

Mark Muekenheim's Brave New World
By T.H.J. Hodsdon

The idea of a *network* is important to Mark Muekenheim. The title of Muekenheim's lecture, "ACTION", or "form follows fun" (which sub-titular assertion he claims, perhaps inadvertently, to be trying to disprove), implies at least a circular, or re-circular line of reasoning which Muekenheim and his design team use unabashedly throughout their design process. Networking is sometimes the process of utilizing added dimensions to the traditional in order to accomplish a goal more effectively. In the interactive world of computers, the concept implies the abandonment of traditional boundaries that keep things segregated, in order to operate more efficiently once connected. The term suggests an interconnectedness and adaptability that allows people or things to function more efficiently once this interconnectedness is realized. Networking is a concept that is inherently about evolution and change, according to need, or even just opinion or desire. Although Muekenheim only mentions 'networking' once in his lecture in reference to his design team, the concept seems to pervade his process, if not his architecture. When combined with the idea of revisiting design through process, networking might ideally translate into buildings that themselves adapt, evolve and inter-connect.

Muekenheim describes a series of projects through the lens of process at the beginning of his lecture, from his Mobile Tourist Interface (which doesn't seem as mobile as it seems collapsible) to an incisive cemetery/freeway project, all of which evolve elegantly through various collaborations of undoubtedly brilliant minds. The models describing these structures are diaphanous, and seem to actually shift and morph before our eyes as he describes the process of designing them. Muekenheim is a visionary whose ideal architectural speculations live in a world of like-minded people who might leap to life from the anorexically modeled figures populating his beautifully crafted CG drawings. With his 'unpinned' style of programming and design, he seems to propose an adaptive style of architecture that is elusive, yet seductive. The MTI is a perfect example – a building that seems to adapt to a time, a place, a set of people and circumstances.

Ultimately the realities of time and place, and the physicality of building seem to get in the way of the pure execution of Muekenheim's process. His buildings ultimately become fixed. Their walls, although some are moveable, have boundaries or are fixed, as if frozen in networking time. They are snapshots of a process that might never, ideally, have ended. They maintain the illusion of being adaptive, but much like Kisho Kurokawa's failed mobile pod towers, this adaptive architecture is only so in a specific way that seems surprisingly rigid in its manifestation. Inevitably with such concepts, once the design and conceptual stage has ended, the structure is a static form in a real place at a given time. The MTI could never transcend its own boundaries, and would inevitably be another motel or hotel or condo, but this time suspended.

The Grand Egyptian Museum competition project proposed for Cairo exemplifies the idea of a networked process that leads to a fixed and static structure. At some point the evolving 'generative' design must become a series of mapped points attached to the earth, despite the programmatic desire to have "the whole museum able to navigate like a web

page”, allowing you to jump from one incongruous point to another. Here the design falls short. If the building could evolve throughout its use as it does during the design process, it seems that Muekenheim could accomplish what might be his goal of a ‘networking’ building. A networking building would seem to operate in more than 3 dimensions. Although well adapted, most of his buildings do not function in such ways as the idealism of his process might hope for.

In fairness, Muekenheim never states the ‘networking’ of function as his primary goal for his projects, but it is implied. The Form that follows the Fun that precedes the ‘nction’ in his presentation is often organic and freely made, responding almost entirely to program and whim – kind of chaos theory architecture. Muekenheim concedes that such forms are not necessarily the aesthetic of the moment. In reference to the Hong Kong Design Center Project, he says: “It’s kind of an ugly building, isn’t it? ... We were thinking of all of these beautiful shapes we made, and then all of a sudden we organized it, and all these ideas we had, and all of a sudden we thought, ‘Man, isn’t that ugly?’ If the shape comes to you, and you don’t actually have to look for a shape, because it just happens, it can’t be ugly, because it is so practical – it’s really enough to be kind of, odd.” The aesthetic, then, starts to be informed by use. The green facades and rice fields accomplish the amorphous nature of the project that seems to be the most adaptive and interactive part of the building, while the shape of the form simply is.

Interestingly, despite the monumental attempts of Muekenheim’s organic and blobular architecture to conquer the adaptability gap between process and design, as well as function and form, it is his simplest solutions that are the most effective. The Klockner House in Dulsberg (art at building project) as well as the IGS Sports Facility both elegantly perform functions and express through their simple art screens and open plans that they might respond to the needs of their inhabitants. It is these defiant backgrounds for the endless possibility of networking that show how sometimes less mandated fun and more ‘nction’ is required to perform the most organic and adaptive functions, allowing networking to just, well, happen.