



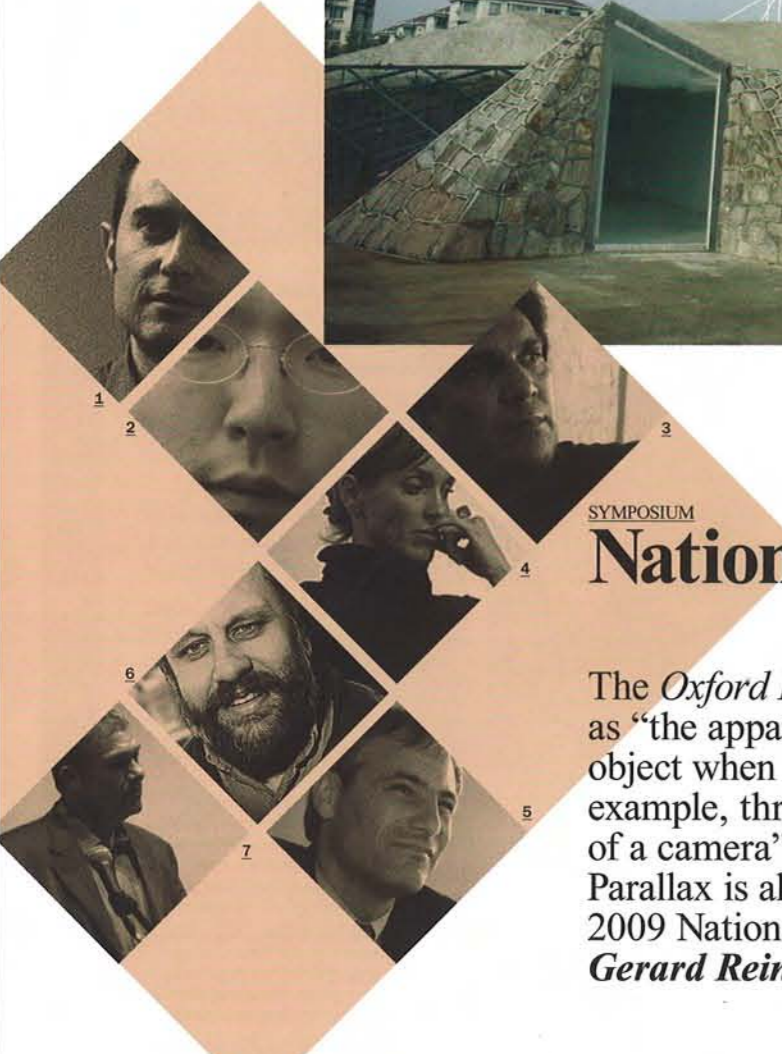
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SYMPOSIUM

National Conference 2009

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘parallax’ as “the apparent difference in the position of an object when viewed from different positions, for example, through the viewfinder and the lens of a camera” – a question of angle and perspective. Parallax is also the working title for the Institute’s 2009 National Conference. Co-creative director **Gerard Reinmuth** fleshes out the manifesto.

TALKING HEADS 1 Alejandro Zaera-Polo, 2 Sou Fujimoto (Japan), 3 Bijoy-Jain (India), 4 Tatiana Bilbao (Mexico), 5 Aaron Betsky (US), 6 Slavoj Žižek (Slovenia/UK), 7 Jeff Kipnis (US), 8 Tatiana Bilbao’s Exhibition Room at the Jinhua Architecture Park in Zhejiang, China, 9 Observatory House by Tatiana Bilbao for artist Gabriel Orozco at Roca Blanca, Mexico, 10 Sou Fujimoto’s Final Wooden House (2007), a 4 x 4 metre pavilion in a forest in Kumamoto. Piled up cedar beams interconnect and simultaneously act as walls, floor and furniture.

DATE + VENUE
30 April – 2 May
Melbourne Convention & Exhibition Centre
(with Form & Function and designEX).
www.architecture.com.au/parallax

An invitation

The five conferences held since the implementation of the creative director role in 2003 have been resounding successes. For TERROIR to be invited as the sixth creative director was, therefore, a surprise, an honour and a challenge. Not only have the previous five creative directors done an excellent job, but the fact that many Institute of Architects members use the conference as their major injection of architecture culture each year brings with it a big responsibility.

