Supermodernity, Emergence and the Built Environment

Reinterpreting the Human-Made Landscape

Article by Dylan J. Beck

As ceramic artists, how might we translate, interpret, understand, explore and critique the built environment through the media of sculpture, installation and performance? Over the past 60 years, our built environment has changed dramatically. Beginning in 1945 and until the recent economic downturn, building occurred at an unprecedented rate. In places as geographically diverse as Dubai and China, development of the built environment continues across the natural and agricultural landscape at a furious pace and more often than not, chaotically.

Paul Sacaridiz: ***Prospect****. 2008. Cast and extruded ceramic, wood.*

In most parts of the world, supermodernity has created sites (airports, shopping malls and various housing developments, for example) that have little relationship to their surrounding natural environments. Perhaps this should not be surprising. After all, in a world of 24-hour news feeds, a never-ending abundance of information on the Internet and high-speed travel, it can be difficult to relate to the real landscape. Lamenting this difficulty and its implications in his book *Non-Places*, Marc Augé observes that the "world of supermodernity does not exactly match the one in which we believe that we live, for we live in a world that we have not yet learned to look at. We have to relearn to think about space."[1] This unique situation raises questions about how to begin to understand the social, economic and psychological implications of unprecedented growth and creates fertile ground for artistic interpretation.

Much of the growth in our (sub)urban places has been emergent, the result of a bottom-up system in which the placement of one object is decided solely by the location of a previously placed object. In such a system, the nature of the whole is not indicated by the isolated parts. Design decisions are made by individual developers and only loose local codes dictate the outcome of entire built landscapes. Many ceramic artists who have begun to address the growth of the built landscape, shifting architectural and design trends and the social implications of our built environment through their sculptures and installations, have drawn upon ideas in *Emergence Theory*, a body of thought that has developed to explain the dynamics of complex and chaotic systems in general. This has introduced a new relationship between ceramics and the architecture and infrastructure of which it has long been an integral part. Ceramic materials have been used in nearly every aspect of our building practices, including structural applications, decorative adornment and even the elimination of human waste but now contemporary ceramic artists have begun to employ ceramics as a means of investigating the built environment. The shift in ceramics from functional building material to conceptual tool for the interpretation of architecture and built space creates a unique opportunity for the artist.

The urban environment is in constant flux. The ebb and flow of development and recession, economic prosperity and natural disasters continuously affects our cities. Addressing the entopic nature of the city is Del Harrow's site-specific installation *City of Porcelain and Plastic*. The piece was conceived after Harrow had visited China (a country that was experiencing unprecedented growth) and was subsequently moved to Cleveland, Ohio (a contracting city in the rust belt of America). Constructed in a

Del Harrow: ***City of Porcelain and Plastic (Detail).***

derelict early 20th century wire-manufacturing factory in Cleveland, Ohio *City of Porcelain and Plastic* is a microcosm of what its host represents. A cloud of surgical tubing hovered above an ever-decaying and regenerating cityscape of unfired porcelain and repurposed plastic jugs. As Harrow worked to rebuild the city, motion sensors activated water pumps that caused 'rain' to fall on the unfired clay, exacerbating its decay. Illustrating his view of "the city as an evolving abstract form and the idea of urban planning as a kind of Sisyphusian pursuit of order", Harrow created his own eternal task of rebuilding that which is in constant decay.

As the installation rained on itself, the host building's porous structure seeped and leaked. The precipitation was collected in various plastic jugs, reminiscent of an eco-friendly rainwater collection system. The improvised construction of *City* speaks to Harrow's interest in the DIY (do-it-yourself) nature of emergent city development. As our cities evolve in a bottom-up system, we often end up with shoddy, poorly conceived structures, leaving the city susceptible to natural disasters. Harrow speaks of the comparison between the flooding of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and the ability of Holland's dikes to hold back the sea steadfastly. "There is an idea about a sort of scrappy pragmatic ecology that I am interested in, yet at the same time there is something cynical in this piece about the state of American urban infrastructure. I look at levy systems in Holland and wonder why we can't put that same kind of ingenuity and intention into our cities, which are sort of scrapped together." Harrow's work, as a consequence, has become a sustained critique of the current state of the American urban landscape through the use of site-specific installation, time-based performance, and interactive sculpture. He manoeuvres the viewer into a position where it is all but impossible to avoid questioning our recent urban-development practices.

