The New Collaboration

All Mixed Up

Told to “think outside the box,” some designers and artists are doing exactly that: they don’t think about the box at all.

by Ray Kinoshita Mann AIA

MULTIDISCIPLINARY. COLLABORATIVE. These are the words that litter countless architecture firm marketing brochures, that are tossed into design-school discussions, and that form many architects’ self-image. The profession that emerged at the end of the 20th century was very different from that of the previous century: the master-builder had morphed into a team-player.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the profession seems to be on the verge of remaking itself once again. As Alex Bitterman, a professor of design at Rochester Institute of Technology, has noted, “Architects are trained to observe and re-examine systems — construction systems, social systems, economic systems, and to forecast the vector of these integrated systems on a scale that impacts our global community.” Add to that the generalized capability of architects to understand the physical and material implications of such systems, and you have a prescription for a field that is continuously reinventing itself. Today, the very nature of the multidisciplinary collaboration that has enabled the contemporary practice of architecture is evolving as a small but influential number of practitioners — including designers and artists — are observing and re-examining standard practice. Their work goes beyond collaboration to mix, meld, and merge.

These practitioners embrace the notion of hybrid vigor, the idea that mixing yields something better — something more fluid and more adaptable that can better meet new and changing conditions by embodying the strengths of each component to yield a sum greater than its parts. For architecture, often so hide-bound in its traditions and professional self-identity, hybrid thinking offers the opportunity to reach well beyond the “bricks and mortar” into issues that may seem to have little to do with building, per se, that can even save lives or the environment by helping to “architect” a better life system.

Each of the individuals or practices represented in the following pages has extended the reach of architecture’s potential in substantive ways through hybrid approaches. While the design media often seem to suggest that the expanding realm of architecture is defined by an ever-larger, elaborate, and technological high-wire act of complicated buildings and building systems, these works represent a broadening of consideration that taps more deeply into social needs and customs. For some of these practitioners, such as Sheila Kennedy and Frano Violich from Boston’s KVA, and Julie Bargmann from D.I.R.T. in Charlottesville, Virginia, hybridity has been the underlying influence on their work since they began with an early recognition of the need to respond to a broader mission; now, 20-plus years later, they’ve achieved a true maturity in their approach.

What is characteristic of these folks? They’ve truly opened themselves to the knowledge and procedures of other fields, of the reality of conditions “out there.” They have put themselves forward to meet the question, not to hammer the question into a shape they already know how to answer. This simple fact is what separates them from the rest, and in so doing, they are redefining practice from without and from within.

Of course, these practitioners are themselves intellectual hybrids — many of them share genetic affinities with architects such as Rem Koolhaas, Steven Holl, and William McDonough; with cross-disciplinary thinkers such as Stewart Brand and Richard Saul Wurman; with established collaborative design firms such as Cambridge Seven and Sasaki; and with 20th-century pioneers of collaborative practice such as Ray and Charles Eames, and the Bauhaus.

Despite these roots, and for all their success and recognition by many of their peers and the public, those engaged in hybrid practice often speak of feeling at times marginalized by the “profession.” Each has given up something recognizable for a less easily recognized something else. It’s frequently a brave undertaking: financial security and professional stature are often at risk when the world doesn’t understand exactly what it is that you do. Even so, these designers and artists may be not only expanding the margins of the field, but also, as hybrids often do in nature, creating what is really the new center.

So, to the rest of us: Watch and Learn.

Ray Kinoshita Mann AIA is a practicing architect in western Massachusetts and associate professor of architecture and design at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She is writing a book about the working methodologies of Japanese architect, Itsuko Hasegawa.
Allan and Ellen Wexler bring the keen insights of the artist into investigating and revealing new potentials of architecture and the human interaction with and inhabitation of space. With remarkable precision and humor, they show us that a chair is not just a chair and a roof is not just a roof, or that the form of a wind turbine shadow can become yet something else. And by harvesting what is special out of the familiar, they remind us how architectural thinking in almost any venue can and should cultivate entirely new possibilities in our relationships with each other and the environment around us, every day.