Context and approach

We set about framing the event just as we framed the formation of TERROIR: a research project held between three people (Scott Balmforth, Richard Blythe and myself), who argued through a wide number of issues to arrive at key selected frameworks, or contexts, within which the practice (and subsequently each project), would occur. As with any TERROIR project, these contexts then provided a framework that could be understood by the wider team around the project – which, in this case, includes the Institute – and a filter through which the numerous guest-speaker suggestions we received could be assessed.

What has made the previous conferences so successful? The answer, in our view, is that each creative director used their own strengths and interests as a basis for choosing speakers and for structuring both the program and the collateral events: from Ian Moore’s technologically driven minimalists to Stephen Varady’s exceptional form-makers (2006). With this in mind, we reflected on our own practice and what defining characteristics might have led to our selection as conference creative director. What did the Institute expect from a TERROIR conference?

Structure

There seemed to be some hope or expectation that the 2009 National Conference would be less about single visions offered in series and more a complex crossover of presentations and discussions. Previous conferences offered various models to consider, some based on individual guest speakers while others tested pairings, panels or interview formats.

Kerstin Thompson’s (2005) conference remains popular among our peers for the way in which speakers were paired to address specific topics. Pairing speakers has a couple of advantages: first, the presenters are more likely to stay focused given that a colleague will be co-presenting, and having specific questions to address minimises the risk of speakers wandering off topic.

The best conferences we have attended, here and overseas, are those that generate their own intelligence and questions as they progress. That is, the appearance and re-appearance of speakers in different formats or at different times throughout the event has the effect of building a conversation specific to that conference. At their best, these conversations result in the development of real knowledge and intellectual property specific to that event. Therefore, the opportunity to hear invited speakers more than once was thought essential.

Finally, we have a strong desire to support younger Australian architects – our peers – who are yet to address a national conference. These issues coalesced into the following conference structure.

Keynote sessions

Keynote sessions will anchor the event. Two speakers will address each session, after which a conversation between the two will flesh out the ideas further. This conversation will be moderated by a keynote speaker from another session who also holds expertise in that area, weaving a

structure via which many of the keynote speakers will appear twice.

Keynote speakers will all be internationals, which may attract an accusation of ‘cultural cringe’. We disagree. The National Conference is a rare opportunity to invite international speakers who we have always wanted to see. The best of our local colleagues are, of course, equal to these speakers but this is not the point: we have other opportunities throughout the year to hear them speak. Further, the occasionally cringe-inducing conversations between a fawning local and invited hero are replaced by robust debates between people who, in many cases, know each other already from the international circuit.

After lunch

In addition to the keynote sessions, a series of six conversations will be held in parallel after lunch each day. In these sessions each speaker will be engaged in conversation with an Australian architect or academic about a specific topic current in the Australian context. The conversation format sets up equivalence between the local and international speaker, while the more intimate format will, hopefully, encourage involvement from the floor.

Parallaxed

Previous conferences have shown that a major focus and venue is needed on the Friday night to avoid the conference splintering into a hundred small dinners. The conversations need to keep going and perhaps be ‘unplugged’ a bit after hours. To encourage this, *Parallaxed* will be a major event where three or four younger Australian architects present their work to a jury comprised of international speakers. This session will be led by Leon van Schaik, from whom we borrowed the concept from his research in practice at RMIT.

Topics and speakers

With the structure evolving, the key question was “what questions would we ask, what topics would we cover?” Informed by recent research undertaken by the practice, including academic study, writing and exhibitions, we confirmed a list of topics that characterise our practice. This list oscillated in number before settling on six key areas that could equate to six sessions. In turn, these sessions worked well with an evolving draft program that was being designed in parallel with topic/speaker discussions. An outline of each follows. >



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11 House N (2001), Oita Japan, by Sou Fujimoto, a speaker at the National Conference. House N dissolves traditional boundaries between elements such as 'house' and 'city', 'implied space' and 'absolute space', in a play with built volumes and nature. **Photograph:** Sou Fujimoto. **12** Sou Fujimoto: *Primitive Future* (INAX Publishing) has texts in Japanese and English, photos, renderings and drawings and 'sound bites' from its author. Available at Archtext. RRP \$68.20 / Institute Members \$61.35.

Studio

TERROIR uses a relatively rare model where one of the three directors and practice owners is head of an architecture school as their 'project'. This embodies the commitment in our business structure to an ongoing relationship between academia and practice. It would be inconceivable for us to curate a conference without a serious teaching/research component. This focus on the relationship between teaching and practice beyond a discussion about (Building Information Modelling) BIMs and various digital activities would, therefore, be a unique contribution. With this in mind, we invited Peter Wilson, who developed a body of thinking through his teaching program at London's Architecture Association, which, in turn, developed into one of the most interesting practices in the world today.

Media

It is still the view of many in the profession that architectural media is some sort of pornography and a shallow pursuit favouring elites. We see the architectural media as a fundamental part of the profession and an important forum for debate, so the relationship between our profession and the media seemed worthy of exploration. Ole Boumann and Aaron Betsky – two key participants in the international architectural media – are perhaps the best-qualified people in the world to consider this.

Collaboration

From the outset, our practice structure has instilled a culture of genuine collaboration and multi-authorship. We were, therefore, curious to invite people engaged with modes of collaboration different to our own, from which we may learn more. Bijoy Jain from Studio Mumbai will discuss his extraordinary practice in which he has had to reconsider his training with Richard Meier in the context of Indian work practices.

Young guns

The Institute's National President, Howard Tanner, has highlighted his interest in encouraging greater engagement in public work from our younger practitioners. This is particularly timely in New South Wales where few contemporaries have implemented work in Sydney's public realm. Tatiana Bilbao, from Mexico, and Japan's Sou Fujimoto are young – both in their thirties – and yet have a large body of built public work that's internationally recognised. They will serve as inspiration to those of us here who are their contemporaries but work in a culture where public work proves elusive.

Politics

The relationship between architecture and politics is constantly under review. As a practice that considers many of its key design strategies in the public realm as political acts (the way a private development enables public participation, for example) it seemed appropriate to

invite Alejandro Zaera-Polo, who is one of the best thinkers and writers in practice today. His current interest is the politics of the building envelope, a concept he will discuss in the context of Foreign Office Architects (FOA) projects.

Cosmopolitan

In 2007, the University of Technology, Sydney, published a book on our practice that evolved from a series of conversations between TERROIR and a group of philosophers. Inspired by this we invited Slavoj Žižek, considered by many as the most electrifying speaker in the philosophy world today, to speak at the National Conference.

From his writing on the politics of the US after 9/11, and, of greater relevance to this event, his work on the parallax view, Žižek confounds, excites and provokes. He will be joined by Jeffrey Kipnis who is one of the most compelling writers on architecture today, and has made major contributions to our understanding of the work of Foreign Office, Daniel Libeskind and others.

The parallax view

Too often in architecture we are confronted with the zealous cult figure (and their followers) as a substitute for nuanced, complex and sometimes changeable approaches to the challenges of architectural practice. The safety of the cult allows the dismissal of major ideas or major figures with naive certainty. Yet we have, therefore, understood that to work on any project we need to identify and select the key contexts we think relevant or important to that project and place and time. Slavoj Žižek talks of the parallax gaps within and between contexts, spaces that, in their indeterminacy, open up possibilities. We have come to value these spaces in our design practice for the challenges they pose and the productivity that arises from their exploration. These gaps make the world less certain, and thus, possibilities more open. Value is given to the uncomfortable and uncanny as places where real innovation might lie.

The contexts within which we have worked on this year's conference have led to the questions, topics and structure through which to explore them. Research and teaching, collaboration, politics, media, philosophy and the role of younger practices in the city are some of the key contexts within which our practice works. Between and within these contexts we find gaps which challenge our certainty.

Thus, delegates to the conference might be faced with challenging propositions worthy of consideration given the calibre of participants. *Can the facade of a building really be a political space?* Alejandro Zaera-Polo certainly thinks so. *Can a teaching career based in highly speculative urban interventions of a highly speculative nature provide the bedrock for a serious commercial practice?* Peter Wilson certainly thinks so. *Can young people be trusted with major projects in the public realm?* Sou Fujimoto and Tatiana Bilbao certainly think so. This is the parallax view that defines the 2009 conference.