Other artists have taken different approaches to re-examining and interpreting the urban landscape. In the series of installations titled *The Decorative City*, Paul Sacaridiz builds fantastical Utopian architectural arrangements. With works such as *Prospect and Sprawl*, he uses a cryptic language of interconnectivity, pragmatic systems and familiar and foreign symbolism as a means of re-examining the built environment and of transporting the viewer to new or unrealized cityscapes where the mundane becomes monumental. Objects in the installations are placed on finely crafted tables, exquisite sawhorses and plinths giving the viewer the sense of viewing a work in progress that has been frozen in time. Sacaridiz occasionally employs a saturated

Del Harrow: ***City of Porcelain and Plastic.*** *2006. Porcelain (unfired and fired elements), plastic tubing, plastic water containers, aquarium pump, motion sensor and steel wire.*

blue field as a backdrop for the arrangements. This blue backdrop acts, like a chroma key in video, as a means of transposing a character to a place other than the studio. The blue field operates in this way in *Prospect*, creating an opportunity for the viewer to imagine being transported beyond the gallery to a type of heterotopia, something Michael Foucault describes as "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several places, several sites that are in themselves incompatible".[2]

Rather than adopting an activist stance, Sacaridiz's work recontextualises objects from daily life as a means of re-examining them. The act of placing objects cast from food moulds alongside decorative interior architectural elements (and within mysterious systems suggestive of Calvert Vaux and Fredrick Law Olmstead's renderings of some of the first suburban planned neighborhoods or Le Corbusier's *Radiant City*) creates the feeling of looking upon a fantastic scheme for a Utopian city environment. Sacaridiz's interest in the architectural model and aerial perspective stems from the idea that, "When looking at a plan or grand schematic for a city or park system there is a logic that is sublime and incredible but the reality of it is that when you are on the ground it is impossible to ever comprehend it. The city becomes an abstraction and there is no way to reconcile it." He describes his process as "taking something chaotic and making order out of it... This has to do with wanting to set up sculptural systems where one might look at it and sense that there is something intentional going on even if that intention isn't particularly clear." This idea of structure in chaos relates to emergence theory and the organized complexity that has driven most modern city development. In an environment where simple decisions are being made continuously by independent entities there is a tendency for more complex behaviours to arise collectively. A system or pattern will become apparent from seemingly chaotic parts.

The characteristics of emergent growth also inform the installation *Converge* by Gail Heidel, a work that contrasts two stages of development that respectively examine a top-down decision making process and a more emergent type of arrangement. Stage one, *Converge: Permutations 1-9* along the gallery walls, rows of shelves display 211 brick variations arranged in nine permutations. The orderly displays of bricks are organized and reorganized in a logical and controlled linear fashion; each permutation alludes to variations on a theme evocative of a musical score. This control is then cast out and the order is changed as the bricks are arranged on the floor in the second part of the installation. Stage two, *Converge: Critical Mass* is built by embracing

Dylan Beck: ***Road To Nowhere.*** *2006. Coloured porcelain and wood. 72 x 96 x 80 in.*

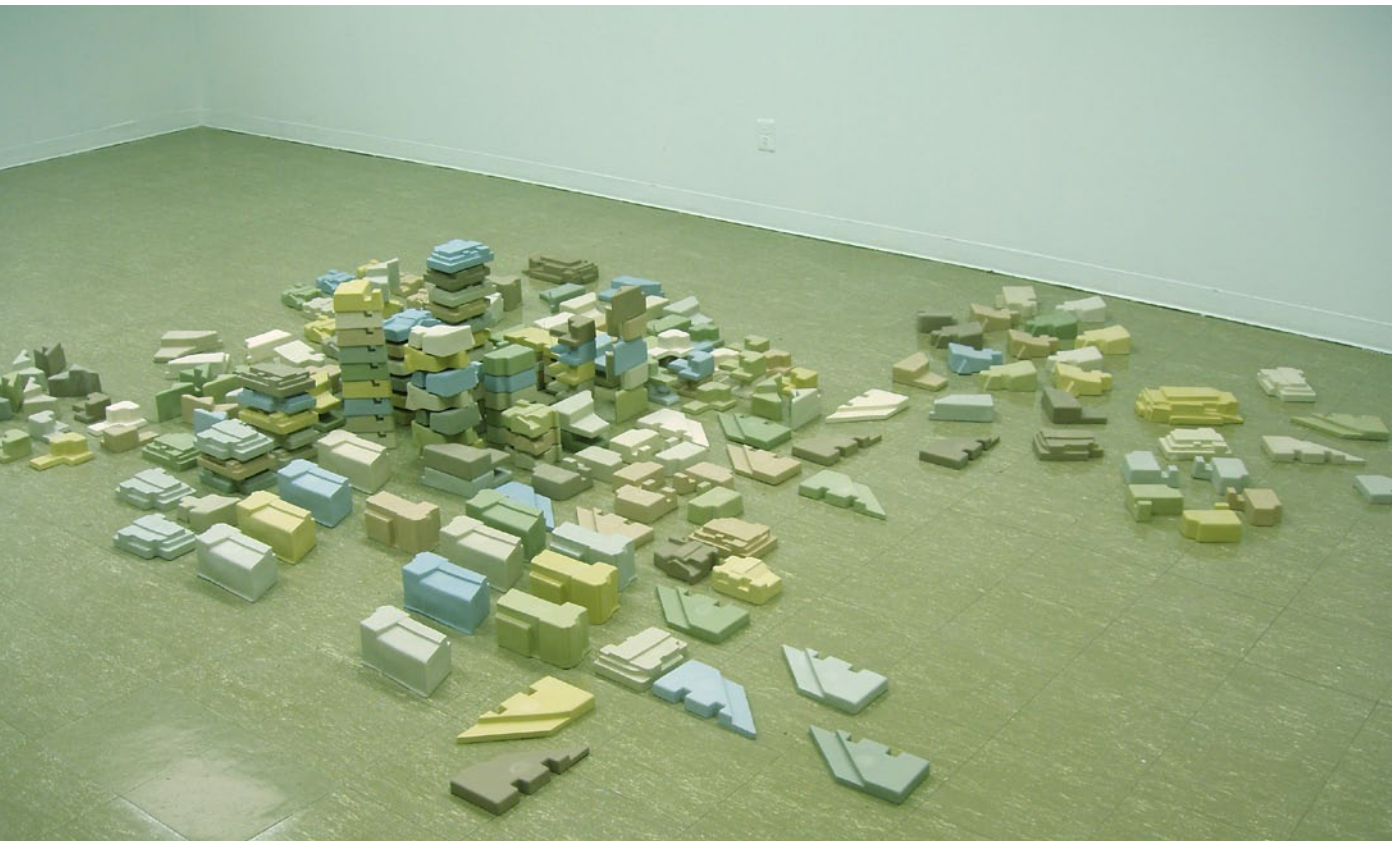
emergent organized complexity as closely as an individual artist can. Heidel and three assistants arrange the bricks on the floor according to loose guidelines and with no predetermined outcomes. The final states of the arrangements and constructions are dictated by the variation in brick forms and the localized decisions of placement based upon previously placed bricks. The resulting structures are reminiscent of a model city built of earthen brick, yet the nodes and pathways created within the arrangements possess an uncanny resemblance to the organization apparent in computer circuitry and motherboards. These visual similarities are recurrent in many manifestations of organized complexity across a whole spectrum of human-made systems.

