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UBC architecture profs challenge status quo thinking with show at Or Gallery



Matthew Soules never thought that when he went to study architecture at Harvard University, it would lead him to create the most imaginative public urinal in British Columbia.

Charlie Smith

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By [Charlie Smith](#), March 11, 2012

Lovers of architecture may want to hustle down to the Or Gallery between Monday and Thursday for the final four days of a unique exhibit. There, the UBC School of Architecture + Landscape Architecture is highlighting the research, writing, and design of 17 faculty members in show called SALA Works.

Curated by architect and professor Matthew Soules, the displays are divided into seven themes with such titles as "emergent urbanism", "digital making", and "common ground".

In an interview with the *Georgia Straight* inside the gallery, Soules says the goal of SALA Works is to raise awareness about the quality of work being done by the faculty and to stimulate conversation about creating better buildings and enhancing the environment.

The exhibit also demonstrates the incredible impact that computers are having on architecture.

"It's not that long ago that if you walked into an architecture office, you would see a huge array of drafting



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tables," Soules comments. "Walk into an architecture office today, and there are no drafting tables. It's all computers. Everything happens on the computer."

And that is having an astonishing impact. He points to a display featuring the work of Prof. Oliver Neumann. It shows elaborately cut boards coming together in a spiral shape that would seem impossible to construct without endless hours of work by wood sculptors. Soules explains that this project was actually done with the work of computers.

"In digital space, they constructed a three-dimensional model," he says. "The three-dimensional modelling allows you to create these complex curves."

The modelling works hand-in-hand with computer numerically controlled cutting machines that robotically produce the shapes out of planes of plywood.

"Increasingly, buildings and the elements within buildings are fabricated by computer-controlled robotic lasers cutting devices," Soules states. "So his [Neumann's] work is investigating the cutting edge of how you can think through this process and capitalize on its inherent potentials."

Nearby, there's a display called OSWall by Prof. Blair Satterfield. He studies the impact of digital production and fabrication techniques on the urban landscape and housing. Another project showcases how Satterfield and his team won a proposal to transform a public space in Minneapolis. When people walk across the area, the energy is used to illuminate parts of the ground, creating a dynamic experience

"This is about responsive public places, not the piazza that's static," Soules comments.

Soules points out that creative architecture can have a profound economic impact. Nowhere is that more apparent, perhaps, than in the research of Prof. Joseph Dahmen. Soules notes that Dahmen, who came from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is a specialist in "rammed-earth technologies". And he has come up with an ecologically sensible alternative to concrete masonry units, which are one of the most common building products in North America.

According to Soules, Dahmen has figured out how to make these blocks out of recycled fly ash and earth. And this has the potential to sharply reduce the production of greenhouse gases in the building process.

Soules points to another display, which demonstrates how Dahmen has created a reactor using algae to produce electrical energy for buildings. "He's super entrepreneurial with his research," he states.

One of the pioneers in sustainable research in architecture is UBC's Ray Cole. Soules says that he's now examining the concept of "beyond green", which involves creating buildings that not only use less energy and fewer resources, but which involve "regenerative design".

Another faculty member who's interested in sustainability issues is Prof. AnnaLisa Meyboom. At SALA Works, there are two of her displays, including one featuring her research into planning infrastructure to refuel electric vehicles. There's even an illustration of what these filling stations would look like dotting the street alongside English Bay.

For people interested in how modern projects can be integrated into heritage districts, there's a model showing the design work of Prof. Inge Roecker. It shows how new housing can be included into a historic neighbourhood like Chinatown without appearing too intrusive.

One of Vancouver's most imaginative architects, Prof. Bill Pechet, is also featured in SALA Works. His long grand table on the south side of the Burrard Bridge is just one of several works exhibited. There's also some of his playful designs, including a huge ladle that sits in a plaza in Victoria.

Soules says that Pechet has also done some important and serious architectural work in cemeteries, citing the Wood Coilumbaria in Capilano View Cemetery as "one of the most incredible projects in Metro Vancouver". That's because of the way it sits in the landscape in a juxtaposition of accumulating moss over rough-hewn stone next to more modern concrete.

"It's kind of both the present and the past at once," Soules says. "It's beautiful."

Perhaps Pechet's most widely viewed project is the colourful smokestack that sticks up like fingers on the southeast side of the Cambie Street Bridge. It's part of the city's neighbourhood energy utility at Southeast False Creek.

"It's inspired by a hand," Soules says. "These are the fingers and these are the nails....Really, this was inspired by nail salons."

Pechet's nails change colour in relation to the amount of energy being created. "So there's this visualization of energy production," Soules adds. "Also, when you're driving across the bridge, it's like getting a big high-five when you enter the city."

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Two projects by Soules are also on display. One is an innovative white laneway house in East Vancouver, which features a steel curtain to help reduce its visual scale in relation to the neighbourhood. The other is a spiral-shaped public urinal, shielded by steel pipes, near Victoria City Hall.

Soules jokes that his design team relied on a photograph of former premier Gordon Campbell's face in testing the model to ensure that whoever uses the facility won't be recognized.

"The most compact shape is a circular shape," Soules says.

City officials and police didn't want the urinal "to support unwanted activity—drug use and sex and so on", he adds. So his team figured out a way to make a door unnecessary.

Cheap steel pipes were used to create a rough exterior surface, which made the urinal graffiti-proof. And the bottom pipes were lifted somewhat, making it easy for passersby, including the police, to see if anyone was inside.

