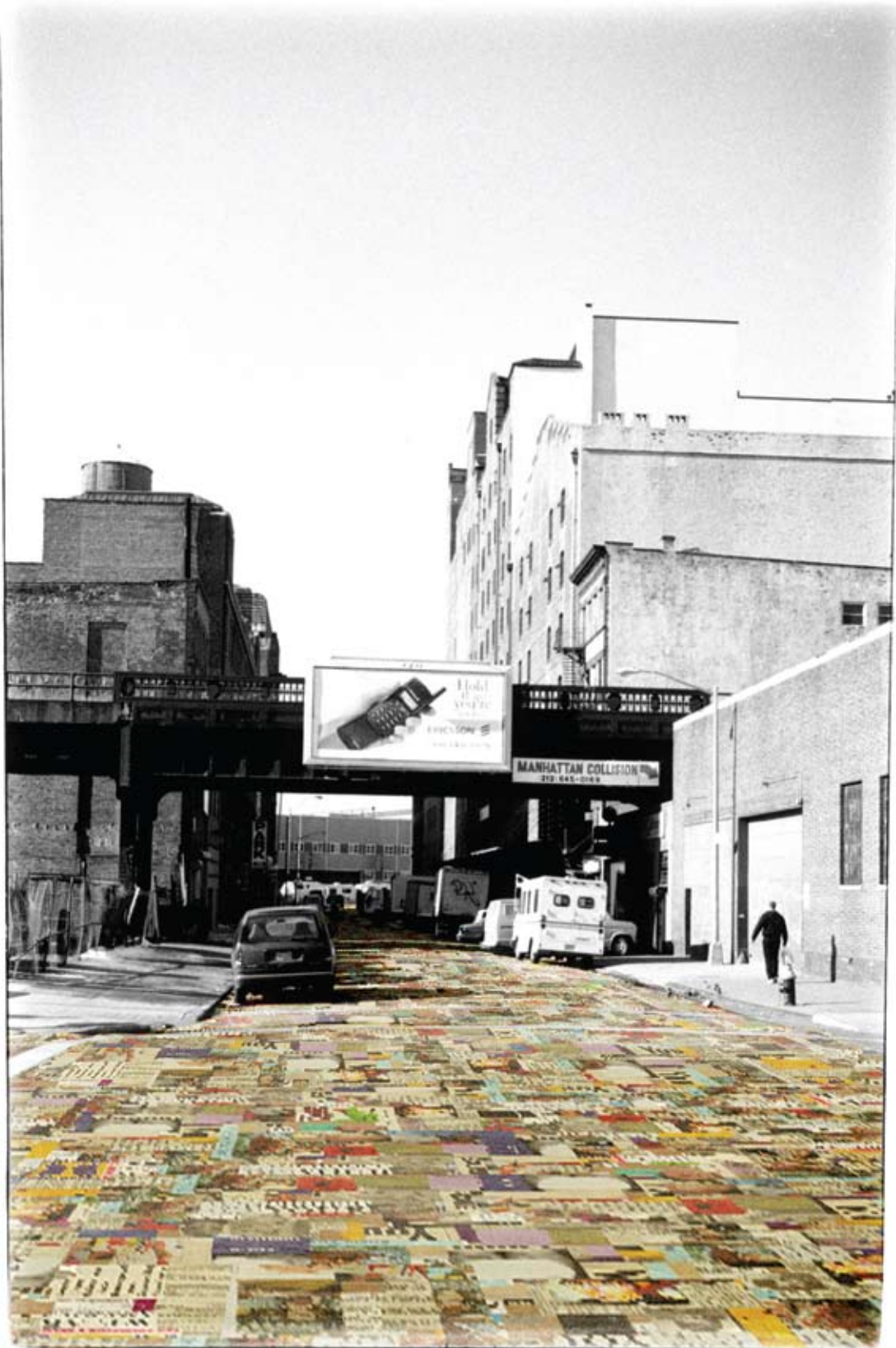

Think/Make



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Think/Make

Della Valle Bernheimer

Andrew Bernheimer and Jared Della Valle

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Andy: I would like to extend special thanks to my parents and sisters, who have all provided encouragement, motivation, support, intellect, and running commentary over the years. I would like to thank Mark Lamster for his constantly insightful critiques and good advice. I dedicate this book to Nicole, Isaac, and Alice, the best family one could ever hope for.

