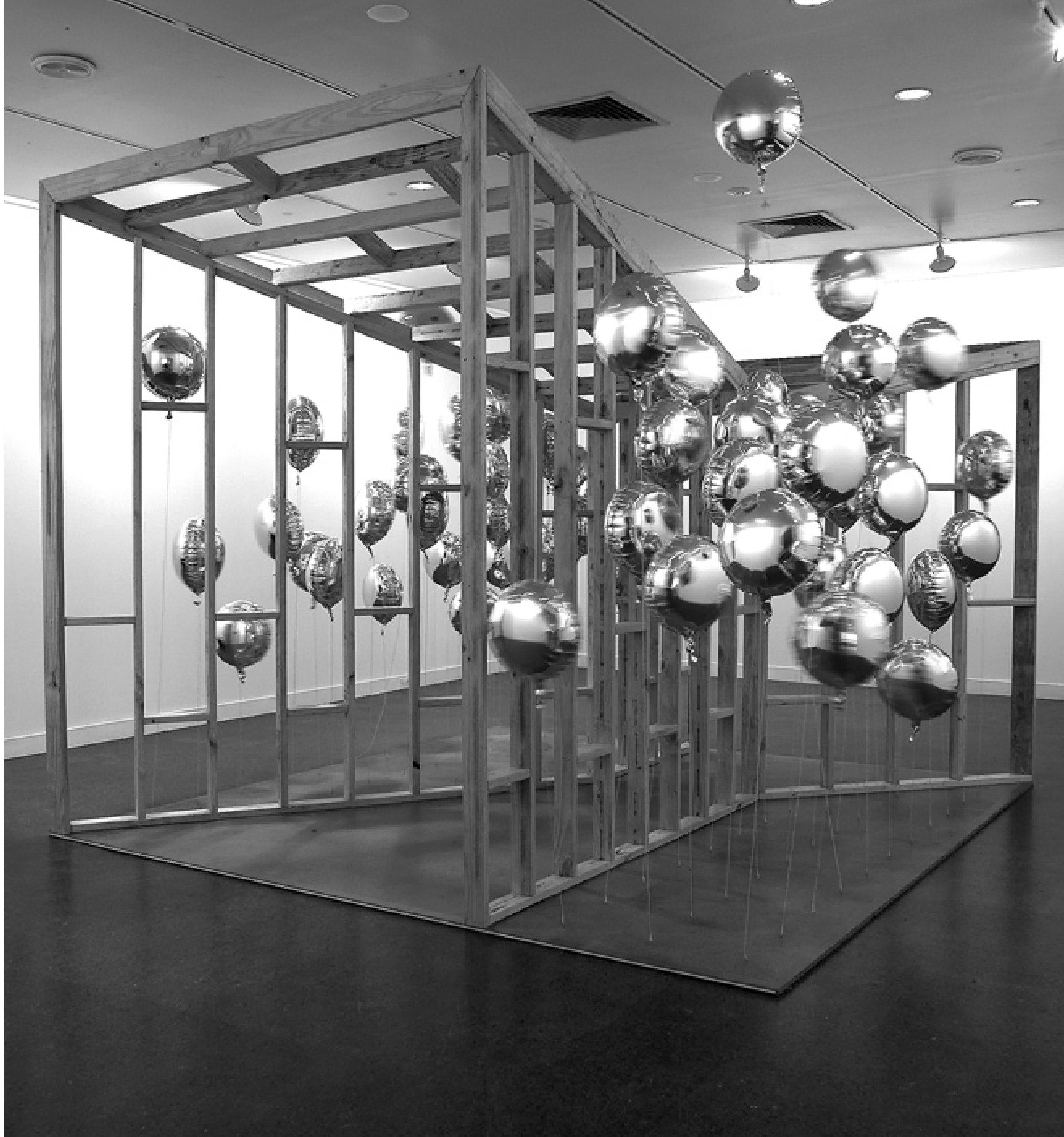

ROOM FOR REVERIE

ANDREW MACKENZIE

It is a strange fact that architects, when given the opportunity to exhibit their work, suddenly stop being architects and become graphic designers. That is, when given the gallery space to do with as they wish, to mould into a physical embodiment of their design philosophy, they instead largely respond by ascertaining the linear meterage of wall space, on which to cram a predictable array of expo paraphernalia; polyboard mounted technical drawings, models, plans, sections, prototypes, render visualisations and of course, immaculately photographed buildings set against deep blue skies and peopled exclusively by urbane Armani clad figures. In five years of being a director of an architectural gallery, I could never fathom the manner in which the exhibition space was read as a passive host to such predictable fare. An experience of architecture, regrettably flattened, both literally and figuratively.

