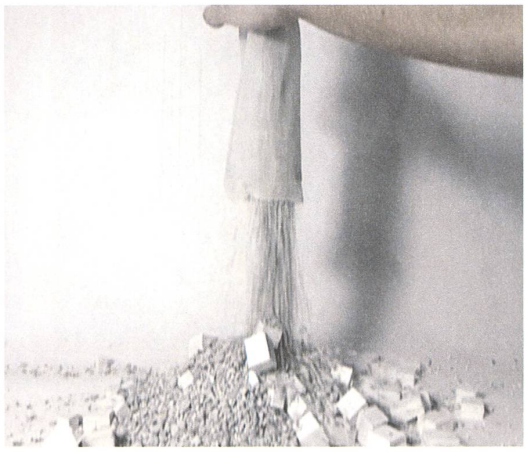

fig. a
Study for ‹Bag Pile›, 2011.
Photography: Formlessfinder.

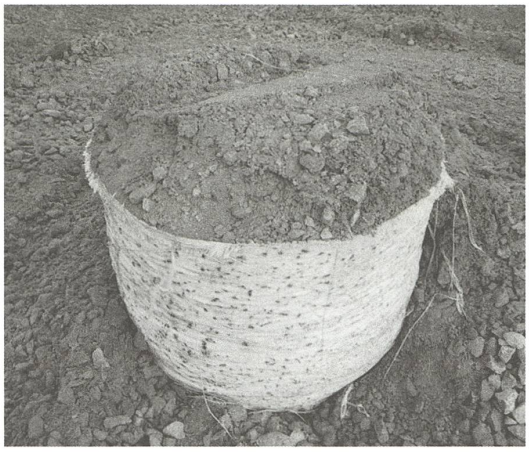

fig. b
Geotextile, as found.
Photography: Formlessfinder.

Too often, we assume that genuinely radical architecture must project itself into some indeterminate future. But just because a design is new or weird or unfamiliar (or maybe even unrecognizable as architecture) doesn't necessarily mean it couldn't be built tomorrow – or, better yet, today. One of the dangers of speculative practice, of so-called paper architecture, is that while it can usually be counted on for novelty and exotic forms, it is rarely grounded in the realities of site and program, materials and methods, or interaction and experience that constitute so much of the depth of architecture itself. Ironically, then, there is a certain fundamental overlap between even the most conceptually ambitious or theoretically driven speculative projects and the prosaic structures that are speculative in the other, commercial sense. ‹Spec houses› and other anonymous developer buildings – lacking clients, users, and legitimization beyond market forces – are confined to a similarly narrow slice of the field. And no matter how utopian, paper projects risk an underlying conservatism by reducing the future to a seductive image, bracketing and deferring change and consigning progress to the realm of speculation rather than seeking to engage real, existing possibilities or transform current norms.

We don't think of our practice as speculative, and we are certainly not interested in making paper architecture. In some way, each of our projects seeks to answer the same basic question: what can we make now, with what we have? This doesn't mean that our work is not experimental, or that we are not interested in innovation, but that we try to begin by looking at existing conditions in new ways. The formless, after all, isn't about attacking form per se as much as it is about abandoning accepted ways of looking at and thinking about architecture and about exploring the possibilities that emerge when we let go of them.

And we're not seeking to design the formless; we're just trying to find it. Our projects usually begin with an exploration of the underlying conditions. These might be as obviously relevant as the materiality and topography of the site, or as seemingly unconnected as a fabrication technique borrowed from another field or an obscure reference from architectural history. This examination of the ‹as found› provides the foundation for further experiments: the inversions, recombinations, layerings, juxtapositions, transformations, and other processes from which the project emerges.

Although the ‹as found› can be sourced from anywhere, over the years many of our most produc-

fig. c
‹Tent Pile›, 2013.
Photography: Formlessfinder.

fig. d
Sand supply, as found.
Image: Formlessfinder.

tive findings have come from looking at infrastructure. Like many of the most interesting found conditions, infrastructure tends to go unnoticed (often we don't give it any thought until it's broken). What appeals to us, though, is that infrastructural projects often deal with materials that are raw and ubiquitous, at a massive scale that demands a kind of rugged pragmatism and simplicity. Much current experimental work in architecture is based on speculation about scaling up, particularly in the realm of digital fabrication, where processes now used to make design objects and architectural fragments may one day produce buildings. But while it may take decades for such theoretical possibilities to become reality, infrastructural techniques can be easily scaled down to architecture – with immediate application.

In ‹Bag Pile›, our 2011 project for the MoMA / PS1 Young Architects Program, we found a geotextile that was ideally suited to the simple column-and-arch structure that we planned to produce. Uncertain of its cost and worried about the limitations of our budget, we calculated the square footage necessary for a single arch and called the manufacturer. We were told that the product wasn't even sold by the square foot – it was available by the acre, and at a rate that would put a vast amount of it within our reach, opening up a whole new range of permutations for our structure (fig. a and b). ‹Tent Pile›, our 2013 project for Design Miami, required 500 tons of sand to produce the size of enclosure we wanted, a quantity that seemed to exceed the limits of architectural feasibility. Unsure of who could supply us, we perused the city and its surroundings on Google Earth, reasoning (correctly) that the kind of equipment and facility necessary to produce this quantity of material would be visible at the scale of satellite imagery. When we found a likely spot, looked up the business at that address, and gave it a call, our supplier told us that he could bring the sand we needed to our site with approximately twenty truckloads. When we nervously asked about logistics, he told us that he was currently involved in a project with the army corps of engineers for which he provided four hundred truckloads a day (fig. c and d). This kind of scaling down works equally well for projects that are far smaller than buildings. For ‹Table Net›, a 2014 furniture design, we produced a flexible table that can be quickly assembled and disassembled, adopting a slightly different configuration each time, by using a cargo netting system developed for shipping large pallets of goods via airfreight (fig. e and f).

fig. e
‹Table Net›, 2014.
Photography: Parsons & Charlesworth.

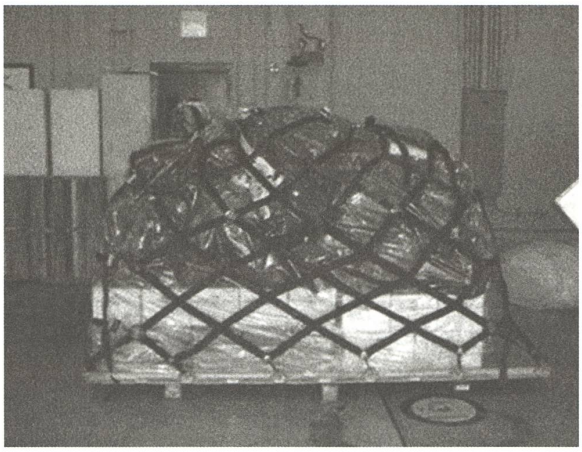

fig. f
Netting system for airfreight, as found.
Photography: Parsons & Charlesworth.

These kinds of materials and processes are cheap and easy; their results are unexpected and immeasurably complex. They also provide a way of expanding architecture beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries, shifting the economic and social conditions of its production and use. Through infrastructure, architecture can be linked to worldwide flows of goods and materials, and perhaps begin to address the needs of a more diverse global audience.

Ironically, the most speculative dimension of our practice is probably the one which would typically be most invested in certainty: engineering. The more we use loose materials and raw matter, the more we gravitate toward engineering approaches no longer based on the idea of a singular, fixed solution. Instead, our collaborations with engineers and other technical experts have focused on creating flexible, dynamic systems in which uncertainty is embraced, rather than eliminated, where probabilities, redundancies, and real-time responsiveness can be used to engineer structures that are immeasurable, or systems that are constantly shifting. The formless is complex enough to be ultimately unknowable even when realized – no need for speculation.

Formlessfinder, founded 2011, has designed and exhibited work for the Museum of Modern Art (NY), MAXXI Museum (Rome), Design Miami, AIA Center for Architecture, Istanbul Design Biennial and has recently released their first book co-published by Lars Müller and The Storefront for Art and Architecture.

Garrett Ricciardi, born 1980, received his Master of Architecture from Princeton, where he co-founded Formlessfinder. His work in the fields of art and design has been exhibited internationally.

Julian Rose, born 1984, received his Master of Architecture from Princeton, where he co-founded Formlessfinder. His writing on art and architecture has been published in ‹Artforum›, ‹Log›, and ‹October›.