POST-
OBJECT
FORM
Architecture's contemporary relevance is tied up with the precarious role of objecthood in today's material culture. The world of things can no longer be described through discrete, auratic objects, as it could before modernism. This premodern notion of objecthood has been interrogated by the evolution of industrial production, from the advent of machine production to postfordism. Today, a cult of abstraction sheds ever-new light on the diminishing relevance of objecthood in the design and reception of architectural form. The object has fled the scene, leaving representation and reality to flicker freely in architectural space.

This project pushes at the contemporary vulnerabilities of the architectural object by collapsing form into the space of its own representation. Volumes unfold, planes mingle, and colors project from one surface to the next. Form doesn’t dissolve with the loss of objecthood; instead, it becomes a much more active presence in the everyday.
The distracted viewer, too, forms habits.
—Walter Benjamin
This project’s realization is indebted,
To my friend and advisor Troy Schaum,
for making space for contradictions,
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To Scott Colman — without the seminars and
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foundations of this project.
When we look at the world today, what we see is no longer a world made up of discrete, bounded objects. Already under modernism, this notion of objecthood began to evaporate, as industry left our cities and mass production obliterated the object's aura. Material culture — the world of things — increasingly became defined as part after part after part. The whole was outmoded.

Under the rubric of holism, architectural practice promotes a definition of form divorced from the reality of our networked world. The field has largely held to a premodern notion of objecthood, neglectful of shifting modes of production and perception that have come to define 21st century material culture. As a result, architects have proliferated neomodernist abstractions and precious icons, or declared defeat to the virtual, dematerializing form altogether.

The formal ordering system that persists as the grounds for the production of architecture is fundamentally at odds with the role of objecthood in the contemporary world. As such, architecture in the 21st century has never been contemporary. While the pop project has persisted as architecture's attempt at contemporary relevance, objecthood—pop's crutch of choice—has long fled the scene. What we're left with is a new material condition that's surfaced in countless portmanteaus: flatbed, junkspace, worldsheet, hyperobject, extrastatecraft.

All to say, the singular logo cannot suffice when the jumbotron is panoramic.
Like the design of running shoes, toothbrushes, and automobiles, architecture is a material practice. Material practice is concerned with the production of the matter that comprises our physical world. Together, these practices constitute a material culture, which, at any given time, supports a certain conceptual framework that allows us to identify objecthood’s role in our perception of the world.

If we follow the story told by twentieth-century industrialization, we can conclude that objecthood has slowly left the material realm of the everyday. Since that time, each move towards post-Fordism has had a direct consequence on the reception of culture with a viewer-object. The Theory of Alienation put forth by Karl Marx is useful in understanding these ontological shifts. Marx observed a fundamental break in the individual’s relationship with object production that occurred during industrialization, as the rise of capitalism was matched by a rise of new technologies. Together, the new economic and industrial conditions enabled rapid machine production at a mass scale, which permitted each individual worker to be responsible for just one element of each object. The worker’s connection to their labour, and the objects they produced, became part after part after part. Labour itself was objectified. Each worker was responsible for just one element of each object, breaking the object into parts: what was once an unerring interdependency around the object—what constitutes objecthood, and how objects become actors in the everyday—under present conditions.

While machine production and serial production stepped on stage around the same time, they can best be understood as sequential steps in the history of objecthood. A material object was once immeasurable whole; it was entirely off the table: the object was entirely itself. The object into parts: what was once an unerring interdependency around the object—what constitutes objecthood, and how objects become actors in the everyday—under present conditions.

Objecthood cannot be understood through production alone, as the consumption of objects sheds light on their reception, their valuation, and their relationship to society and material culture. For Jean Baudrillard, approaching industrialized objecthood conversely—through its consumerism, consumption—revels the degradation of the cultural significance of the object. The pre-modern object is what he identifies as the model, understanding that the model/series distinction is a conceit applied retroactively. The model could not exist before industrialization brought about mass production. The model was never there at all. The model has a harmony, a unity, a homogeneity, a consistency of space, form, substance, and function; it is, in short, a syntax. The serial object is merely juxtaposition, haphazard combination, inarticulate discourse.

—Jean Baudrillard⁶
“During periods in which architecture has had the most cultural power, or has been closest to political power, its disciplinary specificity was linked to the idea that it could stand as the measure of and model for the whole of cultural production, visible in everything from the baroque notion that society was organized by the arms of the church rendered concrete in building form to a Bauhaus spoon, considered to be a mini-version of an ideal state.”

— Sylvia Lavin

Shortly after the inception of mass production came the schema of planned obsolescence, as the postwar economy was buttressed by the illusion of an infinitely disposable income, and the culture of trends spread its roots deeper in the consumer economy. Objects were made to fail, or promised to become irrelevant at the arrival of an expiration date. In effect, the individual’s loyalty now lies not with the object, but with its brand. The marketplace offers products marked by marginal and inessential differences, and brand loyalty guides us through the illusion of choice. But, as Baudrillard reminds us, mass communications allow objects to continue to falsely circulate as models, evidenced in the reception of architectural practice as the production of photorealistic renderings of bound and clad volumes, not the collaborative process of detailing and delicately engineering a network of parts.

As industry left the city, our last remaining connection to any given object’s origins evaporated. Within our world-sphere — the cultural and physical space most immediately experienced in our everyday — in the suburbs and cities where we live, production has become largely abstract and shifted to the technological and cultural sectors. The object has fled the scene.

Mass production erased the trace of the human hand from the object, planned obsolescence diluted the power of signification once inherent to the object, and when industry finally left the city, it took with it the visible origin of the object. Our present conditions favor subscription over ownership and brand worship over reverence of things in themselves. In this paradigm, the material world has been reconfigured such that our conceptual ideals of objecthood have been evacuated from our lived perception of the world.
Art practices have been adept at keeping pace with the changing modes of object production. Objecthood as a concept was popularized in discourses around form by Michael Fried, a seminal art critic. It was drawn from gestalt psychology, which claimed that our ability to distinguish objects from the visual noise around them comes from the legibility of their shape. Central to this thesis is the notion that gestalt psychology loses ground as object production evolves past the age of handcraft—and there’s no better way to see the gestalt disappear than to examine the way we’ve transcribed what we see emerging around us. Because of its innate drive towards representation, art has been a kind of form-making that has always concerned itself with the status of the object. Architecture has largely held to a romantic, premodern notion of objecthood, but its history shows glimpses at a latent desire on the behalf of some designers to push architecture into the contemporary. Given the constraints of building practice, architects have devoted much less attention to the status of the object than have their counterparts in the arts. Visual representation, art’s native tongue, inheres a collapse of the object and its cultural status, so the history of art is de facto the history of objecthood. One can see the object transform from the changing form of the still-life between Flemish and Italian painters, to Art Nouveau’s desire for graphic elements to subsume three-dimensional forms, to the avant-garde’s drive towards abstraction, all the way to the post-minimalists’ trouble with the monumentality of their minimalist forebears. Whether it be a concern with industrial fabrication or the link between representation and perception, artists have been central to responding to and contributing to the cultural production of objecthood.

1 Juan Sánchez Cotán, Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber, oil on canvas, 1602.
Theo van Doesburg’s The Aubette was the ultimate expression of his theory of neoplasticism. The restaurant and dance hall renovation he executed with Hans Arp and Sophie Tauber-Arp consisted of a graphic sweep through an existing architecture in Strasbourg, France. Adhering to the standardized units of acrylic panels offered by plastics companies, he designed a series of ‘counter-constructions’ in which the tiling of the acrylic sheets created a thick layer of color that, through its modulation, denoted tension and movement across the building’s interior surfaces.

With the birth of synthetics in the late 1920s and the new reality of standardized material units, his work — among the abstractions of Suprematism, Constructivism, De Stijl, Neoplasticism, and Elementarism — demonstrated the ontological shift from a holistic worldview to a part-to-part understanding of the material world. Theo van Doesburg’s The Aubette was the ultimate expression of his theory of neoplasticism.

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The part-to-whole configuration that emerged with the advent of machine production incited an abstract representational mode in the early avant-grade practices of Suprematism and Neoplasticism. In his Principles of Neo-plastic Art, Theo Van Doesburg laid out what he saw as the creative potential in the material conditions of his time. With the birth of synthetics in the late 1920s and the new reality of standardized material units, his work — among the abstractions of Suprematism, Constructivism, De Stijl, Neoplasticism, and Elementarism — demonstrated the ontological shift from a holistic worldview to a part-to-part understanding of the material world. Theo van Doesburg’s The Aubette was the ultimate expression of his theory of neoplasticism.