This is lamentable for any exhibition, but especially so when it amounts to a retreat from the single question of importance that all architecture exhibitions demand of their subject—to interrogate the relationship between architecture as built work and architecture as representation. To state the obvious, unlike painting or sculpture, the built form of architecture [its primary presence] is always, inevitably, absent from the gallery, leaving architects stuck with representation as the sole means of describing their practice.

Why this is an issue of singular importance can be traced back to a time when the practice of architecture split from the art of building. Since then and for some centuries now, architects have relied increasingly on related but separate fields such as construction, civil, material and geological engineering, to turn their architectural ideas into reality. This in turn, has meant that the ability to represent abstract ideas through formulised illustration, to communicate spatial ideas through two dimensions, has become a matter critical to architectural success. One could say that for the architect, to *make* architecture, is to *represent* architecture. It is a condition that has reached its apotheosis in the current age of digital virtual reality, where radical architecture happily exists entirely within on-screen visual representation. So this is what makes the display of architecture such an unsatisfactory breed of exhibition, unable to deliver the ‘real thing’ of built architecture, nor seemingly, to think creatively about the nature of representation, beyond its most predictable forms.

For this reason, it is a rare pleasure to see an architecture exhibition, which observes within this awkward relationship between the built and the representational, an opportunity to transform the gallery space itself, into a hybrid of both. To make of the gallery a space where architecture is made rather than illustrated, through a more considered exploration of what it means, to re-present. *The Pavilions for New Architecture* exhibition at Monash University Museum of Art succeeded in doing just that. As the name suggests, the exhibition invited nine architectural practices to each build a pavilion, as an opportunity—albeit with modest means—to create nine discrete environments in which to explore and distil qualities of their own architectural practice. Those chosen came with the unlikely nomenclature of ‘young architects’, which in the wrinkly profession of architecture means, being in your late thirties and with less a decade’s practice under your belt.

The pavilion, as demonstrated here, is an intriguing artifice. Historically, its representational capacity to condense and reify architectural thinking was nowhere so potently demonstrated, than in the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe. More than all his Chicago apartments and office blocks, his Alte Museum in Berlin, private residential commissions, even more than the silent force of his famous Seagrams Building, this modest temporary uninhabitable structure that existed for only a few weeks, captured the essential philosophical core of that architect, and has subsequently been reproduced in any and all substantial reviews of his career and work. Further, such is its perceived importance that the surviving photographs of that pavilion are amongst the most recognisable images of contemporary architecture in the world. It is a supremely ironic observation to note of this pavilion,

that architecture, in the moment of surrendering its utility to a utopian world of pure architectural speculation, became its most compelling self.

Yet herein lies not just irony, but a profound question for architecture. To what extent is architecture defined as most itself, when operating within an idealised utopian world—one in which the architect's ideas are unfettered by practical constraints such as program, durability, site conditions and economy? A world, one might say, of reverie. It is a question implicit within the curatorial brief, created by the curators of *The Pavilions* exhibition, Geraldine Barlow and Max Delany. Challenged thus, it is precisely in the manner in which each of the nine architects responded to that question that each revealed distinct attitudes towards the practice of architecture.

With nine practices included and with insufficient space to do justice to all, I will restrict my remarks to a number of key observations and resist the temptation to declare brave new 'tendencies'. For this is a blessedly motley group with no pretensions to 'paradigm shifts' or any such empty rhetoric. Each practice did however use this opportunity to demarcate very individual trajectories of architectural thinking.

Most of the pavilions took the fairly traditional form of occupiable follies. However Cassandra Fahey's 'pavilion' was not, strictly speaking a pavilion at all, but a large unoccupiable object within the gallery. Her work was composed of thirty-six individual pieces of cut glass, fanned out from a central pole, like an over-sized fragile chandelier. The form of the object was ostensibly generated by the form of a pole dancer, creating in this object a frisson of exotic desire and fetishistic, untouchable glamour. As the architect who famously designed a home for Sam Newman, with a street façade entirely glazed in a two storey pool-blue glass screen, etched with the face of Pamela Anderson, this 'pavilion' perfectly captured Fahey's characteristic play of brash popularism and what is a deceptively subtle poetic sensibility.