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—Andrew Bernheimer and Jared Della Valle



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Preface

In the spring of 2008, Jared Della Valle and Andy Bernheimer taught the Judith Seinfeld Visiting Critic Studio, a series of classes focusing on housing and mixed-use developments, at Syracuse University's School of Architecture. Earlier that academic year, after discussing their work over dinner with the studio's sponsor, in New York City, it was perhaps a matter of luck that we were confronted with a billboard for 245 Tenth, the firm's darkly sleek residential project located along the heavily marketed edge of Chelsea, delimited on the west by the High Line. The glistening night-view rendering, posted near the site—at the time, the building was under construction, hidden behind fences—provided the ideal segue for our conversation about the work of Della Valle Bernheimer (DB) and their proposed studio, which was to be based on a seventy-story, mixed-use tower, sited further uptown, north of the Javits Center development. The students' work was to involve architectural investigations derived, at least in part, from the realities of the New York City real estate market.

Della Valle Bernheimer's projects are explorations of form and fabrication, investigations into the material properties of architecture. Beyond the intensity of attention to craft, they address the marketplace head-on and at close remove. For them, properties of architecture are always informed by the economic and material conditions of production. DB makes a convincing case for creating added value through design, acting as their own developers, a mode of practice that has seen a recent resurgence.

Their projects reflect a broad range of scale and intention, with the smallest being a seemingly fragile pavilion at the Philbrook Museum, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where they cinematically morphed the shapes of butterfly wings through the computer to create a moiré shimmer of screens. Translating organic forms through digital technologies is a fascination of our age, but one of DB's earliest projects—a renovation of a Cape Cod-style house in Massachusetts—reinforces the sense that observation and the details of everyday life also provide motivating forces. This simple project sits on a modest plot, split in two by a change in cladding. It recalls the surface patterns found in older suburbs, where duplex houses are painted different colors or surfaced with brick on one, stucco on the other. A split of program on the inside is designated by an exterior change of skin. In this house, called Empty Nest, interior surfaces and volumes dissolve the usual configuration of rooms. Over time, the functions that define the house have changed to include a larger bedroom suite, study, and library, all occupying one volume, demarcated by a change of cladding on the outside. This visual gesture remakes the dwelling while utilizing the iconic geometries of the typical suburban house. The volume can be understood as sculptural, recalling the work of artist Joel Shapiro but having the intensity and humor of a Gordon Matta-Clark installation.

A few years later, DB worked on a challenging high-density site in East New York, Brooklyn. Acting as architects and developers for the Department of Housing Preservation and Development's New Foundations Program, which encourages private development of affordable housing, DB invited three firms—Architecture Research Office (ARO), Briggs Knowles Architecture + Design, and Lewis.Tsurumaki.Lewis—to collaborate on five two-family homes. Their objective was to address the difficulties of designing dense low-rise housing within a tight budget. They succeeded with a level of variation that is consistent with urban neighborhoods.

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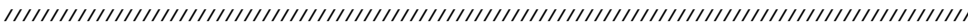
Dense low-rise housing has been a historical mainstay of Brooklyn and Queens, with acres of it sprawling outward from the city in the early part of the last century. Newer proposals for market-rate and subsidized housing, in general, never seem to get it right. Often, individual houses set back from the street are too horizontal and suburban, or they are too large and slablike to be anything but new enclaves with all the obvious earmarks of subsidized housing that is trying to “pass.”

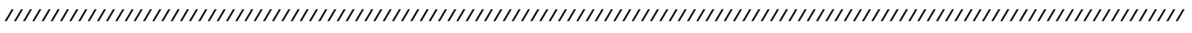
DB’s housing project, as built, holds the street edge and respects the domestic scale, as opposed to pandering to some oddly misplaced mythology about home or family. Working with a vocabulary of resonant forms, the massing makes sense without duplicating the surrounding environment. Newness is addressed as a positive attribute within a preexisting community. This small-scale project is indicative of the goals of the firm; it reveals a keen awareness of the world, an awareness that does not abdicate the need for something projective or settle for a decorated pro forma solution.

Education happens through work like this. This is an important matter for our students and for those working in the private and civic realms to understand. Innovative approaches serve us better and make the case for the poetry and intelligence too rarely seen in our houses, schools, and public spaces. The trick is to find work that is financially sound, sustainable, and smart in terms of technology and construction and that also reads appropriately to different taste groups.

The project that launched Della Valle Bernheimer, 450 Golden Gate Plaza in San Francisco, reconfigured a public space and repositioned the federal presence in the city. A simple formal move—tilting a plane with an inscribed line that crosses the site diagonally—transformed the entrance of the building and achieved what they describe as a democratization of access. DB focuses on the intersections of public and private while addressing the real estate market, issues of financing, and matters of art; their teaching reflects this hybrid mix of practice. When Andy and Jared taught the Judith Seinfeld Visiting Critic Studio, they discussed the complexity, as well as the staggering costs, of their current projects. In response to a question about their capabilities of working on buildings of increasing scale, they responded in an optimistic tone, “Well, we didn’t know exactly how to do those first projects when we did them. We just did them. There’s a first time for everything.” It was an indication that, for architects, experimentation and risk are part of our daily work. This was an ideal point of departure from which to talk about architecture, a place where everything seems possible.

—Mark Robbins, dean, Syracuse University School of Architecture





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Pairs

Aaron Betsky

Della Valle Bernheimer likes to operate via combination. Having accepted the status of architecture as consisting of a series of tasks, including the organization of that particular and invisible phenomenon, space; the allocation of resources into a frame; and the production of skins within which space and material can appear, they revel in the manipulation of exactly those elements in such a manner that, as Jared Della Valle puts it, “a person who uses our buildings can recover what we put into it.” To accomplish this, they have to leave their combinations evident. They also have to operate on the assembly itself, combining development and design while working in collaboration with allied firms. They eschew the expression of large social, technical, or aesthetic issues. They focus only on the work itself and proceed by articulation, composition, and contrast. The result is an architecture of effects that are clear though not always obvious. Simple lines and boxes shift, slide, or dematerialize in order, above all else, to make one aware of their presence. They are in balance but never resolved.

The professional twosome of Della Valle and Bernheimer seems to like working in pairs. Take, for instance, the two houses they designed for themselves and their families, Bernheimer’s in upstate New York and Della Valle’s in Fire Island. The latter is simpler, an existing house cleaned up, opened, and clad in wood and zinc. Metal dominates the house, abstracting the volume while emphasizing a larger cubical mass and small structure extending over the deck, where the wood siding and deck merge and the base appears to reach up and grab hold of the house. The gestures are simple and economical, reflecting the tastes of an architect who has degrees in both construction management and architecture and who codevelops buildings in Manhattan.

The Bernheimer house, by contrast, is a more complex affair. Also clad in a combination of wood and metal, in this instance copper, it consists of a longer space with three saw-toothed skylights and a cubic volume similar to that of the Della Valle house. Bernheimer delights in the ability of copper to weather and discolor, while Della Valle desires a more consistent appearance. The complex shapes of Bernheimer’s home find their counterpart in

Copper House, Columbia County, N.Y.

Zinc House, Fire Island, N.Y.



windows positioned to catch particular fragments of the landscape, incorporating views into the interior as found art. Its complexities may derive from the fact that it is a stand-alone piece of new construction, not a renovation, but the two houses do represent different elements of the partners' work.

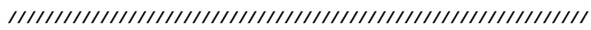
The spatial gymnastics inherent in the Bernheimer house, for instance, spin out in the Artreehouse in New Fairfield, Connecticut, completed in 2008. Wood-clad volumes extend into space, held together by a steel frame that becomes evident as the scaffolding for the living spaces in the house's interior. Della Valle and Bernheimer clad the house with board and batten, which acts as an abstraction of traditional building materials. Interior volumes extend the logic of both the balloon frame of the standard suburban home and the cubic composition of high modernism. The house is exuberant in its spatial and volumetric effects and yet tightly controlled, disciplined, rooted in memory, and reserved in appearance.

By contrast, the housing they designed in 2005 in East New York, Brooklyn, as part of a City of New York program to provide affordable dwelling units, reduces most of the effects to plays with the facade. Inside, the houses are as generous as financing and building codes would allow, which is to say, not very. Outside, Della Valle and Bernheimer created a sense of scale and identity simply by contrasting metal siding with horizontal and vertical corrugations, as well as by grouping standard windows and cladding small areas in wood. On one facade, they were able to manipulate the volume sufficiently to produce a cross-shaped profile protruding from the box.

A third residential structure, a renovation completed in 2005 in Fire Island, New York, sums up DB's strategy. It is a wooden box contained by a bold lintel that wraps around to become an exterior wall and sill—a modernist line, implying a box, that contains a volume. Its practical, familiar form is indicated by the use of wood siding. Again by contrast, the renovation of architect Paul Rudolph's own house on Beekman Place in New York City, completed in 2006, is nothing but lines and voids, the actual forms having been reduced to white planes

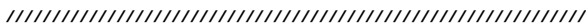
23 Beekman Place, N.Y.

Fire Island Residence, Fire Island, N.Y.



Artreehouse, New Fairfield, Conn.

Glenmore Gardens, East New York, N.Y.



hovering in air. Della Valle and Bernheimer brought out the freedom from gravity and containment that Rudolph worked so hard to achieve in all of his buildings, as a reflection of an almost utopian modernist thirst for liberation that he was only able to bring to some resolution through relentless tinkering on his own house.

To extend these comparisons to a larger scale, consider DB's two condominium towers located a few blocks from each other in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood. While the 459 West 18th Street building is a clear illustration of zoning and financial conditions, which divide the form into two contrasting pieces, one clad in white and the other in black glass; the 245 Tenth Avenue tower absorbs these complexities into a deformed shape, while its facade is composed of a pixelated grid of glass and metal panels. It bows out slightly, asserting its presence over the High Line, a disused rail yard currently being transformed into a park, just as its skin dematerializes. Like 459 West 18th Street, the tower is L-Shaped, its two volumes only barely seeming to touch. One is never quite sure whether the Tenth Avenue building is really there, but at the same time, it cannot be avoided. The Eighteenth Street building, by contrast, has a simpler shape that shifts into two slices. The tall white volume recedes into the background as an abstract block; ribbon windows give it some sense of scale. The lower block, by contrast, is darker than its surroundings; the same lines of windows slice open what appears to be an otherwise closed volume. It is as if Della Valle and Bernheimer took the properties inherent in the surrounding buildings; emphasized them; made them simpler and clearer, including the sloped eaves and setbacks; and balanced them out so that one can clearly understand their innate tendencies.

DB's most ambitious project to date, the eighty-two-story Hudson Yards Tower, might seem a far remove from the modest garden pavilion they designed for the Philbrook Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 2004, but both designs emphasize the dematerialization of skin while asserting the presence of either the real or implied block. The tower is split into two slabs, with the higher one rising up toward the rear; a glass-enclosed stack of bridges connects

459 West 18th, New York, N.Y.

245 Tenth, New York, N.Y.

Migration Tower, New York, N.Y.

Butterfly Pavilion, Tulsa, Okla.



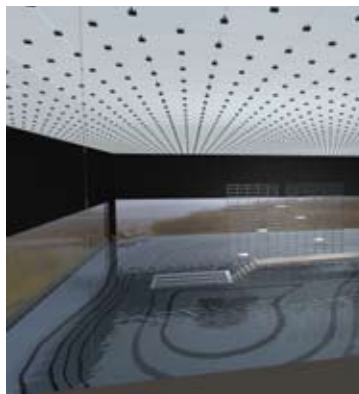
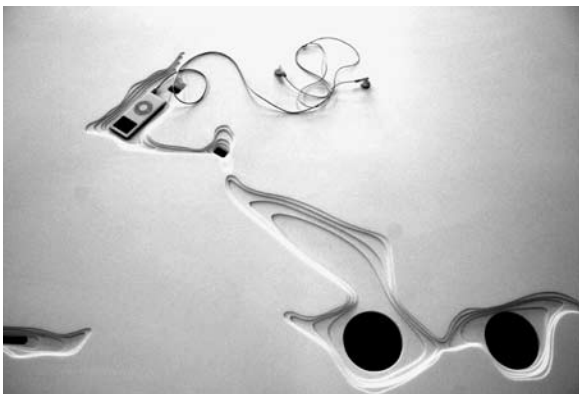
the two. Della Valle and Bernheimer extended the separation of geometric volumes—corresponding to the zoning envelope—to both a larger scale and a higher degree of abstraction. The facade is meant to disappear into a cloudlike apparition, reminiscent of a flock of birds, as if the architects were sculpting nothing but ephemeral matter, not a massive skyscraper. By contrast, the pavilion at the Philbrook Museum tries to make the ephemeral present. Its laser-cut metal skin, based on the shape of a butterfly, dissolves into a filigreed container of space, implied by the manner in which these white panels assemble themselves around a rectangular wood podium, wrapping to create a ceiling that evokes the pattern of leaves from surrounding trees. In both of these projects, Della Valle and Bernheimer beg the question of what the solid core of architecture should be. Is it a building that can be occupied, or is it the assembly of material toward an effect that recalibrates the occupant's relation to his or her surroundings, whether natural or human made?

In DB's design for the tables on which their firm works in their Brooklyn loft, completed in 2005, the architecture becomes a landscape carved into the tops, while the scissoring legs and articulated supports allow for a modular assembly. The whorls of the tabletop are intended to reflect and house the ephemeral objects particular to each designer, from drafting tools to cellular phones and iPods. These landscapes are structures that articulate and accommodate work, just as the design of an office building might, but they do their task at a much smaller scale and with a medium that we might not think of as proper to the field of architecture. Yet their forms are clearly related to Della Valle and Bernheimer's 2001 competition entry to design an aquatic center in Aalborg, Denmark. Here, the whirling table becomes a plane of water, cut into what is otherwise just a rectangular box. It makes the fluid nature of water present, accommodates the splashing and swimming occupants, and, in general, gives form to that which is formless.

These two projects show Della Valle and Bernheimer developing a horizontal version of the dissolving form through the use of remarkably solid materials, which has become a

JACK Table

Aquacenter, Aalborg, Denmark



hallmark of their architecture. In a sense, this is where they started and where they may continue. In 1996, they won the competition for the redesign of San Francisco's Federal Plaza; its folded forms re-emerge and find their pairing in the rising grass roof of the 2007 Maine State Pier competition entry. In the plaza, the architecture consisted of what was, essentially, the roof of an underground parking garage that the architects manipulated to provide a series of amenities, such as benches, as well as to differentiate and create shelter within an otherwise windswept public space. The jagged landscape sliced and diced the plane—we don't usually see it because we occupy it as we move—and created a series of relationships between the surrounding buildings. In Maine, DB created a building that simply disappears beneath the green park rising from the foot of the pier, extending over the building's various functions and arriving at a point that can be a belvedere or lookout point comparable in scale and height to the cruise liners that dock there. The building's actual volume is just a glass box, but the architecture is no more or less than the plane from which architecture usually starts (or is absent from) articulated into form.

Pair by pair, though not in temporal progression, Della Valle and Bernheimer seem to be moving toward an architecture that is both present and absent, both skin and volume. What is missing is the articulation of structure, the monumentality of built form, a hierarchy of building elements, and a sense of expressive experimentation with technology or typology. You might say that Della Valle and Bernheimer work with the materials and programs at hand and try to tease out some sense of the institution or client's character, while using an array of tried-and-true materials and responding with care to the surroundings. That does not mean that their buildings either disappear into tradition or their surroundings. Rather, they are exemplars of what we might now think of as the classical modern canon. In fulfilling the aims and methods of that particular mode, Della Valle and Bernheimer find satisfaction in doing what they can with a great deal of skill. They play it pretty straight and, as a result, the work is perfectly balanced. Yet somehow, out of a clear-headed confrontation with the act of building and development comes recognizable and beautiful architecture.

Maine State Pier, Portland, Maine

450 Golden Gate Plaza, San Francisco, Calif.



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Think/Make

Midway through Steven Spielberg's sci-fi masterpiece *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Roy Neary, played by Richard Dreyfuss, tears into a pile of potatoes, sculpting them into a facsimile of the natural wonder Devils Tower. His replica volcanic outcropping "means something," but he admits, he does not know what. Instinct leads him to making, and making raises the question of meaning. But his intuition remains indescribable. The very personal significance of his tower of tubers eludes explanation.

This is the dilemma of our architecture. How do you make something meaningful out of an instinct of thinking and then have that meaning be recognizable to others? This takes a certain trust in potatoes. For some, a potato will always be just a potato. But for us, it's something to devour, to sculpt, and to know. It's a poignant vegetable; a misshapen figure that, in its earthy weight and lumpy being, makes us feel some kind of strange wonder. Like an idea, it grows in hidden fashion and must be unearthed.

Our firm evolved instinctively. In 1995, we were working for others in the architecture and construction fields when we stumbled, quite literally, on an announcement in a bookshop for a design competition for the renovation of a federal plaza in San Francisco. For thirty-five dollars we could test our relationship as designers (and friends) and possibly get a built project out of it; this was our immediate thinking. For us, the key premise of the competition was that the winning proposal might be built. We were young and naive. We didn't consider this a stock disclaimer of most architectural competitions. We immediately thought of the project as real.

When we returned the entry fee, we had already calculated our odds of success: Perhaps there would be 200 applicants, and maybe we were smarter than half of them. That made our odds one in a hundred, not bad considering that we had learned in our professional practice courses that only one in fourteen interviews for potential work by accomplished professional firms ends in success.

"This means something. This is important."

From Close Encounters of the Third Kind

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To our surprise (and against the real odds, which are painstakingly known now that we are out in the world), we won. That lucky moment fomented our trust in intuition. We were interviewed by the General Services Administration, along with several other winners, and eventually selected to execute the design. At the time, we were unlicensed, working out of a toxic metal shop with an atrophied dog named Snoop always lying on the cement floor, and designing a 45,000-square-foot public space with nearly full artistic freedom. We were actually making something.

The design for 450 Golden Gate Plaza, the second project of our collaboration, relied on a single mechanism: a folded plane that bent and moved in accordance with the site's access requirements, the Americans with Disabilities Act building code, and the security needs of the United States Marshals Service, as well as the natural elements of wind and light. This folded plane also accommodated a surface treatment for a publicly curated collage, representing a participatory act of local architecture, the patterns and textural qualities of which remain prevalent in our work twelve years later. To this day, we have remained committed to investigating the indeterminate relationship between site, function, and client. We start with a word, maybe a concept, probably a noun. Language evolves into making, and intuition and mechanical doing are entwined by thinking.

Think empty nest; make an addition: A renovation and expansion of a home in suburban Boston for an empty-nest couple addressed the ingrained habits of over thirty years of living, and it literally extrudes these habits in formal terms. The new construction stretches the shape of the existing colonial house and wraps it in zinc, instead of cedar.

Think building on tracks; make steam clouds for train: A billowy building adjacent to the proposed High Line park in Manhattan evokes the image of steam clouds from foregone railroad cars. The skin of the building is composed of a literal image of clouds fabricated out of punched stainless steel.

Think trees; make tree house: A modern lakeside house in Connecticut reveals its structure of steel and long-span plywood, evoking the language of exposed timber construction and tying itself, metaphorically, to the trees that surround it.

Think table; make leg: A modular structure, made out of cast aluminum and crafted through a process of extensive research, engages computer numerical control (CNC) technology to make a single, economical table leg that is adaptable to countless desk configurations.

Think clock; make timepiece: A house wrapped in copper, in upstate New York, measures the passage of time. It ages visibly on the exterior as the material transforms over the years, while skylights on the interior track the hours of the day.

Think pavilion; make cocoon: A garden folly in Tulsa, Oklahoma, explores the etymology of the word *pavilion* in order to derive a pattern of butterflies and create a cocoon for its occupants.

In the formative moments of each project, a reduction of expression exists, for us, as a counterbalance to the prototypical and expansive aspects of architecture. Most of our buildings are effectively the first and last of their kind. Usually, they are made by proven methodologies that have been tested by us; however, unless deployed in a repeated fashion, each

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project is a one-off, never to be rebuilt. (Just as a thought only truly exists in the moment that it happens, and no other.) We aim to mitigate risk via several thought-gestures: by a reduction of systems, through stringent research into new methods of fabrication beyond the common, and through the simplification of architectural language. After the initial moment of instinct, we think through ways of making, while intellectual and mechanical mental associations play crucial roles.

We also search for a “distillation of thought,” which we believe makes spaces and designs accessible and enriching, even if our authorial intentions are not, on the surface, legible to others. Everyone’s intuition is different, but if the design is well articulated, we can enter each other’s thought-spaces. Our architecture is a kind of syllogism, where primary elements and secondary textures combine, legibly and intuitively, to guide users to their own distinctive and diverse responses. While motifs and themes, such as specific technical strategies, may reappear over time throughout our work, each project’s parti is inherently related to the specifics and differences of site and client, and they will be re-created by the users over time.

We strive to always think anew—to make each project unlike any that preceded it. The absence of an overarching signature is not an earth-shattering pronouncement on our part; rather, it liberates us. We believe in consistency, not homogeneity. We have thought through the business side of our impulses, and this has allowed us, as practitioners, to proactively expand the rules of development within our firm in the spirit of instinctual thinking and making. We have cultivated relationships with developers and independent sources of financing, which have given us an elevated degree of control over the inception of projects and an increased likelihood of their being realized. We have acted as developers, inventing opportunities for affordable housing and market-rate construction and seeing these efforts through, in most cases, to the point of breaking ground. We have engaged the field of product design, partnering with manufacturing companies to create custom products for our own office as well as for several real estate development properties. We love to live in the things we make; it is where we live, inside our minds, and we are deeply appreciative for opportunities to make things for others.

This spirit was rooted in us over a decade ago. In graduate school, we had the good fortune of learning from immensely talented professors, who were not only teachers, but active builders. Their work ranged from small apartments to public spaces and large-scale urban projects. They all drew beautifully and conceptualized rigorously. They privileged the act of making, but not at the expense of thinking. The first question they posed to us was, “What were you thinking?” The second was, “How would you build it?” We were thus ingrained, from the first moments of our architectural educations, with a sense of intellectual responsibility to the made object, by the people who made it. This taught us to be mindful of being mindful.

Our diverse practice is rooted in an ongoing effort to invent and formulate projects and to create a world where others may also live. We seek to make things that are thoughtful, interpretive, and substantial, even as we search, like Roy Neary, to explain what we mean.

—Andrew Bernheimer and Jared Della Valle

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245 Tenth

A 54,000-square-foot residential tower in the Chelsea arts district of Manhattan contains nineteen apartments and two galleries. The design uses images of the old steam trains that traversed the High Line tracks, adjacent to the site, to derive form and surface. