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Stan Allen by Nader Tehrani

opposite: *Taichung InfoBox, 2010, temporary exhibition pavilion, Taichung Taiwan. Photos by Iwan Baan.*

this page: *Sagaponac House, 2008, single-family house, Sagaponac, NY. Photo by Michael Moran.*

Stan Allen has been an active and vocal force in architecture over the past 25 years. As the former dean of the School of Architecture at Princeton, the principal of SAA/Stan Allen Architect, and the author of numerous books and articles (among them the essay "From Object to Field: Field Conditions in Architecture and Urbanism," to which we refer repeatedly in this conversation), his impact has been felt from the realms of practice to the academic world. In the "Field Conditions" text, he articulates new ways in which "difference" can be accommodated in compositional strategies that do not resort to figural, typological, or iconic variations and he unearths a series of aggregative strategies that demonstrate the wide range of spatial, formal, and material possibilities immanent in the systemic logics of the field itself. Protean in many ways, Allen's mission has been to define some of the irreducible aspects of the architectural discipline on the one hand, while on the other he has used his experience with the arts—painting, film, sculpture, and beyond—to expand the intellectual terrain on which architects walk.

As one of the original voices of landscape urbanism, Allen is also its most potent analyst, critic, and interlocutor; his most recent book, *Landform Building: Architecture's New Terrain,* establishes a provocative critique of landscape practices, while helping to unlock the potential of architecture beyond its dialectic other, opening up a wide array of discussions about urbanism, geometry, aggregation, and composition—all the discrete practices that impact the field from bottom up. While his personal manner is nuanced, diplomatic, and soft-spoken, Allen has a bold and polemical presence in the architectural discipline.

— NADER TEHRANI

NADER TEHRANI Your 2010 book, *Field Conditions Revisited*, helped refresh my memory, and I also read some new material that put a lot of your work in context for me. Moreover, I realized the historical affinity we share. In fact, the historical era to which we were both reacting was almost identical. You were doing it, I believe, from a broader "organizational" point of view, if I can say that, and I was doing it almost at the scale of a unit—a slat of wood, a brick, a sheet of glass—without a concern for the scale of planning or the landscape implications of what I was doing. But I realized, reading these things, that you were also somehow a teacher to me, though I didn't understand it at the time. So although your articles have been out there, seeing them all together was very instructive.

STAN ALLEN For better or worse that's my legacy: it's going to be on my tombstone that I'm the guy who wrote "Field Conditions." (*laughter*) It's an older essay, but it keeps coming back to haunt me. For example, I was flattered and a little surprised when Joseph Becker, a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, based an exhibition on the essay just last year, which included both artists and architects. When I was originally working on "Field Conditions," I was looking as much at examples from art and music as I was from architecture, so I'm glad to have that favor returned. Clearly, that essay, which was written almost 15 years ago, continues to be very important to me. With the field conditions idea, I wanted to preserve the double sense of working "in the field," open to change, accident and improvisation, and at the same time, the more abstract sense of a "field of forces"—organizational systems and material assemblages that are serial, expansive, non-hierarchical and open-ended. But you identified a dilemma in the piece: if the proposition is that you create difference not by starting with a single form and breaking it up, but by accumulating small differences over many, many iterations, you will always come to an impasse with the smaller scale. I thought at the time (and still do) that you could not do a "field conditions" house, for example; you needed a larger scale, more repetitions. But if—as I learned from your practice and others—you were to say that the repeated units are not the larger, compositional elements of architecture but, in fact, construction elements, you can make that transposition to the smaller scale.

NT The other thing I appreciated in the book was the genealogy it offered. Often architects either don't acknowledge such things or they don't realize the power of building discourse through history and the conversation that specific buildings create between each other. The theoretical nuances that emerge out of this dialogue are not only critical to advancing architectural discussions, but offer an intellectual generosity on the process. Having James Stirling next to Louis Kahn, or next to Frank Gehry—there's a level of obviousness in terms of their formal affinities but actually the ideas do vary quite a lot, and that's indispensable to a good debate. So I also appreciated that.