"When you go to architecture school, you never dream of designing a urinal," Soules quips. "You dream of doing a museum."

But this is a urinal for the ages, demonstrating that form and function can come together beautifully.

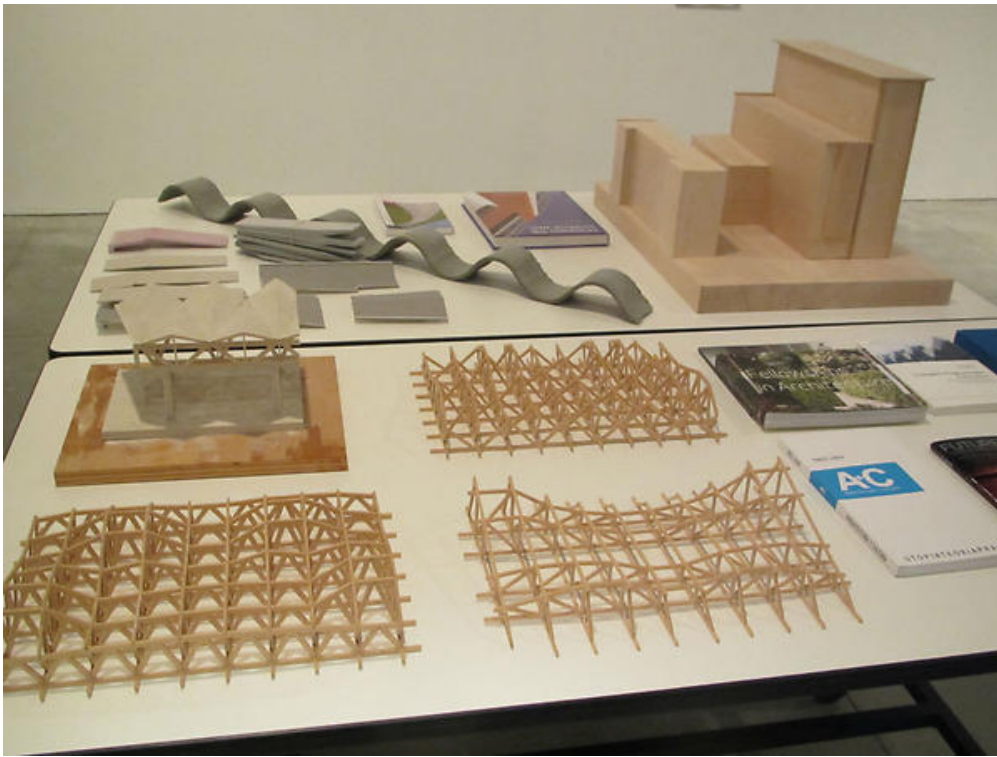
SALA Works continues at the Or Gallery (555 Hamilton Street) until March 15.

Follow Charlie Smith on Twitter at twitter.com/csmithstraight.



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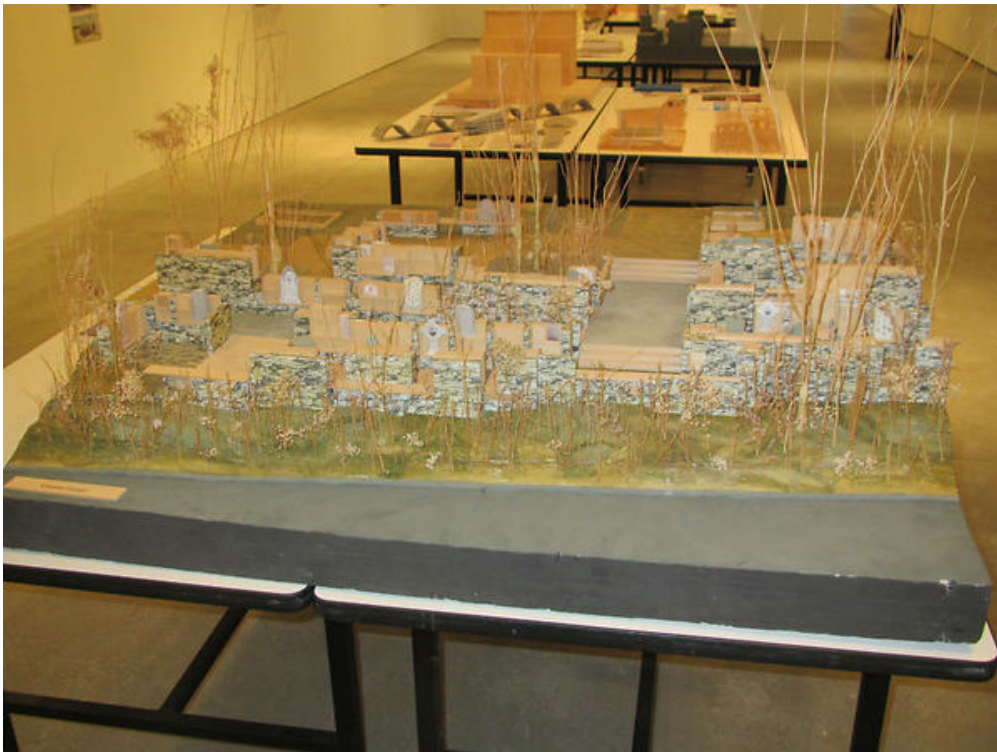
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