The relationship between parts one and two of *Converge* is defined by the title of the installation. Heidel states, "The top-down and bottom-up systems are converging. The outcome illustrates that we actually do have agency and that we can control our environment; we do have an effect on it." The idea that we are not merely passive residents of earth but that our actions and decisions, no matter how small, affect our environment, natural and artificial, has been a point of contention in environmental debates concerning global climate change and issues of land use. Heidel's interests also encompass the "condition of interconnectivity within commerce, community and labor." In the supermodern world where goods are shipped around the globe and services can be rendered via the Internet without regard to locale, it is hard to form a concrete concept of place and community. The ramifications of our everyday actions and consumer decisions have acquired truly global consequences.

Emergence Theory and the concepts of organized complexity and supermodernity have been reccurring themes in my own sculptural practice. The works *Road To Nowhere* and *A Modular City* operate on many of the same levels as Heidel's *Converge*. Rather than using bricks as modular units, however, I derived forms from the negative spaces within polystyrene packing containers. My interest in these particular negative spaces stems from the contemplation of issues of commerce and retail waste and the design relationships between shipping containers and the buildings in which their contents are sold. There is also something remarkable about creating form from empty space: making something from nothing. The modular forms represent a pseudo-product that the container was designed to protect. A transformation of form occurs when the objects are placed in contextual arrangements. *Road To Nowhere* represents an orderly top-down arrangement. The shelves, with their practical and

Dylan Beck: ***Road To Nowhere.***

Above: Gail Heidel: ***Converge****. 2007–2008. 1123 bricks, earthenware and wood.*
Below: Dylan Beck: ***A Modular City****. 2007. Coloured porcelain.*



ostensibly temporary post-and-lintel construction, confront the viewer at eye level in crowded interior space. The work takes the shape of an overly simplified maze where the painstakingly arranged objects surround the viewer in a swarm. This effect is intended to elicit a feeling similar to that of being shuttled around in an auto-centric environment designed to facilitate the movement of goods and consumers from non-place to non-place.

As a counterpart to *Road To Nowhere* and in the spirit of *Emergence Theory*, I created the work *A Modular City*. Each time the piece is installed it takes on a unique form based on my reactions to the existing architectonics of the installation space and the unique traits of each individual module. I begin with a vague vision of a cityscape sprawling outward from a dense core. The piece evolves on its own from there.

Though admittedly it would by definition be nearly impossible for a single person to create something truly emergent, I think that as artists we make the most honest attempts that we can to prompt viewers to re-examine the world around them. We observe and, by recontextualising events, histories, landscape and so forth, we attempt to revive neglected discussions or begin new ones that reflect on our contemporary condition. Whether the approach involves passive observation or critical visual dialogue, the outcomes can be influential. At a time when it has become imperative for us to redefine the way in which the world's populations deal with land use, resources and energy, art can hardly go wrong by seeking to add to a discourse that is integral to self-reflection and re-evaluation of the built environment.

Footnotes

1. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity.* 180 Varick Street, New York, NY: Verso, 1995, p. 35-36.
2. "Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias," *French journal Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, October, 1984.

Dylan Beck was born in South Eastern Ohio, US in 1980. He spent his childhood in the foothills of the Appalachian mountain range. As a teenager, Beck worked with his father, who is an architect and general contractor. After completing high school in 1999, he attended The Ohio University in Athens, Ohio where he studied ceramics and conseration biology. Upon earning his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in ceramics, Beck was awarded a Post Baccalaureate Fellowship at Illinois State University in Illinois, US. In 2006, he moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, US to attend Tyler School of Art of Temple University for graduate school; earning his Master of Fine Arts degree in ceramics. Since 2005, Beck has exhibited widely in the US and is presently an Assistant Professor of Art at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, US.

Dylan Beck: ***A Modular City (Detail)****.*