SA You know, frankly it puzzles me why architects are hesitant to acknowledge their sources. I think you and I had fairly parallel educational experiences and, as you recall, one of the things about the '70s and '80s was the attention to precedent, which became associated with postmodernism. We were all a little bit skeptical of that. But in some sense we threw the baby out with the bath water. And this embrace of heroic originality—if you look at the world of visual arts or writing, it's a highly suspect idea—architects are susceptible to these traps. So I very much see what I do in the present as a conversation, both with recent history—Stirling, Kahn, and so on—but also with my peers. To have a good conversation you have to acknowledge your common ground. You have to be speaking the same language. But you also need to bring something new to the table. Which is for me exactly what you do when you teach: your job is to bring students into that conversation.

NT How do you describe your role in the last 20 years? You're a designer, you're an architect, you are an educator, and you have been an administrator. These activities involve very different things, and you certainly don't have to choose one over the other. All of us sometimes do a bit of all of that, but where do you see your prejudices? What's crucial to you, and what are you willing to abandon?

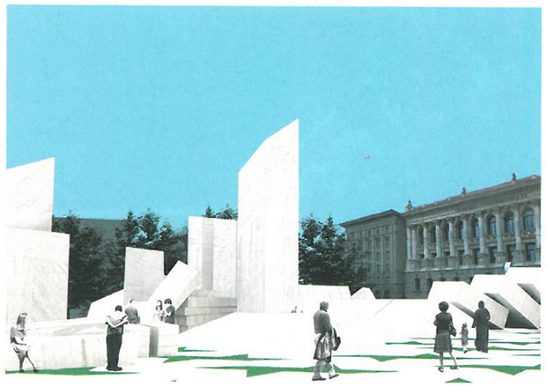
SA It's true that teaching and writing have been a major part of what I do, but I have always seen that as an extension of the work I do as an architect. You have to teach from a position of uncertainty; you can't pretend that you're the one with all the answers. I've always seen the work in the school as a kind of laboratory, an extension of what's happening in the studio. After 20-odd years of doing this I am still figuring it out, and if I can have that conversation with students, we both learn something, which is what makes teaching worthwhile.

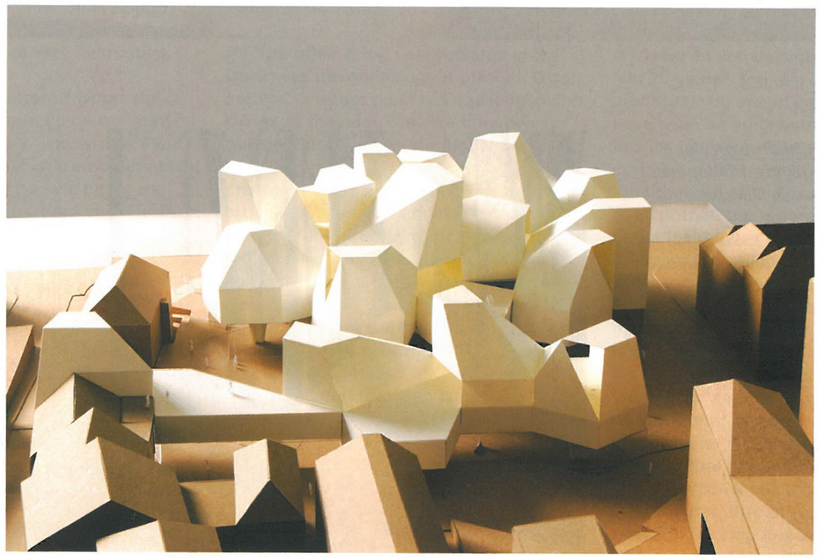
above: *Chosen Children's Village Chapel, 2008, Tagaytay, Philippines. Photo by Marvin Dungao.*

right: *M&M House, 1999/2012, photomontage, single-family house (on right, 1999) and studio (on left, 2012), Cold Spring, NY.*

right: *Stan Allen and Rafi Segal, Block/Tower, 2013, rendering, study for the re-use of an existing 1960s office building in Midtown Manhattan as mixed-use housing, on view in the exhibition Making Room, 2013, Museum of the City of New York.*

below: *Monument to Freedom and Equality, 2012, rendering for invited competition, Leipzig, Germany.*





Maribor Art Gallery, 2010, model, Maribor, Slovenia. Photo by Elliot Schwartz.

It's probably a weakness that I am unwilling to abandon any of these separate activities for, let's say, a singular focus on writing or design work. But my passion is for the larger culture of architecture, which for me encompasses all of the above. I like to talk about architecture, I like the exchange of ideas, I like being in the studio, and I like being on the building site. And I somehow want to pass all that on to the next generation.

NT You strike a chord when you speak about the value of teaching from a position of uncertainty. I find myself saying that exact same thing to both students and collaborators in my office. I'm simply not interested in the things I know, and I walk around like a wreck for the things I don't—acknowledging, in effect, the indispensability of having to relearn things in order to trudge forward.

As the head of Princeton and the principal of significant commissions, you have to navigate a very tricky line. How do you balance the necessity for both uncertainty and absolute assuredness—with clients, with communities, with groups whose lives depend on certainty, when in fact *un*certainty is the very basis for what could get them out of their predicaments?

SA In a way you are outlining the dilemma of the architect, aren't you? We have to present public certainty in the face of private uncertainty. Recently, in our practice, we went through a period of working on very large-scale urban design projects, which required a lot of public presentations and back and forth with city agencies. And I think we actually got quite good at that. When you stand up in front of a community review board or a public agency, you don't talk to them about your private dilemmas. But if architecture is a public art form, then it is, in the best sense of the word, the job of architects to open up that public world to a little bit of private uncertainty. That is to say that if there's a germ of uncertainty in the work that actually finds its way into the public realm, it gives a kind of foothold for the public to exercise their own creativity—to respond to a building, or to respond to a landscape, or to respond to a public space in ways that aren't initially programmed into it. For example, the InfoBox pavilion that we built in Taichung, Taiwan, is being used in ways we never could have anticipated. Even with the CCV Chapel, which is a Catholic chapel for an organization that takes care of orphaned children—not much doubt there—you can see subtle shifts in the way people use the building, the children especially. I would say that significant works of architecture are those in which some of that private uncertainty finds its way into the actual work of architecture; otherwise we are just technocrats.

NT Going back to the genealogies you cite: the acknowledgment you offer is a very specific form of debate, something that is not always that evident in the more recent explosion of information. It seems that while the Internet has made so much readily available, it has also had the effect of flattening differences and nuances—muting discourse in the face of the proliferation of images. Where do you see the nature of discourse going under these circumstances and what opportunities does it pose?

SA Look, you're absolutely right. We live in an image culture and we are bombarded by images from all over the globe. Today you can easily chain together five or six or seven hundred images—I can revel in that delirium, but it also scares me. The time for reflection, for analysis, is lost; the specificity of the source material disappears. That's a fairly natural fear. But I've always been an image-driven person—someone who thinks something out not so much in written form but by sequencing together images. In that sense, I love the computer. I love Google Images, and even PowerPoint for its ability to make that possible. It ups the stakes. I think the problem of today is not so much access to information, it's sorting the information and being able to determine what is important and what's not in that delirious flux of images and information that we swim in today.