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Gerrit Riteveld’s Schröder House best expressed the principles of Elementarism also put forth by van Doesburg as a move towards the spatialization of a new abstract reality, but this time through a more didactic approach to architectural form: the house was designed to be read as a series of lines and planes floating in space, hovering around a center of gravity. Rietveld used colour not to highlight tension but to delineate edges and to distinguish one conceptual plane from another. The architecture, like any object in a factory, could be visually reassembled—and it made sure its viewer knew that this was so.
De Stijl influenced many architects of its time, not least of which were Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies Van der Rohe. Mies’ Barcelona Pavilion embodied all the formal principles of de Stijl, but — short of Van Doesburg’s bright acrylic panels — used an opulent material palette of marble, glass, and steel. As an architecture meant to embody a national spirit, its rich materials imbued it with the connotation that Germany was prosperous, stable, and robust. However, the elementary arrangement of planes still gives each surface a singular identity by its particular texture and coloration, producing contrast in perspectives and dematerialization by way of the reflections produced within. The roof plane unites these parts, but it remains unclear where the interior begins and ends—the focus is on the interaction of the various parts, and on the way that they lead the viewer through.

For the Russian constructivists, abstraction was a means of harnessing the aesthetics of machine production as a means for art to take part in industry. For Suprematism, which followed shortly after, abstraction was conversely a means by which artistic expression could move away from any representation of industry or of objecthood. One of the key contributions to this discourse on behalf of the suprematist movement was El Lissitzky’s Prouns. With these three-dimensional works, he manipulated axonometric projection to challenge the picture plane as a division between viewing subject and form. The reversal of the geometries and the floating forms denies the axonometric as a rational mode. Colour, too, contributed to an illusionistic positioning of the subject in relation to the form in these compositions, as varied intensities of color pull the subject in towards the form.
Working in the abstract and in three dimensions gave minimalist sculptors space from the illusionistic pull of figuration in painting tradition. Minimalism followed in the vein of Suprematism, but grounded its thinking not in philosophy but directly in material culture itself: in fabrication, and in industrial material. While Donald Judd outsourced the making of his forms to architectural fabricators, Carl Andre, like Theo van Doesburg before him, worked with the materials and dimensions available to him at industrial lumber yards and steel mills. Together with an emphasis on the encounter between subject and form, the minimalists’ use of simple geometries and simple means bore an undeniable significance for architects. In fact, scholars like Michael Fried have argued that this moment marked a fundamental change in sensibility—a moment when art began to look outward and reflect a “pervasive and general condition.”

Increasingly, since the advent of mass production, our consumer economy has moved toward the illusion of choice. Marked by inessential differences, objects play a game of mass customization. For Jean Baudrillard, this turn is a ploy to placate the masses, and reverts our idea of objecthood to a premodern one: “The corollary of the fact that every object reaches us by way of a choice is the fact that fundamentally no object is offered as a serial object, that every single object claims model status.”

For minimalist sculptors like Donald Judd and Robert Morris, a form’s singularity was of most concern. Rather than the part-by-part-by part composition of forms that came out of earlier movements, the minimalist work would appear to comprise a whole. However, the frequent use of sets, permutations, and multiples reveals the form’s status as, not whole, but standardized part after standardized part. One cannot apprehend the work without being conscious of its entropic tendencies—that it could go on forever. This condition became a constant subtext for the minimalists because it was palpable in the built and material environment and thus inevitable as subject matter. This connection reached its peak with Dan Graham’s Homes For Ameri
can project, which sought a poeticism in the repetitive architecture of the subdivisions that made up the post-war landscape in California.
As minimalism aged, it revealed its flaws in light of the emergence of late capitalism in western economies: it’s object was clearly there for the taking. Any mediating factors — the abstract nature of late capitalism and the issues of access linked to socioeconomic inequality and globalization, to name a few — were not accounted for by the objecthood described by minimalist practices. Fried claimed that in art — speaking of Anthony Caro’s work — all meaning “is in the syntax.” Looking at an Anthony Caro piece, one is delighted by the beauty of the composition, not by any monolithic presence. However, this syntax is completely internal, which is why minimalist sculptors could see even something as subjective as color as a property of objecthood. A single color could translate directly into a surface. Minimalism’s flaw was its inability to enter into a networked world, and to investigate the relations that take form between different entities, object or not.

The post-war period brought about three significant and interdependent shifts: first, a fundamental break in the history of the object, became increasingly elusive as urban cores shifted towards the man-made environment.”

The post-industrial economy. Second, a major growth pushed industry out of the city and towards a language of abstraction. Third, a significant growth in disposable income and far from the places we inhabit. The effect of communicating extra-spatial phenomena as architecture: the bands of colour that sweep across each floor and up the walls can be traced to the palette of a colour television test pattern. The bold color bars allude to the evolution of the library into what is now a highly mediated graphic space. The reading rooms are coded gray, differentiating the spaces of information from the spaces of contemplation. Beyond the symbolism, the color bars act as a wayfinding system for the library. The application of color adds a layer of resolution to the architectural surface, and invites form into the domain of visual culture.

The expanded field of supergraphics includes an expanded sociability, a humane vocation attributed to the work, and also an expanded significance... by the environmental legibility of the graphics generate.”

John McMorrough
Late capitalism has built a consumer culture premised on a relationship between individual and brand. Under this framework, we worship brands more than things themselves, always awaiting the next iteration of an exercise in the loose objecthood that distinguishes one corporation from the next. Similarly, the culture of subscription — to services, to virtual products, and to physical products through app-based delivery — has rendered the object itself besides the point. Loyalty occurs on a circumstantial basis, fed more to social and cultural inclinations than concrete things as such. Practices like relational aesthetics and social practice have picked up on this condition by using form and materiality as a framework for ephemeral social relations.

In architecture, these themes have translated to an appeal to the social dimension through the incorporation of images and technology into the design of buildings. OMA’s McCormick Tribune Campus Center all IIT incorporates environmental design by 2x4 to enhance efforts on behalf of the plan and section to create a feeling of simultaneity and temporary communities. The ceramic frit features iconographic representations of students engaged in various activities, and the color (overwhelmingly mandarin orange) used in the panelite throughout casts continuous glows across surfaces that hosts otherwise unrelated programs. The material palette of the building draws on an aesthetic of generic materials on steroids, playfully shining a light on today’s material culture. The object is nowhere in sight.

Despite this trajectory, the practice of architecture largely continues to hold to a potemkin objecthood based on premodern notions of the revered object. Keeping our ears to the ground and our fingers on the pulse of at production, architects can contribute to a conversation waiting to be had: a conversation about form in an increasingly immaterial economy.
To understand the status of the object today, we can look to the work of Thomas Demand. The generic material culture re-imagined here with colored appearance is an artifact of abstraction. In Demand’s tableaus, we see abstraction as a general condition that surfaces themselves in the everyday, but that also carries a weight of potential as a tool of communication in a culture grappling with indeterminacy.1

If we believe, for a minute, that architecture’s oblique strategy is a politics of aesthetics, we can see the agency in abstraction at a time when issues of gender and sexuality boil over in social discourse. To deny a form’s figuration is to deny its nomination as a fixed or normative identity—to deny its objecthood by way of abstraction and to foreground a technique that is foremost relational is to issue a call for architecture’s audiences to reconsider normative modes of mapping assumptions onto a form, or to seek meaning in legibility.2

Our understanding of objects is tied up with our desire to read the world around us. We’re at a moment when we’ve reached an unprecedented level of visual literacy—we are able to read a depth of information that is both two-dimensional, and to quickly understand the three-dimensional as flat—as image.3

We often think of color as a property of objecthood, when in fact it is too unstable to be so definite. If you understand color as a property of perception—or, to be more exact, an index of the relation between form and subject—you might agree that today, the object collapses into the space of its own representation. The repercussions of this collapse are twofold: first, the form can no longer stand as a sign for a conceptual referent, whereas the object-form inheres a sign, evoking the expectation that it should mean something. In a second, the appearance of images is no longer constrained to two-dimensional projection onto a surface; surface itself takes part in the making of images.4

To think objects through colour is to ascribe a single colour exclusively to a single object. This folder is crimson red. What if, instead, we thought of the crimson as an atmospheric feature that coagulates around the folder, allowing the folders to make our world present? Suddenly, the folder has a relationship with the telephones, the post-it notes, the flashlights, and, to varying degrees, everything else before us. Suddenly, the rectangular form doesn’t constitute a folder through its bounded difference from other objects—through its objecthood the form becomes folder by way of projecting an image that emerges from its presence.5

The uncertainty of the status of a form within its context arises out of perceptual variation. Perceptual variation can be explained by the intersection of a subjectivity with whatever particular ontological climate that frames our experience of seeing is at play. The perceptual variation of which colour is only a part is both at the crux of the collective human experience, and is one of the most dismissed subjects in modern thought. For that reason, it’s been a difficult subject to take up in an architectural project. Different disciplines have employed colour in different ways, albeit always in service for some other purpose. In science, colour has been a way of classifying observations, and in behavioral psychology it has been a way to trigger moods. However, looking at colour through the lenses of art, design, and philosophy, one realizes that subject matter lends itself well to modern thought. Perception is experienced through a focus on the surface, quickly giving way to discussions around abstraction and representation. The spatial agency within colour is clear in the legacy of representation and image culture in architecture, through abstraction in modern art, and through theories of perception. Considering its persistence within our discipline, it’s difficult to deny the relevance of chromatic abstraction in considering the status of architectural form today.

