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**Digital Culture And Architecture::  
Evolution or Revolution**

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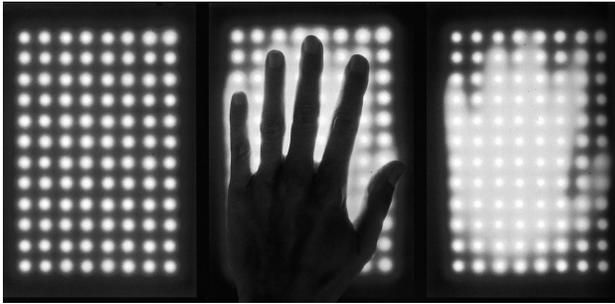


Figure 1: Kennedy & Violich Architecture, body temperature-responsive material

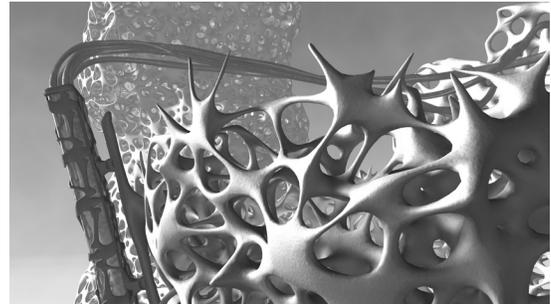


Figure 2: R&Sie(n), « I've Heard About »

In a little more than a decade, the computer has profoundly impacted the practice of architecture. It has also begun to transform the way the discipline defines itself. More than an evolution, this shift represents a revolution both practical and theoretical. Change is almost always a mixed bag of creation and destruction. Whereas new possibilities have arisen, some aspects of architectural design that used to be considered fundamental are jeopardized. Using a theoretical and historical frame of interpretation, the lecture will discuss the complex situation that prevails today as well as some of the challenges that await practitioners and theorists.

More specifically, the lecture will first stress the more and more strategic nature of design in today's world. Digital tools have reinforced this strategic character. Computer-aided contemporary architectural design is in a paradoxical situation insofar that it oscillates between this strategic imperative that requires an understanding of design extending far beyond its formal aspects and a highly formalistic turn, epitomized by the architectural star-system. From diagrams to algorithms, from mapping practices to parametric design, the desire to go beyond traditional form-finding practices is everywhere. It could very well lead to a radically new conception of architectural form as event-based, a perspective that is clearly at stake in contemporary performalist attitudes.

Traditional dimensions of architecture have become meanwhile problematic. Scale is no longer evident in a world in which information is to be found at every level, from the microscopic to the macroscopic. Tectonics, that is structure conceived as space defining, is also in a state of crisis. This crisis finds its counterpart in the new importance taken by ornament, an ornament often more "structural" than structure itself. The lecture will discuss how such a situation is in deep accordance with the context generated by globalization as well as by recent technological evolution. The crisis of scale and tectonics finds its counterpart in a renewed interest for the material presence of architecture. A profound redefinition of materiality, envisaged as the interface between the physical and human spheres, seems ultimately at stake. In its most radical form, digital architecture should not be reduced to another neo-avant-garde. Actively engaged in the exploration of a new materiality, it represents first and foremost an experimental practice.

This emergent materiality is also inseparable from the rise of a new type of individual, a digitally-equipped individual with new expectations and requirements. From cyborg analogies to the post-human hypothesis, various approaches have been proposed in order to understand this new figure. In the light provided by the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Bruno Latour, the lecture will discuss how it must be also considered as inherently multiple, network-like. From the desire to overcome the clear-cut distinction between subject and object—a desire epitomized by the importance taken by the notion of affect—to the new accent put on sensory stimulation—various trends of contemporary digital architecture have to do with the rise of this new subject.

A number of problems remain however to be addressed. Despite the fact that what is happening today is rooted in a much longer history of the relations between architecture and an information-based society, a history that really begins at the dawn of the twentieth century, digital architecture tends to be oblivious to the historical dimension, to position itself implicitly in an everlasting present. This lack of historical perspective goes with a certain disinterest for the political implications of design. The time has perhaps come to address these shortcomings frontally. This might require the reinvention, or rather reinterpretation of some of the fundamentals of architecture, beginning with the need to shelter from the elements, let those be physical or digital. What could be the primitive hut of the digital age?