Surprisingly, in these ascendant days of 'the digital', most pavilions represented an almost hand crafted attention to detail and commitment to the tectonics of their own construction. Few employed the wizardry of semi-conductors, as has become *de rigueur* elsewhere in many architectural exhibitions. There were no virtual reality fly-throughs, rapid-prototyped resin models or fluid blobs in space. A single digitally-rendered video projection work by Minifie Nixon Architects, represented the sole suggestion of architecture's enchantment with a world of virtual algorithmic experimentation. This three-part looping diorama video projection is an appropriate response from a practice so immersed in the interaction between the spatial and the visual. Despite the substantial achievement of their Centre for Ideas building for the Victorian College of Art, Minifie Nixon Architects is perhaps the practice most absorbed in the abstracted ethereal possibilities of digital form processing, and so it is apt that their pavilion disappeared, each night, as the power switch was thrown.

For some practices, such as Jackon Clements Burrows, Staughton Architects and Neil and Idle, the opportunity to build and construct, released a very direct hands-on sculptural playfulness. Clearly, in the 'real world' of architectural design, it is the bane of the architect to be perpetually victim to disconsolate builders and time chiselling project managers, where such opportunities to playfully investigate form, simply evaporate. Jeff Kipnis, in his film *A Constructed Madness*, argues the radical success of Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim was the result precisely of such a playful gestation of ideas, afforded by a separate commission from American billionaire Peter Lewis. Gehry's design for Lewis' house took ten years in development; cost millions of dollars in design fees and in the end was cancelled—as too expensive [one can only speculate what is 'too expensive' for an insurance billionaire!]. For Kipnis, the creative freedom deployed in this design may seem extravagantly excessive, but contributed crucially to a design sophistication, without which the Bilbao museum would have been literally, unthinkable.

Back in the parsimonious world of Australian arts funding, though space and resources were tight, nevertheless a clear spirit of material and intellectual freedom pertained to these pavilions, many of which suggested affinities with the abstract sculptural aesthetics of David Smith or psychologically charged perceptual games of Dan Graham, to name just two obvious crossover references to visual arts. One remark from the audience at the evening symposium that accompanied the exhibition, observed surprise that none of the architects had engaged with the built form of the gallery interior, as a springboard to their pavilion design. This was rebutted by Paul Minifie, who stated with a hint of pique, "we're not interested in trying to be artists". Minifie is clearly aware of the suggested institutional critique which informed minimalist art and its later reformulation in installation art. For many artists, this evolution of installation art's engagement with the space of the gallery has lead directly

to architectural projects, such as was seen at the last *Venice Architecture Biennale*, where Vito Acconci contributed significantly. But the architects here were at pains to distance themselves from such an easy conflation of art and architecture.

That said, and despite such protests, I was reminded in some of these pavilions, of Acconci's eye for the bizarre, the taut and the dark underbelly of the libidinal imagination. Harrison and Crist dimensioned their claustrophobic pavilion according to the Building Code of Australia's minimum size for a disabled toilet, then gave it a blood-red interior, with slick exterior detail lighting, to create a TARDIS for morbid fantasy, as if cooked up the ever-weird David Lynch. Again, the stretched, black vinyl-distorted box pavilion of Ellenberg Frazer, exploited an uncomfortable connection between voyeurism and entertainment, inclusion and alienation, and looking and being looked at. As a practice whose bread and butter projects include large apartment blocks, the dreaded thought occurred to me that these pavilions might one day feed back into the substance of day-to-day design work!

Finally, to return to the question from the audience of the pavilions' relationship to art, this thought did present an interesting moment. As a profession that is rarely indulged with the freedoms of the gallery, these nine architects have refrained, in most cases at least, from looking jealously at that 'freedom' of art. Rather, each pavilion retained a sense of an internal intellectual commitment to qualities essentially architectural. The exhibition demonstrated that by implication many of the constraints of architecture—including the limitations of what it means to represent concrete form and space by other means—are what make it in the end, architecture, not art.

Pavilions for New Architecture
Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne
Pavilions: BKK Architects, Cassandra Complex, Elenberg Fraser Architecture, Harrison & Crist Architects, Iredale Pedersen Hook Architects, Jackson Clements Burrows, Minifie Nixon Architects, Neil & Idle Architects, Staughton Architects
monash.edu.au/muma
1 September – 29 October, 2005

Opposite page: Jackson Clements Burrows, *Stud*, 2005
Above: Cassandra Complex, *Crowning Glory*, 2005
Photographs Andrew Curtis