To get from image to architecture, one must consider space in all of its depth and white noise. In “On Judging Works of Visual Art,” (1876) Conrad Fiedler built upon Kant’s notion of visual experience (anschauung) with the spatial dimension. He was writing far before the time of mass media, advertising, and a popularized image culture, so—naturally—his theory falls short today in that it fails to engage the critical thinking that conceptualization brings to perception. For him, perception was a direct process that operated uncrinkled, through a primal appeal to the senses. Conceptualization, conversely, was the domain of scientists, who viewed objects vis-a-vis objecthood, attempting to perceive parts and whole, both at once. Scientists could not be satisfied with visual experience as a valid way of navigating phenomena, and Fiedler saw this as a major flaw in the scientific worldview. For him, the artistic mind has the upper hand because it does not immediately seek concept.6

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Gender does share with color a certain ontological indeterminacy: it isn’t quite right to say that an object is a color, nor that the object has a color... Nor is color voluntary precisely. But none of these formulations mean that the question in object is colorless.”

—Maggie Nelson

1. See the first publication of Konrad Fiedler, “On Judging Works of Visual Art,” (1876) Conrad Fiedler built upon Kant’s notion of visual experience (anschauung) with the spatial dimension. He was writing far before the time of mass media, advertising, and a popularized image culture, so—naturally—his theory falls short today in that it fails to engage the critical thinking that conceptualization brings to perception. For him, perception was a direct process that operated uncrinkled, through a primal appeal to the senses. Conceptualization, conversely, was the domain of scientists, who viewed objects vis-a-vis objecthood, attempting to perceive parts and whole, both at once. Scientists could not be satisfied with visual experience as a valid way of navigating phenomena, and Fiedler saw this as a major flaw in the scientific worldview. For him, the artistic mind has the upper hand because it does not immediately seek concept.

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Fiedler’s concern was with the spatial imaginary as a clearinghouse for percepts—those phenomena that trigger perceptual reactions. Using the events that transpire between a viewer and an artwork, Fiedler hypothesized that artists must possess an innate ability to pull entities out of the white noise of lived space and into a consciousness that gifts the viewer with a heightened interpretation of percepts, should the viewer be open to such an expanded worldview. For Fiedler, the artist’s role is to use their intellect to heighten the artistic consciousness of the masses. "Art has nothing to do with forms that are independent of its activity and pre-exist it... What art creates is not a world parallel to the one that exists without art; rather, it brings about the world through and for artistic consciousness." 10

Fiedler’s idealized artistic consciousness rests on a spectrum of empathy through which individuals can relate to non-human entities. While some individuals are totally estranged from objects, or even alienated by them, others empathize with them. To empathize with an object is to see a bit of one’s self in it, and a bit of it in one’s self, gaining a deeper appreciation for it, and a stronger grasp on its status within its environment. Empathy is one way to foreground an object against its background environment, and for Fiedler, the greatest artists were ones who could enter into completely symbiotic relations with the object of their art.

Looking at Fiedler as a product of his time, we see that perception itself is affected by the dominant theoretical regimes of its day. Art practices are useful to examine with the problem of representation — the transcription of percepts and concepts back into the visual world — but also because the perceptual regime of any given era can be observed surfacing in the art practices of the time. 6

Colour, line, and the part-to-whole relationship are the historically robust tools artists have used to represent phenomena as objects distinct from one another. To see how these elements evolved through modernism, and how perceptual regimes have shifted, we can look at two painters: Henri Matisse, 7 who was active in the 1900s, and Helen Frankenthaler, 8 whose work peaked in the 1950s and 60s. For Matisse, every painting was preconceived in its entirety. Images would be planned, from the organization of figures within the picture plane, to the colours that described these figures, to the lines that might trace the boundaries between them. It was, in short, a conception of colour and form that preceded the culture of abstraction that matured long after the era of mass production. Objecthood was intact in what he took as his subject matter, and the artwork itself was conceived top-down, starting with a whole, moving down to its parts.

Half a century later, Helen Frankenthaler conceived of painting as a problem to be solved through the relation of its parts. Colour came about by chance, in the process of painting, and took a life of its own: the colours she used grew bolder and more abstract as her work matured. By the 60s, she had shifted to acrylic paint, and colour used up more and more of the picture frame. Frankenthaler’s stain paintings show an engagement of colour, form, and materiality in line with a mode of visual perception that demands conceptualization. The rise of visual literacy at Frankenthaler’s time was evidence that images and spatial-visual phenomena had emerged as two ends of the perceptual regime of the second half of the twentieth century. Fiedler may well have agreed that his formulation of visual experience (i.e., perception at the exclusion of conceptualization) would prove to be outmoded given the new weight of image culture in society at large. The question at hand, from this point until today, became how form (the perceived) and representation (the conceptualized) play off of one another to create new perceptual hybrids between space and image.
In this increasingly flat world where image and form mingle, the gestalt reading — that is, one that figures an object against a ground — increasingly loses relevance. The phenomena of the contemporary world effectively collapse foreground and background, with the result that our perception of form and representation. Bruce Mau describes these phenomena as an "inventory of background conditions that make itself selectively present." He goes on to identify them as surfaces of inscription, unstable images, circulation, surveillance, the image infrastructure, camouflage industries, tourism, postcard, street wear, free way exhibition, franchising celebrity, icons, migration, electronic media, violence, aura, and spin. In short, the contemporary world moves, behaves, and reveals itself in such a way that we now read phenomena no more as indistinct than as objects in a still life. Just as objects in a still life are seen as objects, lines and edges lose their surface object-based logic in the contemporary world.

This interest in the map is not in its informational capacity but in its flatness, and in the way that flatness increasingly intersects with form as a two-dimensional plane, the map must be bent to spatialize a phenomenon, at which point "its flatness is overcome by the powerful ability for architecture to momentarily intensify the graphic surface of seduction." 10 While the projective methods used by cartographers act to flatten and abstract spatial information, one might derive from Denari's thinking how concept has been used to extend abstract knowing after-images and object memories. Fiedler has observed how concept has been a notoriously unreliable measure of objective reality, leaving us with mere representations, not an object form comes not from the profound effects that technology has on culture. 11 His observations — namely that the world is "more like a map than a real sphere" from the profound effects that technology has on culture. 11

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When image and object are relieved of the burden of representation, they both engage in the making of a new breed of architecture: "what Mark Gage elsewhere identifies as an architectural instance of "dumining": both undermining and re-making the discipline." 12 Both outcomes are symptomatic of a mode of perception in which there is no mystery to express within the immeasurable objects.

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"True, abandoning the figure won’t change the world. But then again, neither will changing the world."

— Ben Lerner
In addition to ‘determining’ and serving as a ‘backdrop for human action’, things might authorize, allow, afford encouragement, permit, suggest influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on.”

— Bruno Latour

emerged long after the industrial revolution, strikes him as strange. While art practices were busy banishing the aura, breaking the object into parts, and putting it back together again, sociology retreated deeper into a realm designated off-limits to any non-human entity, and the humans with which it was concerned lived in a world devoid of objects. Under modernism, this picture of the social world worked: it placated the (human) masses in an otherwise alienating, increasingly de-humanizing world—that, let’s not forget, they themselves created. However, this same world is quickly reaching its extreme, demanding more than ever that humans find a way to coexist.

What does the social have to do with post-object form? Everything. It is only by making something that is fundamentally social as relational that we can allow it to transcend its object status. Here is another spot where it’s easy to get caught up in semantics: for Bruno Latour, the social is a concept that has been tainted with the aura, breaking the object into parts, and putting it back together again, sociology retreated deeper into a realm designated off-limits to any non-human entity, and the humans with which it was concerned lived in a world devoid of objects. Under modernism, this picture of the social world worked: it placated the (human) masses in an otherwise alienating, increasingly de-humanizing world—that, let’s not forget, they themselves created. However, this

recovery of the term, from being construed as at once an act (socializing) and a material (the social), into a phenomenon that emerges when new associations are made. For the purposes of this project, I’d like to shortcut the semantic debate and use the term “relational” to model precisely what Latour meant by “social”: “a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembly that is taking us beyond the scope of what is considered social, and limits its domain to that of connections.