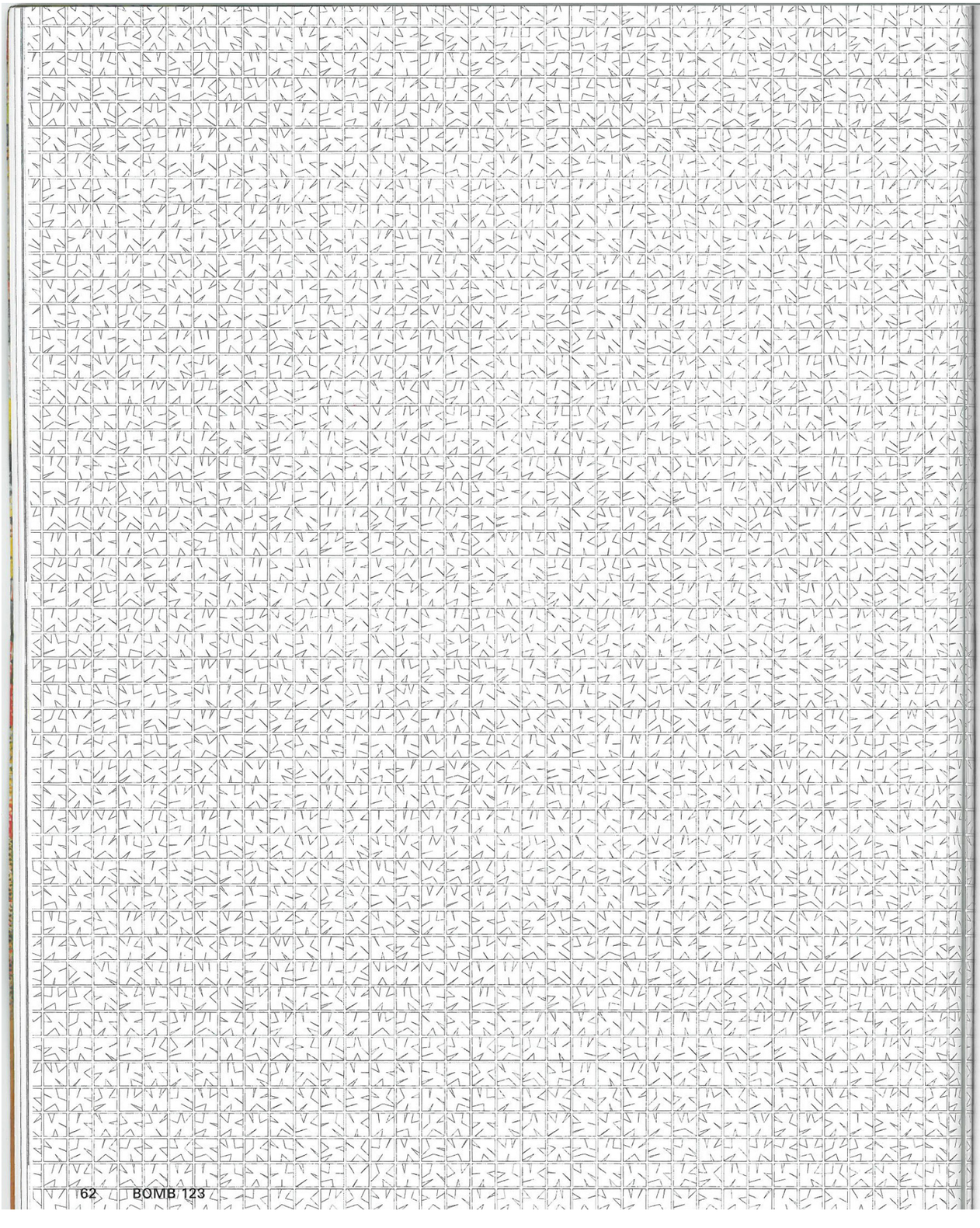
NT Back to "Field Conditions." It takes a long time to develop discourse—to theorize, to think through, and to experiment through numerous projects. Where are you now? That doesn't end your preoccupation with the field condition, but it also brings you to a new juncture. Are there other areas in which you are overturning your own mode of thought? Or has that line of thought produced new tributaries and can you tease them out?

SA I'm going to give a three-part answer. I'm somehow wired to think in threes. The first thing is the detour from field conditions to landscape and then back again. Call me naive, but when I first started talking about field conditions, it didn't have anything to do with landscape in my mind. But obviously it was that work that led to the collaboration with Jim Corner and my interest in landscape urbanism. It's not such a stretch to move from the horizontal, organizational field to the literal field on the ground.

