

Transforming the Disciplinary Boundary

Amita Sinha

The exhibition titled, 'Outside Design', a collateral event of the First Chicago Architecture Biennial, of visually arresting full-scale installations is claimed to be a series of laboratories for design experiments. A few of these experiments are grounded in observations of behavior of urban wildlife and of materials under varying atmospheric conditions in everyday spaces —campuses of University of Illinois at Chicago and Urbana Champaign, and urban neighborhoods.

Walls dominate the installations and challenge our perception of them as static, solid, and impermeable boundaries separating interior from exterior. Here we find them as living habitats in Amphibious Envelope (David Benjamin, *The Living*), Aquapones (Emmanual Pratt, *Sweet Water Foundation*), and Habitat Wall (Joyce Hwang, *Ants of the Prairie*).

Habitat Wall articulates the building edge into crevices, cavities, and nesting boxes with the use of rough wood and recycled window shutters making it a shelter for bats, swallows, and cliff dwelling birds. This installation is an outcome of on-going field observations using camera traps and campus surveillance videos of animal sightings and their habitat mapping in and around building surfaces, and spaces in-between buildings in SAIC campus.



Outside Design

Exhibition

September 11-December 19, 2015,
Sullivan Galleries, Chicago.

Curated By:

Jonathan Solomon, Director of
Architecture, Interior Architecture, and
Designed Objects at the School of the
Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC).

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Habitat Wall Joyce Hwang, *Ants of the Prairie*

Amphibious Envelope is a full-scale insulated glass wall unit, consisting of a tank filled with water and amphibious creatures—frogs and snails—and moss balls. In this self-cleaning ecosystem, movement of frogs triggers sensors releasing air bubbles into the water and re-oxygenating it. The installation Aquapones draws our attention to training of young interns in the aquaponics system that is part of the community network engaged in regenerative place-making in blighted neighborhoods in South Side Chicago.

The installations by David Hays of *Analog Media Lab* are designed to reveal changes in atmospheric conditions that are not apparent to the eye. Materials change form in response to temperature shifts, a point made by the use of layered bundles of sheet plastic and wood, and in bonded strips of sheet plastic and brass in analog actuators and flexible lattice structures. Their linear and rotary movements are a material manifestation of diurnal and

seasonal temperature changes making visible what the human body may not otherwise perceive. The installations are playful, yet cerebral, provoking us to rethink the static ideal in architectural form in favor of that which is dynamic and responsive to ambient conditions. Honey Window for example is a luminescent object created by ever-changing patterns of honey flows between two panes of glass in response to lighting through the Gallery windows. This beautiful installation is a comment on the obsessive desire of modernists to reduce the wall to a transparent glass pane thus obviating its textural and visual attributes, in other words, dematerializing it.

Eric Ellingsen of *Species of Space* explores visual patterns or what he calls 'materiality' of sound in his perceptual studies of public spaces and one of his installations is a 'dream machine', a spinning strobe in a dark room inducing hallucination.



Amphibian Envelope David Benjamin, *The Living*

His work aims at amplifying human perception into visualizing aural and haptic engagement with the city.

'Outside Design' refers to both the work of designers working at the margins of their disciplines, and objects designed to straddle the boundaries between inside and outside and by extension between interior design, architecture, and landscape architecture. Taken together, the installations are metaphorical as well as literal statements on transforming the disciplinary boundary between architecture and landscape architecture into a seam. They subvert the long held idea of the interior world of fixed objects erected in resistance to the exterior non-human world, by reimagining the wall as a kinetic structure and a site of co-habitation. Design of objects as sensors is a low cost alternative to green living walls and louvered surfaces whose movements are controlled by digital sensors. Outside Design demonstrates that innovative design is an outcome of research; experiments in



Honey Window David Hays, *Analog Media Lab*

materiality open up possibilities of dynamic forms; and investigations into human perceptual experience and urban wildlife behavior lead to new thinking on our relationship with the creature world and its accommodation in architectural form. ■

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