Forms — tools, objects, buildings — are active in that they make possible the many tasks that we carry out on a daily basis. Latour describes an easy test to determine whether something is an actor: “Any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor—or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant. Thus, the question is: what does the social judge about any agent—are simply the following: Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent’s action or not? If so, they are actors, or, more precisely, participants in the course of action waiting to be given a figuration.” To reclaim form into the realm of the active is to reclaim the territory long held by the sciences and to bring the insides of things back into the symbolic Social ties — relations — need objects to exist, and objects need relations in order to exist. As things stand, objects are marginalized: they do an enormous amount of work to support society, but are rejected from the fold. While this may sound far fetched, humanizing objects is one way we can begin to understand the magnitude of their effect.
Flat ontology derives from critiques and modifications of principles offered by phenomenology in the 20th century. It cuts a layer deeper than Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of enmeshment, which suggests that everything exists in a completely equilateral tapestry of mutual affect and no single entity exists independently of those around it. Flat ontology conceives the distinct identity of each form, and scrutinizes the specific and local ways in which those forms relate to one another. This premise has one effect that becomes central to post-object form as it relates to architectural design: the relationship between forms is at its root, aesthetic. This insight comes by way of Graham Harman, a key figure in the field of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), who follows Martin Heidegger’s tool analysis to uncover that the common denominator for all entities is their ability to withdraw. The tool analysis is based on Heidegger’s observation that objects are submissive and rest ‘withdrawn’ in the background of the everyday until they break, at which point they become present to us because they’ve lost their use-value. For Harman, this means all objects withdraw, existing in a flat ontology. In this flat ontology, relationships are formed aesthetically, as they become present to us through sensory effects. In his work, thanks to this realization, objects are specifically able to engage with one another because they have no pre-existing web of relations.

For post-object form, these relations form the connective tissue of the flat ontology. An early attempt to make them visible has been made by Graham Harman, a key figure in Object-Oriented Ontology, for its neglect of “tela” — the very stuff of relations. In other words, by reducing everything to its action — seeing every entity as an actor in a network — Lefebvre ignores the idiosyncrasies of the relations that emerge out of this network in Labour’s flat ontology, the actions of each entity are brought forth, leaving no mystery as to the effect of one entity on the next. OOO would argue that in fact, some entities have latent effects that may not translate into action, or that take action on levels invisible to us.

So, what we’ve established so far is that forms exist free of any hierarchy, and relations between these forms are what give us aesthetic effects. Naturally, then, as Timothy Morton points out in Hyperobjects, “it becomes impossible to maintain aesthetic distance.” While his work deals more specifically with the status of the object under the ecological crisis, its observations prove all the more relevant to getting a handle on the aesthetic regime that permits this equilateral exchange between entities. Without aesthetic distance, we are faced with the reality that objects are speaking the same aesthetic language as are we: a language of abstraction, manifested in a vocabulary of colour and surface. In a certain light, the issue of the object today is an aesthetic one — or, more precisely, one in which aesthetics claims territory in politics and economics, and — naturally — culture and philosophy. Since the various incarnations of the avant-garde in the early twentieth century, art and design have been on the frontlines of shaping new modes of perception.
By operating directly with the toolkit of aesthetics, artists have the ability to induce a new aesthetic language and so to design again. To them, it is clear that art constitutes objecthood at any given moment in history, and the credit can certainly be given to them. A recent issue of Architectural Forum Todd Gannon, David Ruy, and Tom Wiscombe spoke to Graham Harman about OOO and to Latour about what it might mean for the practice of architecture. Todd Gannon brought up the idea of formalism as a technique to work to realize this latent power in art, and made it operable through the concept of estrangement: the notion that a aesthetic shock to the viewer would somehow jolt them into comfort with an emerging culture. The Constructivists and their contemporaries all operated with the notion of objecthood relevant to their time; they had separated objects from their human makers, but there was still an ontological distance between humans and things. Today, as OOO would have it, estrangement is a basic condition of all objects, not in an inversion technique performed onto the unsuspecting viewer by the artist. Instead of acting like a weapon between an artwork and its audience, art and design become the venue for the withdrawal of their human makers. Architecture today benefits from a flat-ontological perspective where architecture seeks to be the venue for design and perception, not technology. Labour posits a call-to-action in his text, suggesting that objects don’t make themselves visible but to the simple notion that you can, and do, in fact make architecture, to reconnect with the recent impetus of poststructuralism, which claims that the essence is always withdrawn. For architectural form to play an active part in our lives, designers need to leverage its presence, position it to be drawn forward through effects to the exclusion of the whole; 100-102. They key to unlocking a new status for architectural form is in the flattening of material and social culture is in looking closely at the way form appears and works within it that it may address its historical negotiations and foreground. Throughout the twentieth century, architecture has receded further and further into the background of our daily lives. This, in part, is through the value system that architects and clients address. Architectural form in a flat-ontological guise of affect theory. Sylvia Lavin and Todd Gannon in “The Object Turn: A Conversation,” 2004, 98-111; “What Color is it Now?” in Log 33, 2003, 128-135. Architecture today benefits from a flatt ontological perspective as it offers a much-needed antidote to the syndrome diagnosed in Building Codes, 2004, 98-111. T aichung Cultural Center, 2013. For the sake of architecture, we arrive at post-object form: action itself has become objecthood, and perception, not technology. 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in Brazil, designers have been pushing at the vulnerabilities of the architectural object since the country’s building boom in the 1940s and 1950s, growing in population from 13 to 43 million. At this time, the concrete modernism of the Paulista school was at its peak. Along with architecturally-trained João Vilaça Artigas, European-trained Gregori Warchavchik, Franz Reep, Rino Levi, and Lina Bo Bardi flooded the city’s architecture scene in the 1950s, forming the Paulista style. The designs by these architects done during this period were characterized by a commitment to tectonics, detailing, and social good. Raw concrete, rough textures and innovations in tectonics gave these buildings an industrial quality. Typically, the buildings would touch the ground on four points, allowing in open ground floor to bleed into the structure, detailing, and social good. Raw concrete, rough textures and innovations in tectonics gave these buildings an industrial quality. 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In São Paulo, we find a language of colour and abstraction playing out in the city’s everyday urbanism. In the past decade, image culture has begun to inhabit the urban form of the city itself. Had William Gibson waited three years to write *Pattern Recognition*, São Paulo would have been his protagonist’s absolute utopia. The story centers around Cayce Pollard, an advertising consultant who has built a career on her biological sensitivity to ads. Pollard is allergic to logos and advertising, and she goes about her days wearing solid-colored clothes with all the labels meticulously removed. Without all the aplique, she can better focus on the phenomena that lie behind brand imagery.

In 2006, São Paulo’s center-right municipal government led by Mayor Gilberto Kassab enacted the *Lei Cidade Limpa*, which translates to “Clean City Act” and entails a city-wide ban on all outdoor advertising. Its justification was what the municipal government identified as an unmanageable amount of visual pollution, which amplified the claustrophobic feelings associated with urban density. As part of the municipal government’s “strategic master plan of São Paulo,” its mission was to give the city coherence. After it was passed, commercial murals were painted over; billboards were taken down; and posters were removed, leaving the city bathed in an abstract play of light and color. Like a Robert Ryman painting, the city had been redacted, and the absence of the image sounded all the more loudly. This ban fundamentally challenges the representation of the object in the 21st century city. Without these large-scale ads, the subject of the city is no longer the objects it might offer, but the material culture—the space of tectonics, graphics, and affect—that make up its urban form.
The Act drew overwhelming support from the public and, naturally, substantial criticism from the advertising industry. To this day, there are continued debates about what exactly constitutes advertising—whether the city's strong tradition of street art and mural painting adds to the visual noise described by Kassab's government; whether commissioned murals can always be linked to commercial goods; and whether small signs in outdoor markets merit the same level of scrutiny as large-scale advertisements promoting international perfume brands.

In any case, images of post-2006 São Paulo strike us as uncanny. Upon first glance, it's hard to identify what exactly is different about, or missing from, these images of a generic city. But there is an overall absence that foregrounds that which is typically background: architectural form. The 21st century metropolis is the birth of global image culture, and stripping the city bare creates an entirely new breed of visual culture: one made up of the architectural and natural forms that populate the urban landscape. In the aftermath of the city's denuding, journalists have described laying eyes on newly-unveiled art deco facades, but even the generic stucco facades lining the Minhocão highway have since found a new architectural significance within the city's collective urban form.
In a certain light, the intersections between architecture and image culture have been latent in Brazilian design culture since modernism. Bas-relief, mosaic, and supergraphics have all been recurring elements of building design since the building boom of the 1950s and 60s. The 1950s also saw the rise of a new graphic culture taking root in the shift from agriculture to an industrial economy that brought about a newfound need for a print culture, branding, and advertising. The appeal of such a fine level of visual resolution resonated with design culture at large. The tile murals and azulejos of Cândido Portinari and Paulo Werneck\(^3\) can be seen on the surfaces of modernist works by the likes of Oscar Niemeyer and Le Corbusier across the country, bringing into sharper focus the cultural milieu of these otherwise blank, concrete forms. The most pervasive trail by far is the one left by Roberto Burle Marx, in the form of his highly graphic paving patterns, bas-reliefs, and landscapes — not to mention the paintings and tapestries he completed alongside his architectural work.\(^4\) His work was revolutionary for its ability to ignite a dialogue between two-dimensional graphic practice and landscape design. Conceiving gardens as if they were paintings made up of abstract geometries and pure fields of color — he took charge of an aesthetic condition already present in the city’s forms and revealed in these photographs, taken in the denuded downtown of São Paulo.