But over time, part of the frustration with landscape urbanism, apart from the slow and tedious process of implementation, is that as an architect I continue to be interested in objects as much as in systems or territories. The important point of reference here is the 2010 project in Maribor, Slovenia. We had been doing small-scale buildings all along but this was the first time where I could say there was a synthesis of the earlier ideas, the insights from landscape, with the specific agency of a freestanding building. Maribor is a kind of field-like object; not pure field, not an object building, but something in-between. It came out of the dilemma of trying to create an identifiable institutional presence while working in an intricate, well-preserved historic context. So our solution was to aggregate small-scale pieces that would have some connection to the historic texture of the city, but that together would form some sense of a larger whole and be legible as a new institution. But it's not as if we said to ourselves at the beginning, "Let's do a field conditions museum"; we were working to solve certain problems, and, at a certain point, I said, "Wait a second. This is a field conditions project." You talked about the slowness—of ideas percolating for a long time before returning, but not returning in a forced way.

And the other thing that opened up to me, the second thing that belongs to that time, was the thinking around landform and the geological. You were part of the 2009 "Landform Building" conference and then later the book, so you know this history well. Part of the motivation for doing the "Landform Building" conference in the first place was to get away from the cliché of the softly rounded mound in the field, which is for me the most obvious and probably least interesting translation of landscape into architecture. I remember you insisting on the "stubbornness of the ground." In part this is what is at work in this shift from the biological to the geological. The geological is slower, more about hardness, durability, and resistance; it reflects more accurately the mineral quality of buildings and cities. The soft curves of landscape resonated with the early computer formalisms; the geological by contrast is hard and faceted.

But the third piece of the puzzle is my ongoing preoccupation with diagrams and organization. The best of the



The first imperative is simply to master your own craft and not to use the politics, environment, or technology as an alibi for bad design or lack of imagination.

landscape work, for example, works with landscape as a system, as a dynamic ecology that can be analyzed and diagrammed. So that was at play in the landscape work and in the original field conditions piece, and it continues to be at play in the sequence of the three recent projects which I'm calling "geological."

NT That's very clear. In the interim period, the world around you has upped the ante, often with techniques that are void of the thinking for which you have laid the groundwork. For instance, both you and I stumbled across techniques in the analog era that would have originally been better undertaken through computation. Subsequently, the world around us has taken on this charge, and even radicalized it. Now we do similar operations by scripting because we cannot imagine doing it in the old ways, not only out of pragmatism, but because of the other conceptual opportunities it offers us. So to what degree have you seen the obsolescence of certain things that you've struggled so hard with through the years? What is it that's on your desk right now, something that embodies the tensions between idea and medium?

SA This is a really important question, and I agree—we're in an interesting moment. You and I both kept our distance from the more extravagant, computer-driven formalisms of the '90s and early 2000s. That work was mostly surface based, and it was dependent on the protocols of certain software. The rise of scripting has reignited my interest in computation. I'm interested in simple rules that can generate complex effects, not in complexity for its own sake.

I'm attracted to the quickness and the immediacy of the computer, if that's not too counterintuitive. Like you, I come from a drawing culture, from a position that sees drawing as fundamental to architecture. And today, I think of the computer as a superpowerful drawing machine; I'm very aware that's exactly the opposite of what the digital design theorists say. The drawing that was in the *Field Conditions* show at SF MoMA, for example, was a very simple algorithm that could generate a potentially infinite number of plan configurations. We printed out 2,500 of them in an array and it made a very beautiful, delicate abstract drawing.

Related to this is the generational shift and the democratization of computer culture. I remember when a Silicon Graphics workstation cost $35,000; it was out of reach for most architects and certainly for students. There was a cultish aspect to the early digital culture; it was expensive and difficult to learn. For the generation younger than us, for our students, all of this hardware and software is immediately available, writing scripts in Grasshopper is completely normal and manageable; they swim very comfortably in this water. I see scripting as more abstract. It's notational, it's diagrammatic, it's talking about organization—to me it's a potentially very rich area and it connects to the process of building and execution. But I need to hire good people and develop a good collaborative conversation with them, because it's not something that I'm going to manage myself. On the other hand, I would say that the ground was prepared and there is an algorithmic thinking embedded in my work that isn't always dependent on the specific technology.

NT You've already answered this question, so it may be a redundant detour, but I want to go back to it for a second because—

SA Detours are always good, actually.