John Zeisel has taken architectural thinking deep into the mind of Alzheimer’s Disease, to discover how profoundly we are impacted by our environments, especially as we lose neurological functioning — and how most of our building activity fails to take this into account. In co-founding Hearthstone Alzheimer Care in 1992, John Zeisel essentially subsumed his identity as an architect into that of a team of medical and behavioral experts and caregivers. In so doing, his impact is felt both in the architecture of the spatial methodology and in the architecture of the understanding of the disease and how to care for it. When we consider that responsive spaces and care systems not only have a huge impact on the sense of well-being of individuals, but have also been shown to measurably slow the progression of the disease, it is clear that we have a lot more to learn about architecture for everybody based on his insights.

Hearthstone facilities in (clockwise from top left) Palisades, New York; Marlborough, Massachusetts; and Brockton, Massachusetts. Hanging planters discourage climbing; therapeutic gardens provide a roomy but well-defined enclosure with seasonally distinctive vegetation and pathway choices; gathering spaces, in the form of living rooms or microwave stations, offer opportunities to socialize. Photos courtesy John Zeisel.
When Julie Bargmann, after schooling as a landscape architect, set out to take on some of the nation’s worst pollution sites, she must have had an inkling that improving the most damaged places can make anything else seem possible. “Collaboration” is an inadequate word to describe the intensity with which she has reached into the scientific community, joined forces with like-minded colleagues such as William McDonough FAIA, and reached out to individuals, communities, and historians as keepers of our culture. From the rehabilitation and rejuvenation of acid mine drainage sites to the 100-percent-recycled site-materials strategy at the Urban Outfitters project at the Philadelphia Dockyards (shown above), Bargmann has teased out an entirely new role for design as a hybrid activity that rescues not only sites, but also their history, memories, and continued possibilities.

What makes an object a work of architecture? Someone infusing it with an architectural thought or methodology — as when Sheila Kennedy recognized that a blanket can be a home. And when that blanket is made of a simple and durable “cloth” made of solar cells, LEDs, and reflective film, it not only shelters but may even save a life by offering therapy in the treatment of tuberculosis. Sheila Kennedy AIA and Frano Violich AIA have embraced a cross-over between arts, architecture, and technology since they began working together over 20 years ago. For them, each medium is a means for revealing and articulating the conditions underlying what we make and use. The artistic and technical rigor of their approach has brought them to focus on the new energy imperative, largely through KVA’s materials research unit, MATx, which includes rapid prototyping equipment. The tuberculosis blanket is a part of the KVA MATx Portable Light initiative, a nonprofit established to find new ways of delivering power and light to the developing world.
Eric Höweler AIA and Meejin Yoon might seem to be having just too much fun. Wearables and sittables; hovering yellow canopy cones that capture and interact with solar energy, rainwater, and sound; installations; buildings, condos, and interiors — their work suggests new lifestyle possibilities and demonstrates that architecture can be found everywhere.

From doorknobs to toy cars, from restaurant interiors to entire buildings, Office dA principals Monica Ponce de Leon and Nader Tehrani make disciplinary boundary-breaking seem effortless. What makes this overt hybridity work so well, however, is a more subtle hybridity underlying their thought processes, what one might call a mathematical/textile sensibility — a hyper-awareness of how the individual element exists and acts with another and another to repeat, shift, turn, accumulate. More than glibly digital or superficially virtuosic, their methodology evokes deep traditions in the made-ness of things, and in so doing, engages and enriches our collective sensibilities across time, class, and cultural boundaries. One can as easily imagine the artisan’s pleasure in constructing a wall or piece of furniture as our own in seeing it.

Andrea Zittel is a scientist of space and inhabitation cloaked in the guise of an artist. Relentlessly delving into the functions of the world and ourselves, often using herself “as a handy example of a human being,” she helps us see with sudden clarity the assumptions and presumptions that underlie much of modern existence. Among her most familiar projects are the Wagon Stations, the portable living pods featured at the Whitney Museum in 2006 that were conceived as purposefully simple shelters that can be brought virtually anywhere. By pursuing her unbounded “research” from terrain to shelters to furniture, household goods, and even body wear, she ventures well beyond the designed gadget and the artful object to suggest that the solution to a design problem starts with redesigning the problem itself.