\(^3\) Cândido Portinari, tilework for St. Francis of Assisi Church in Pampulha, which was designed by Oscar Niemeyer, 1943.

\(^4\) Paulo Werneck completed many of these loosely figured blue mosaics, on buildings done by prominent architects as well as generic buildings around Brazil.

\(^5\) Roberto Burle Marx, promenade at Copacabana Beach in Rio, 1970.
“In painting as in music and literature, what is called abstract so often seems to me the figurative of a more delicate and difficult reality, less visible to the naked eye.”

— Clarice Lispector

In the 1960s, a group of Brazilian artists set out to forge an avant-garde that would be distinctly Brazilian, set apart from its North American contemporaries by the very nature of its roots. A few front-runners of this push were Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, and Hélio Oiticica and their collective desire was above all to include the viewer in the object of the work. This often translated to art that was participatory and appealed to the senses. While these ambitions led the Brazilian avant-garde to sculptural abstraction, mirroring what was happening in the U.S. at the time, Brazilian artists sought to objectify participation itself, rather than maintaining the subject/object dichotomy that American minimalism would maintain. What Michael Fried referred to as the ‘theatrical’ quality of minimalist sculpture, for Hélio Oiticica and his Brazilian contemporaries became a multi-player game. The object shifted its position, becoming active and allowing more space for other entities.

“By the unification of architecture, sculpture, painting, a new plastic reality will be created. Painting and sculpture will not manifest themselves as separate objects, nor as ‘mural art’ or ‘applied art,’ but being purely constructive, will aid the creation of a surrounding not merely utilitarian or rational, but also pure and complete in its beauty.”

—Piet Mondrian

In fact, according to some proponents of the movement, the object had not just stepped out of the limelight—it had never been there. Ferreira Gullar took this stance when he wrote his Theory of the Non-Object, a manifesto for the Neo-concretist movement, which took shape in Rio at the end of the 1950s. While São Paulo’s Concretists shifted the viewer’s reception of a work to a purely conceptual level, dismissing the phenomenal qualities that address the senses, Neo-concretism was an attempt to flip this on its head, taking on the geometric abstraction and aesthetic expression of neoplasticism and suprematism, but with the ambition of being far more participatory and interdisciplinarity than its Concretist precedents. The emphasis was all on the world born out of the experience of the viewer, so the artist’s process didn’t matter. While the Concretists subscribed to gestalt psychology, Neo-concretism adopted a more phenomenological view. The gestalt proved inadequate in an under-standing of form that was constantly unfolding, conceptually and formally. In short, Neo-concretism sought out the human within the concrete.

For Gullar, ‘object’ meant any ordinary thing: a pencil, a stool, or a jacket. A non-object would be found in the territory newly reserved for art objects, effectively relieving them of the status of everyday things. The non-object evolved from modernism into the geometric abstraction of the 1950s, taking existentialist and phenomenology as its philosophical core and a stance against medium specificity as its tool. The non-object fits comfortably within the art historical legacy of a two-dimensionality of space unfoldiing in three dimensions, which is a useful trajectory to follow towards post-object form. Like Theo van Doesburg before him, Oiticica himself described his work as the “transition of color and form into space.” The plane is taken as an object, and manipulated: cut, folded, and multiplied until it is a non-object. The third dimension—form—is always latent in the plane.

For Gullar, much like in this project, the shifting status of objecthood could be traced through the history of art. With Impressionism blurred the object’s boundaries, Cubism rid the object of its figuration. Slowly, painting evolved from a representation of the object to embodying the non-object. Around Picasso’s time, more relevant murmurs could be heard from Oiticica, especially in his desire to achieve a new equilibrium through dynamism. As well, Oiticica adopted many aspects of Mondrian’s ideology and interpretation as a theory not formulized of an expected formal output, but as a general call for the arts to keep pace with their contemporary political and material conditions. While Mondrian’s compositions relied heavily on lines, Oiticica used pure colour fills to appeal to an atmospheric effect upon the senses more than to the abstract semantics of lines on a plane.

"We do not conceive of the work of art as a 'machine,' or as an 'object,' but as a quasi-corpse that is to say, something that embodies the transcendence of its constituent elements, something that analyses may bring to light with its elements that can only be thoroughly understood by phenomenological means." —Ferreira Gullar, “Theory of the Non-Object” (1962), in Art in Brazil (2004), 10.

"The expression 'non-object' in art does not stand for something that is the opposite of an object inasmuch as it is, or suggests, the opposite of material objects. The non-object is not an anti-object, but a special object, which is distinguished from an object inasmuch as it is a body transparent to phenomenological knowledge, and which gives itself to perception without leaving a remainder. A non-object is an object." —Ferreira Gullar, “Theory of the Non-Object” (1962), in Art in Brazil (2004), 10.

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One way that Oiticica described these practices of his and his contemporaries was under the banner of New Objectivity, which wasn’t about the dematerialization of the object, but rather about an extension of its capacity. While previous avant-gardes had continually used defamiliarization as a crutch, New Objectivity promised to instead welcome the viewer in through de-alienation. In the Surrealist and Dadaist practices of those like Marcel Duchamp, namely the recontextualization of everyday objects vis-a-vis the art institution, the form of the object itself was overpowered by the social and cultural significance tied to it. For the Brazilian avant-garde, this would constitute a weak tactic, for it didn’t question the ontological status quo, but merely took the object as a given. New Objectivity calls for a “general constructive will,” a notion that grew out of Oiticica’s reflection on Gullar’s *Theory of the Non-Object* and his own wariness towards the trap of autonomous discourse.

He was searching for a more radical and productive framework that maintained a level of self-criticism that was lacking in Gullar. New Objectivity’s constructive principles promote participation, political and social engagement, and a wariness of metanarratives.

A constructive act could be any contribution made by an artist to their field, getting at the roots of an art practice and pushing it to its extreme. At its best, a constructive act could tap into a latent zeitgeist and coax it into the public consciousness by aesthetic means. Most of all, the constructive ideology elevated the medium of sculpture over painting, growing out of Oiticica’s interest in monochromes and the apparent limits introduced by the medium of painting. Meanwhile, the minimalists gained an interest in the advent of edge stress in painting, pushing the concepts of post-painterly abstraction further still, into the three-dimensional realm.

Both Oiticica and the minimalists wanted to train the viewer’s eye to be active, but Oiticica’s work differed in its formulation of ‘participation’: by presenting the viewer with “tactile images,” form could transcend its object status and include the viewer in its unfolding.

Oiticica’s practice consisted of four branches: “penetrables” in the form of installations, spatial reliefs in the form of suspended color planes, bólices — what could be described as prototypes of post-object form, and parangolés, which were capes and costumes to be worn in happenings and performances. In a certain light, his work progressed towards the idea of non-art. With the parangolés, he sought to integrate the non-object back into the world of things. Throughout all of his work, the concept and perception of space and colour were of main concern. In the Brazilian avant-garde, the experience of an object constituted its decoding. At the same time, the tension between form and its representation was continuously on the table. El Lissitzky forged the path towards the notion that the third dimension would always arise from the two-dimensional, and this appeared again and again in the Brazilian avant-garde, but always with the added dimension of the social—the relational. To carry these ideas through to building form, the translation from two to three dimensions becomes ever more crucial. While the neo-concretist form emerged from the manipulation of its origins in a surface, post-object architectural form might come out of the two-dimensional surface of the architectural drawing.
Brazil’s utopian spirit is best embodied in its love of sports—the country has qualified for every World Cup, and has five World Cup titles. Sports culture thrives, nourishing the city’s civic life both at grand scales with world events, and with the day-to-day practice of street soccer.
Throughout the city, there are a number of social housing projects built by the national housing bank in the 50s and 60s. One such project sits in the Vila Madalena neighborhood in the city’s core. The community hosts fifty-five duplicate five-storey buildings, echoing the spirit of mass production prevalent at the time—the context doesn’t form a whole, but instead duplicate part after duplicate part. These buildings surround this project’s site, a rectangular 7500 square meter superblock that slopes in two directions, with a 7m difference in elevation between its lowest and highest points.
In the world of sports, international standards have been derived from the movement of bodies and equipment in space. A community facility with minimal spectator space brings the actions of each sport into dialogue with architectural form.

Those who use the building come with a particular activity in mind, experiencing it through its parts, instead of habitually touring the building as a whole.
Largely, the athletics facility has historically been designed with an object-minded approach: large objects anchor a grid of parts, all treated with a uniform height derived from the lowest common denominator of required ceiling clearance. Smaller ancillary halls float to the top or line the perimeter. As a result, the building is experienced first as a whole from the outside, and then as a highly itemized set of parts on its interior. Graphic and material expression is constrained to the playing surface.