NT I want to go back to the divide between media, especially since you have brought up significant differences between landscape urbanism and landforms. You know, when I look at your work in Maribor, when I look at the Sagaponac house, when I look at those things that you've now associated with landform and the geological, I'm often more engaged. Originally, you did much to bring the disciplines of architecture and landscape together—I am thinking of your analysis of the mat building—but later you also helped underline their distinctions. Your own work shows the struggles in engaging the terrain of both disciplines, but in different ways—with architecture, through diagramming, geometry, and organizational strategies (might I say typological strategies, even though you never say that, and I do not mean it pejoratively). And with landscape, through a discourse that is more related to performance than to form. Whether you are dealing with hydrology, soil remediation, or rainwater harvesting, your categories of concern do not align conceptually with what I think to be your thesis in "Field Conditions," even if they are pragmatically nested within them.

Obviously the scale of planning and landscape design is a different conceptual terrain than that of architecture, and yet I see more theoretical attention to the latter. Or it could be my ideological bias that receives the latter better?

SA I appreciate your directness, and I don't disagree, actually. In these past years, we worked on three major landscape-urbanism projects, each one of which, I feel, has a strong simple idea. But I agree, there needs to be more—more dissonance, perhaps. And going forward I don't see that I could do too much more of this type of work without repeating myself. The danger is that it's very easy in the large-scale work to become formulaic and to fall into the trap of using the work to address some of these easy topical questions. Sustainability and green design become very obvious answers. And there is the practical side to it, the 19-hour plane rides and endless meetings with city officials, which frankly I just got a bit tired of.

But for me, aside from these personal predilections, I think there are two questions at work there. One is, in a very simple way, the transition from the horizontal to the vertical, and the other is the interest in the iconic form of the building, either in the city or in the landscape. Landscape obviously works primarily in the horizontal register, and there is a very attractive idea that you can connect everything through folded surfaces. But architecture works with borders and boundaries as much as with connections; in a way, you could say we are experts at limits and boundaries. And that means looking at the vertical plane, not being afraid of partitioning or separation. I think that's another question with a history we share: Coming out of the '80s, we were all suspicious of postmodernism and its attention to iconicity and the facade; but that's another case where we threw the baby out with the bath water. We turned to plan, section, and organization and forgot about the capacity of

First 2,500 Iterations of an Infinite Series of Plan Variations, (detail), 2009, unique ink-jet print on Mylar, 42 × 42 inches, programming by Mike Golembewski. Courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

the building elevation as a very powerful element of architecture. So all the projects we've mentioned, Sagaponac especially, are invested in iconicity: the figure of the building standing up, either in the landscape or in the city. That's simply part of our toolkit as architects, and, if we don't use it, we're tying our own hands in a way.

But the larger issue here also speaks to disciplinary specificity. You mention typology, for example; I'm not afraid of typology. I don't think it ties us to past experience. You can say that there are certain questions to which the discipline itself already gives us an answer—a kind of shared knowledge, and you don't have to go over that ground again. One of the problems today is the tendency to turn away from this specifically architectural expertise in pursuit of topical questions and an easy cross-disciplinary approach in landscape and urban-scale work.

NT But there's another thing happening today—what used to be a very intense discussion about form, about organization, about architectural culture, has slowly but tangibly changed into a discussion about performance, about world crises, about ecology, and about the degree to which technology can once again come and save us from the litany of formal excess. How do you situate yourself in this current of discourse, and where do you place your work? I'm not saying this to corner you. I'm hoping that you'll come up with an answer that historicizes the present condition or at least puts it in context, because it's a problem today. It's somehow putting us back into either a service industry scenario, once again, where we have to problem solve at the basic level, diminishing any of the other cultural services that we may do, or it puts us back into the form-and-function debate, albeit recast in different terms.

SA I agree with your analysis, and I'm frustrated by that condition too. It's something that you see in students a lot. They seem to be interested in everything but architecture. There is something wonderfully naive about students' faith that design can solve the world's crises—ecological, financial, or whatever. Which it can't. So I'm skeptical of the easy appeal to other disciplines, but I also don't think we can retreat into our own world. We have to be sophisticated enough to have a private discussion of architectural issues at the same time as we have a public discussion of architecture's consequences in the world, without confusing the two. It's not rocket science. The first imperative is simply to master your own craft and not to use the politics, environment, or technology as an alibi for bad design or lack of imagination.