A closer study of the way these standard planes are used reveals that they're far from static: movement inscribes a volumetric zone, and as each game, match, run, or swim plays out, object-form quickly proves inadequate for the movement that occurs on these planes.

A RECREATIONAL ATHLETICS FACILITY...
What I’d like to suggest, then, is that these spaces, instead of being designed vis-a-vis their objecthood — as bounded, discrete volumes — they be choreographed relationally and understood through surface and colour. Formally, this means deploying a number of relational techniques: volumetric unfolding, colour projection across planes, and figural superfluity. In short, the objects are taken apart and put back together again as a new world of networked relations.

With this approach, form is active at its very inception, in the way it forms a network as one moves from part to part. This design understands that the athletics facility is experienced only in part — no one comes to do all the things; you come to use the pools and you leave; you come, play basketball, and maybe lift some weights, and you leave. This means, though the weaving of the programmatic units, that certain elements fall away into the background while others are active and foregrounded in relation to the subject.
The basement level contains the parking lot, accessible by a ramp at the southwest corner of the ground level, storage space, and two volleyball courts serviced by an elevator or entered directly from the parking lot. A stair at the northwest corner leads up to the main locker room, and another stair moves along the pink gymnastics volume, bringing visitors up into the gymnastics hall. (See 80-83.)
The ground level has entrances at the northwest and southwest corners. Both entrances have access to locker areas, but visitors may choose to circulate directly through to the activity spaces. A juice bar wraps a column slab that supports the bottom of the diving pool. The pool’s basin protrudes down through the slab of the second floor and brings its colour down onto the space around the juice bar on the ground floor. (See 96-97.)
On the second floor, an entrance at the northeast corner serves parents and guardians who want to drop children off at the daycare center before using the facilities. As well, a staircase to the right of the lobby leads up to the conditioned aquatics spaces. The running track’s flooring system leaks out of the bounds of the track, to engage the entire floor as an active surface surrounding a void that looks down into the racquetball and squash courts. [See 90-95.]
The third floor has an entrance at the southeast corner, leading into an outdoor corridor between the louvers and curtain wall, with the option of entering the equipment hall directly, or continuing through the soccer pitch towards the aquatics center or a pilates class in the movement studio.
On the fourth floor, visitors experience the cumulative effect of the voids created to fulfill required ceiling clearances. Looking down from the multi-purpose court into the atrium along the east facade, one can see the flattening effect of the running track, gymnastics hall, stretch space, and volleyball courts as they stack around the shifting void. On the aquatics mezzanine, visitors can look down into the diving pool, watching divers practice their jumps. From the leisure pool, visitors might catch figments of the arms and legs of the most agile divers. The massive Olympic pool acts as background to all this activity, its active surface tucked out of sight on the floor above. (See 100-101.)
The roof is entirely occupiable, integrating light monitors above the soccer field as topographic elements, and accommodating both clearances and shading requirements with sloped roofs above the diving pool and the multi-purpose court. (See 104-105).
Entering the parking garage, visitors round the corner to see an undulating pink underbelly in an otherwise monosaturated blue space. The parking spaces figure against the blue of the ground and play with the distinction between line and field.
Above the parking lot, the gymnastics hall is largely defined by a pink layer of paint that extends up the wall that cuts through all four floors, and by a slight drop in the floor plate to accommodate the high clearances of many of the jumps and swings. The salmon-coloured volleyball volume slopes along the east wall.
The double facade system allows both conditioned and unconditioned spaces to exist within the single volume defined by the louvered outer facade. Here, along the east facade, the conditioned volume (left) steps back, and a void invites the sidewalk in, creating a public walkway alongside the programmatic spaces. (See page 112.) The sidewalk then becomes a mezzanine when the ground floor gives way to a large atrium that reveals the stacking planes of the track below, the weight room, and the multipurpose court above.
Looking back across the void from the third-floor open-air weight room, visitors see horizontal planes track through openings in vertical planes. This creates an effect of dynamism: the circulatory movement along the running track and the linearity of the graphics and railings emphasize movement parallel to the ground, while the vertical planes splice this movement to create discrete zones.
Squash and racquetball are one-directional sports that require a surface directly across from the players, with side walls only to act as guards to keep the ball within the court. The surface area actually used is delineated by the service lines, the tin line, the service line, the front wall line, and the side wall lines. By abstracting the volume of the court to the space described by these lines, the squash volume becomes a folded plane, easily used as a module and repeated to create a group-form as a definition of this programmatic zone.
The tops of the squash and racquetball courts form a landscape-like topography that emerges from the void cut from the center of the ovoid running track. The red of the track projects down to the floor of the courts below, implicating one programmatic unit in the other.
The concrete structural system uses pre-cast concrete double tees typical to highway construction. The tees allow for long spans while lending the project an 'as-found' tectonic quality. A playful alternation of the direction of these tees textures the ceiling without being biased towards any single direction. The tees occur in the bays supporting any performance flooring system to provide a more robust absorption of the most active live loads. Here, the large span supports the soccer field above. To the visitor, the change in ceiling texture denotes a change in function above.
The red Mondo flooring of the running track extends beyond the confines of the track lines, winding around a void that allows the diving pool to drop down, and around the top of the tennis court volume.
The ground-floor juice bar sits beneath the diving pool, which drops down from the second floor through a curvilinear cut in the floor plate, and projects its colour treatment down onto the exposed floor below. This volumetric intrusion pairs with a die-cut graphic projection to introduce a continuity between two otherwise discrete programs (lobby and pool).
Custom diving boards carry the project’s ambition down to the detail. Their forms come together through an assemblage of planes that, in this perspective, act as a framing device for the vast volume over the diving pool beyond.
The stacked organization of the aquatics program allows for each zone (diving pool and leisure pool) to be defined not by its own discrete entities but by its location within a composition of planes.
The powder-coated steel staircases act as a connective tissue between different volumes, allowing visitors to move between the seams that stitch these various spaces together. Here, the stair allows circulation from one level of the diving pool to the mezzanine that overlooks it, and experientially links the interior void over the diving pool to the flat expanse of the Olympic pool outside.
Looking south across the roof deck, past the Olympic pool, visitors can see the roofs of the diving pool and the multi-purpose court beyond. The top floors of the surrounding buildings have views down onto the roof, which, when viewed from above, casts a graphic relief over the center of the housing development.
Because most sports played within this building are played in all directions, buildings of its kind tend to be concerned with providing their visitors with lighting that isn’t biased in any given direction, such that the glare from the sun doesn’t disadvantage one player over another. Complete opacity tends to be the default solution, but it makes for an architecture that creates an interior world with no public face—a bounded object.
Within the need for an intelligent daylight control system is an opportunity for the building to act more like a sponge than a cinder block, amping up its porosity for aesthetic and social effect. This project takes advantage of the temperate climate of its site by conceiving of the envelope as a double skin. The interior skin is a glass curtainwall that wraps select spaces that require climate control, such as the equipment halls and aquatics spaces. Together with open-air program like the running track and soccer pitch, they form a loosely rectangular volume that is then bound by a skin of operable louvers.
The louvers are mirrored on one side and white on the other, reflecting sunlight onto ceilings when there's less need for lighting control, or reflecting the building's surroundings in sections of its facade when interiors need to be closed off from sunlight. At its most transparent, the louvered facade allows the interior's colors to telegraph onto the facade, like a stain painting.
The two facade systems delaminate at moments to host a network of stairs and corridors. Moving within the very seams of the project — between these two facades — visitors are witness to an encounter with the relationship of one material system to another. Through the transparency of one facade and the op-art play of the other, the project teases its context while seeping into its subconscious.
What follows is a conversation between Sasha Plotnikova, Ron Witte, John McMorrough, Albert Pope, Luis Callejas, Ana Miljacki, Michelle Chang, Troy Schaum, Sarah Whiting, Lars Lerup, and Scott Colman. The conversation took place on Friday, January 15, 2016 in the Jury Room inside Anderson Hall at Rice University. This transcript has been edited for brevity and clarity.
RON WITTE: So, let’s slow this down a little bit. What are you replacing the object with? There are a couple of different things that came forward in your explanation: one is a form relationship; the other has to do with colour. But can you tell me what you’re replacing the object with?

SASHA PLOTNIKOVA: I’m replacing the object with a breed of form that is always-already a part of a network. I see the object as defined by “objecthood”: something that’s bounded, and fairly unconcerned with anything around it—or, specifically, with its relationship to the subject. I’m proposing post-object form, which is a form that’s much more ingrained in its place, and has more agency.

RW: I’m trying to wrap my mind around what that replaces. When you do code — and you are pretty clear in the plans: the colours comprise functional units — you reinscribe a field of objects of sorts. But then when I look at a moment like this, when I’m standing on red (track) in front of pink (gymnastics)—I’m in a double state. Should I read it as a set of double or multiple states all of the time? Or should I read it as a different kind of thing, no longer an object?

SP: I think it’s the latter, what you’re getting at. It’s no longer an object because you locate yourself within it through the effects you see when the spaces come together. This perspective describes the overall effect the best, where you’re not necessarily cognizant of the fact that each colour or surface corresponds to a space. But you’re seeing this field of planes which in themselves form a kind of environment, or form an identity for that space. So here, you’re not just in the red, you’re not just in the blue, you’re in both at once.

JOHN MCMORROUGH: You’ve put a lot on the table, and I appreciate the project. It’s hard for me to tie the threads together. There’s this interest in programmatic units, opening them up, making them visible within the mass. I think there’s also this interest in colour, which clearly is a coding mechanism, but then by the porosity of the surfaces, you can get a layering of the colours. What I’m mostly curious about is, not so much evaluating the project, but understanding how you evaluate, how you develop the sense of colour. It seems like once it’s in play, we get nice perspectives where by dint of the apertures, we get this layering of colour. But there’s also the compositional mode that has to do with how well these colours and forms mix. In some ways, I’m trying to figure out the difference between being in the pink gymnasmium, which for the most part is a mono-saturation of colour with little bits to the side, or something like Le Corb’s colour problem at the Villa La Roche, where suddenly the colour went to the interiority, at which point it’s not about the coding of designations, it’s very much compositional. And so what I’m trying to figure out in this post-object form is, what is the role of playing out these systems which are fairly autonomous and give us certain effects when they collide? And on the other hand, we actually compose these effects or circumscribe them because I think there’s a kind of relativism in the project. Like, everything’s sort of good ‘cause there’s a lot of colour and they all sort of match. And I appreciate that, but I’m not sure how then to calibrate, or judge, or distinguish between where you would say the collage of colours in compositional sense is super attuned, and where it just sort of happens. In other words, there’s just this evenness, which seems incompatible with how we...
start to judge and measure. And I haven't really encountered that before. I mean that as a problem: how do you know that you're on the right track with these various collapses of form?

SP: I think its success is most explicit when you begin to define the spaces outside of the colour boundary; when the form actually becomes an active part of something greater than itself. That happens through colour, but also through the interaction between forms through surfaces and cuts. Some moments where I've tried to make that happen is, let's say standing between these two forms, where you see the diving pool dropping down and the tennis court popping up—but from the running track you're not necessarily sure what those things are; they're more like these surreal icebergs emerging onto the scene.

ALBERT POPE: So does the colour always stick to the program? It seems in some ways, it's directly stuck to the program; in other ways you were explaining it, it bled out and made connections between spaces that otherwise would not be connected, or you would not think are connected. Those moments are kind of different from each other. Is it both?

SP: It is both. For instance, in this moment where the columns supporting the tennis space in the parking lot below get the yellow treatment so they can act as a wayfinding device when you're not partaking in those spaces. So the tennis space is in a way partaking in the space below. See pages 84-85.

AP: But it's always in a minor key? It's always clear what the main program element for each colour is?

SP: As in, would you know that the yellow connects to the tennis court? If you've never used the tennis court, I don't think you would know, unless you've walked through it.

LUIS CALLEJAS: I think it's great that it's not coded.

AP: Well it is cued, but it's slipped. You're slipping the coding.

LC: I love it, but at the same time, too many things are missing just because of my familiarity with the context of building in Latin America. You speak about object and post-object form and it's impossible not to think about this relationship between Gio Ponti, a designer of objects, influencing a designer of buildings, Lina Bo Bardi, who was not afraid of using colour. While other architects were inviting artists to carry out any colour-related or graphic aspects of the design, she was actually introducing her own hand through colour and through form. In some ways, I see those furniture collaborations between Bo Bardi and Ponti in what you're doing, but over-scaled to buildings that probably could have been done in that historical moment. But what you're proposing could be a revised version of that as a technique.

LC: It's almost as if I'm seeing a playful over-scaling of certain aspects of that design culture. It's interesting because on the one hand, Latin American designers were quite conservative in colouring large surfaces; while in the furniture, you would see what you are representing here.

I think the next step would be to step back and really think how you can connect the application of color to these large surfaces. And when you translate that...
More Bo Bardi, definitely—while I’m enjoying your colour, and He’s more post-object.

If we take him as an example, I think there’s an exercise I’ve been trying to do in my head, which is removing all the relationships within it. And that’s a kind of overall volume and what the colour does is it takes any internal confetti. It’s still there, it just recalibrates volume and it throws it into the air like the colour back in, it goes to surface almost immediately with some exceptions, like when colour turns a corner. So actually, I think there’s an outcome of the colour, which is extraordinarily interesting, and I don’t think it’s without precedent. I think there’s something in the representation with these sharp lines that’s more than volume or surface. There are so many artists now, and you can trace it back fifty years in Latin America, exploring this desire to soften the presence of those modern objects, which is extraordinarily interesting, and I think there’s something in the representation with these sharp lines that’s more than volume or surface. There are so many artists now, and you can trace it back fifty years in Latin America, exploring this desire to soften the presence of those modern objects.

Right.

So I’d say, we don’t really need a method to address it. I’m understanding the project in terms of a kind of stitching, through colour, and through formal moves. What I keep getting stuck on is the post-object. The way you described it, isn’t colour a kind of property of perception already?

It’s not just about removing the volume. I don’t have a problem with volume. But it goes back to what Luis and Albert were saying, where Lina Bo Bardi would pick out certain details and maybe paint a lightswitch red, or in the Seattle Central Library, where there’s this red hallway. Those are special moments — those are object moments, which is why I opted for all-but total saturation.

There are so many artists now, and you can trace it back fifty years in Latin America, exploring this desire to soften the presence of those modern objects.

And it’s hard not to talk of the Barcelona Pavilion. And it’s hard not to think of de Stijl, but I think there’s something extraordinary about the colour which is extraordinarily interesting, and I don’t think it’s without precedent. I think there’s something in the representation with these sharp lines that’s more than volume or surface. There are so many artists now, and you can trace it back fifty years in Latin America, exploring this desire to soften the presence of those modern objects.

ANA MILJACKI: I’m enjoying your colour, and I’m understanding the project in terms of a kind of stitching, through colour, and through formal moves. What I keep getting stuck on is the post-object. The way you described it, isn’t colour a kind of property of perception already?

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ANA MILJACKI: I’m enjoying your colour, and I’m understanding the project in terms of a kind of stitching, through colour, and through formal moves. What I keep getting stuck on is the post-object. The way you described it, isn’t colour a kind of property of perception already?

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And it’s hard not to talk of the Barcelona Pavilion. And it’s hard not to think of de Stijl, but I think there’s something extraordinary about the colour which is extraordinarily interesting, and I don’t think it’s without precedent. I think there’s something in the representation with these sharp lines that’s more than volume or surface. There are so many artists now, and you can trace it back fifty years in Latin America, exploring this desire to soften the presence of those modern objects.

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TROY SCHAUM: The thing with the post-object — and it’s in that title that’s been there since the beginning — is it’s an incredibly ambitious bar, and you can look at the history of ‘post-’ projects in architecture. You’re forced to prop up the object and at the same time construct a rupture, because it’s not really a without-object project. And representation in the project is the way you’ve chosen to represent the rupture.

SARAH WHITING: Maybe it’s a question of perception and how you’re trying to put forth a different notion of how architecture is perceived and, through spaces of interiority, that become a form of object.

I want to go back to Luis’ question about this particular context and the role of colour here, but also your choice of program, on the one hand, it’s a really amazing project to look at, and very tightly composed in terms of the large program, the right site, very carefully done — on the other hand, it becomes almost too perfect for this being a thesis about a condition of perception that can be generalized more; because I start to look at it and say: one, does it become a question of representational thesis, which is all about how one represents the world today using these non-delineated colour planes to talk about perception and representation; or is it really going at a design of architecture in this way, in which case I think the athletic fields give you too easy a gun of pure fields of colour, and I would then push you and say, how would you take this to another project?

AP: For me, the straw man is what you haven’t mentioned but once, but it’s clear in the drawings. It’s the grey world of the repetitive blocks. And that’s the object-form in my reading of this. I think you’re entering a long line of attempts to de-materialize form in favour of event. Whether we do it by literally dissolving the architecture into glass — almost nothing, or the various devices that we can use to foreground event and background object. And I think that’s something that has been a kind of goal and ambition that animated much of the architecture of the last century. I think even with colour, to some extent.

I think amongst this field of objects, block after block after block after block, is the form against which this is a reaction as the exception — where the building provides a kind of relief. The post-object, or a way of getting away from the object is where the event would be foregrounded — not exactly coded, but designated, by the particular colour choices you have, and the striking contrast like in the Seattle Public Library, the red corridors. It’s amazing, this space you go into and you’re completely immersed in this single colour. I think you’ve probably chosen the views to show multi-colour as opposed to showing views where you’re completely immersed in a single colour, which I think is just as important, maybe more important to show than the multi-colour. You try to counteract the effect of the repetitive objects that surround this thing with this dynamic of colour in space where the form is backgrounded to the best that you can do that. So much of your colouring is against the form; it goes floor to ceiling — it’s not tied to a particular volume, it slips out of the volume. You’re working with another logic besides what is often done, using colour to define the volume or reinforce a volume — you’re doing the opposite which is to slip around the volume, and in some ways to undermine it.
MICHELLE CHANG: I think that the effect that Ron was talking about is what’s successful about the project, and what you were trying to explain in what post-object form is. To go back to the reading that Albert was mentioning, that the object is the grey that surrounds the project: I think that when it is successful is when there’s a lack of relief. So the idea that the isolated object becomes densely packed in what becomes less like a solid void and more like a solid solid is how you undermine objecthood as you described it. So, in that way I think it’s less about the slippages of color or the relationship of one color to another, but that it is incessant and total within this otherwise grey field. And so the areas in which you have relief I think are a misstep in that reading because you explain that there’s this kind of grey area where you can hang out and kind of get away from it all—I don’t think that you should be able to do that, in the sense that you are creating something that is total, without relief.

AP: As a gesamtkunstwerk. Maybe the one test would be, as a thought experiment, what if someone got real excited about all the colours and started painting all the housing blocks in separate colours? Would you have the same project?

LC: That’s interesting. In Rio de Janeiro, they have done that many times. They have this real separation—I mean, in São Paulo they like to think of themselves as a real design culture, much more refined in that sense, they don’t do these kinds of things. I think this favela painting is horrible. I think what’s interesting is that through colour, if you apply it in a way that is more delicate, you can dissolve the perception of type through the application of these colour shifts. And that’s what I think as a project could be really interesting. I tried that in a stadium in Bogota and some people hated it.

SP: With the dazzle camouflage?

LC: Yeah. We wanted to make the stadium not look like a stadium. And I wish I would have used colour. I think the question about aesthetics is powerful enough on its own here, so you don’t have to dive at it from other approaches. I think it’s perfectly fine. I think it needs to be applied with a delicate hand so as not to be outdated.

LARS LERUP: I wonder if we can see the activity itself as a kind of object—a bunch of atoms that float around but that actually create a space that lends an image. Then it becomes important, it seems to me — as Albert suggested — that the colour should not coincide with the activity space but should be a separate operation. So that the only object you see is that unstable object doing pirouettes, much like players in a tennis match. That new space is a kind of shifting focus away from the object, towards the activity—which of course, architects wouldn’t be too happy about. Nevertheless, there’s a new potential to the ever-changing form that yet stays within some kind of horizon of activity, made up of repeated patterns. I think that’s very rarely spoken of, but tennis, like I said, is one of those things. You see the whole audience at a tennis match turning their heads from left to right and back again, all involved in this strange kind of activity space, or as Albert called it, an event space.

SW: You’re not anti-object; I think you’re trying to find ways of engaging architecture that includes interior and...
It's easy to read “post-object form” and think that you're only about event. And that's where I think it's very exciting that you're finding a way of letting architecture capture that kind of articulation and not rely just on performance or event or program.

SCOTT COLMAN: But that's exactly it. Think of — this is very crude — the first half of the twentieth century focusing on the object, and the second half as being about event. This is about another relationship between people and objects, very Bruno Latour. You said it earlier: it's not just an object, it's an object always within a network or a set of relationships. So the question of whether you need this program is an important one. Given that when you see the particular coloration of the running track, you run. Or when you see your relationship to the object, the object in a sense tells you what to do. So there are moments where there's a kind of spillover or the colour from the running track spills into some other space — it's problematizing that relationship: what do you do in those moments? You still have that relationship to the object but it's not clear what you're supposed to do in a situation where the object isn't telling you what to do. And those moments I find the most crucial to the way the building's been designed.

TS: The post-object has been designed after the object. Ron says it well when he refers to your process. In a way, you designed the modernist building and then you've taken another step past the object. It's after the object, I think, not without the object. And so if you reverse your process, you basically take Albert's argument further. It's not just the context of the object: it's this massive modernist object — a box — that you've designed and you're now attempting to rupture with the past.

AM: When you started talking about the relational, I was expecting that you would be talking more about the politics of this mega-object or of design in general. For me, the relational would make us think about who made it for whom, and what the perspectives are on that object given the different subjects that are using it, which was already there in your presentation — this idea that we bring certain perspectives to things to begin with. So, you could say that this is a relational object in a Latourian sense, for this community: they will all have certain stakes in it. But I'm not sure that necessarily translates into designing in that particular way in which you design. I feel we have a certain issue on the table that has politics in it, and we have a kind of extraordinary colorful object and they're not quite talking to each other yet.

RW: I think it's an interesting question — “How overt is that political action on our end, as designers?” One of the things that happens to me when I look at these drawings, is that I can't stop moving my eyes. I look at a certain place for about two seconds and I kind of do this [head swivels around] — I think that's political. In the same way that for example, when you're looking at Hilbersheimer's drawings, you don't look at any particular unit, you kind of move around. There was a kind of politic loaded into the objects and seriality in that case. I view my eye's inability to stop as a kind of political fact. It implicates the way we're moving through the space, or means something about the hierarchies of program types or hierarchies of relations to the city, or something else. I'm not sure what it is, but I think it's loaded in there.
AM: Sure, but the politics there is not the same as the politics of incorporating, let’s say, a piece of wood from the Brazilian forest, which would make the object relational in a very particular political sense. There are many ways to think relational. The relational in this project is only on how we come to this experience.

RW: I disagree. There’s a prompt in here but I don’t think it requires the prompt of that kind of material economy.

AM: There are many ways to think about this: who built it, who is the politician that allowed it to go between these different housing blocks, and what does it bring to the population of the block? I thought you would talk about relationality on many levels of the project.

SP: It’s much more of an aesthetic question for me than an economic one. I think architecture has suffered enough in the past ten or twenty years, as form has been pushed away in favour of these kind of contextual or technological relations you’re talking about. In a way, this has been one outcome of this post-object culture: the building’s no longer an object but a collection of circumstantial requirements. I’m not interested in that.

SC: One of the things I really appreciate about the project and really like about it as a thesis is that at certain moments when certain ideas from outside the field — like relational aesthetics or like relativism in the 20s or like the kind of social-political moment that leads to the event for Tschumi — those ideas are on the table but there’s no attempt to embody them in architecture. It’s actually a speculative exploration of what that could mean for architecture. And so its kind of lack of editing or lack of the mediation that you’re talking about, Luis, is I think actually one of the advantages of the project. And one of the great things that Sasha’s put forth over the semester, is the willingness to explore different modes of representation, and what the potentials of extradisciplinary ideas could be in the discipline. It suggests that architecture wouldn’t necessarily embody it, but would actually produce something different out of having had an engagement with those broader theoretical ideas.

RW: I agree with you, Scott, because I think to do the experiment that I was doing, which is to say, take the color and put it back in, there’s a huge amount of force necessary to achieve that effect. And so the rawness of the colour, the crazy amalgamations, the way you turn corners, that’s a blunt force exercise. So I think that’s right — there is a necessity for that in a sense, for what you’re doing. I’m not sure it has to be subtle.

There’s another question that again maybe has to do with how all of us are supposed to operate. Somebody walks into your building and says “Hey this is pretty colorful.” And then they’re going to leave. Is that okay?

SP: Why would they leave?

RW: Haha, that’s a good answer, but I think there are always secondary and tertiary readings in these spaces when we enter into them, and I think you really really have to work get your game. I think the first reading and the second and third reading are “I’m in a pink room, I’m in an orange room,” or “Somebody doesn’t understand coloring here, they really should have gotten an interior designer involved.” You see what I mean? There’s a whole conversation there, because you’re making a difficult world.
LL: You know, what’s so striking about this project — and I agree with my colleagues that it is — as a thesis it goes to the very bitter end. And maybe some people will say it was a failure, but it was certainly worth it. Your tenacity and your commitment to this idea are formidable. And what strikes me with the agglomeration of these activities into one collective enterprise is that it’s precisely where monumentality lies today. The discrete activities of living in housey-houses is here turned inside out, because it’s here in this building that their bodies are forced together seamlessly, and those bodies play and act in various ways. That collective image is ultimately something about the city—about who we are collectively, how we get drawn into these things. Therefore I would end up saying that this is a very successful thesis. Even if I don’t think you’ve even licked the post-object yet.

TS: I think — I just wanted to commend Sasha. Because she set the bar so high with the post-object she ended up in a place over the course of the semester, and definitely a lot of what you’re hearing is she’s found a new territory for exploration for design. And there are moments when there weren’t the criteria we might typically have found in earlier studios to judge, is this in a decisive way, good? Is this the definite way to respond to this? What I think is important for a thesis and what I think you’ve achieved is you’ve set a set of terms that have allowed for exploration over the course of the year that as you’re seeing from the response have nothing but kind of more important, decisive, and definitive answers and questions that will propel your career forward, and it’s been a remarkable thesis for me to participate in.