I have a favorite formula for this question, which may or may not answer the question. Before he became a director, Jean-Luc Godard was a film critic. He wrote a great piece on the films of Nicholas Ray, where he starts off by saying, "Nicholas Ray is cinema and nothing but cinema." Then he goes on to give this wonderful list: If they were not film directors, Otto Preminger could be a novelist; Robert Aldrich, a businessman; John Ford, an admiral; and so on. But, unlike those other directors, Godard says, "If the cinema no longer existed, Nicholas Ray alone gives the impression of being capable of reinventing it, and what is more, of wanting to." That's high praise, right? He goes on a bit more with some examples of how deeply enmeshed Nicholas Ray is with film culture, but then at the end, he drops a killer qualifier: "Nothing but cinema," he says, "is not the whole of cinema." I love the way he opens that up at the end. And to me it's a pretty good formulation for our field: starting from the premise of "nothing but architecture," but always keeping that doubt alive. I think there always has to be that question at the back of your mind, which is, could "nothing but architecture" ever be "the whole of architecture"? So, a certainty about the core, but an uncertainty around the edges. I think we need to be open to the way in which architecture intersects with other fields, and with this sort of large, public imperative. But at the same time, remember that if we're going to contribute anything, we're going to contribute as architects, not as social scientists or economists or activists.

NT That's very clear and very well said. You brought up the idea that your work speaks to historical figures and current debates—I want to just ask more casually, whose work recently are you totally fascinated by or jealous of? And I could ask the opposite: What is absolutely repulsive to you about certain works in particular?

SA You know, you open up the journals, you go online—the quantity of stuff that's being produced, it can be scary sometimes. But I think if you wade through all the muck, there's reason to be optimistic. Valerio Olgiati in Switzerland, Sou Fujimoto in Japan, Giancarlo Mazzanti or Tatiana Bilbao in Latin America, just to mention, off the top of my head, a few people who have crossed my radar recently. There's plenty of good work being done. Of course I'm attracted to people who are working on similar issues. Although we included Mazzanti's library in Medellin in *Landform Building*, I only met Giancarlo last year when he came to Princeton. He showed me a pamphlet where he quoted from my essays and was working on very similar ideas of part-to-whole aggregation.

And, talking in this vein, one of the other things is to be able to look back over a longer arc—people in a sense that I have grown up with. Among our generation, one of the practices I admire most is Mansilla+Tuñón. And of course it's bittersweet. Beyond the personal tragedy, it's a loss to the field when someone as young and talented as Luis dies. [Luis Mansilla died unexpectedly, of a heart attack, in February 2012.] They were just hitting their stride, doing beautiful work. Emilio will continue but it's going to be hard. They were both old friends, we always kept in touch, and we were especially close these past years when they taught at Princeton. I understood where they were coming from but was also constantly amazed at the leaps they would take in their work. I love the playfulness, the creativity in their work, which is not necessarily what you would expect given their background.

NT Didn't you work side-by-side with them?

SA Luis was in Rome, at the Spanish Academy, when I was in Spain, but Emilio and I worked together in Rafael Moneo's office. This was nearly 30 years ago, so I have seen the whole trajectory of their career. All of the Mansilla+Tuñón office's built work is in Spain. I don't think it is a strategy of resistance; they travel, they teach, they do competitions, they show their work in biennials, they have a very active blog—they are totally aware of what is going on, yet it is an exceptional practice for its intensely local focus. My theory is that they do not want to deny themselves the pleasure of watching the building go up so they keep it close by. And it was a building culture they understand. But as you know very well, that's not a luxury we can indulge here in the States. But if you want to single out one contemporary practice that I really admire, that would be it.

As to the other side of your question, I'm still enough of a diplomat, at least in public. Let's you and I have a drink and we can talk about things that drive me crazy.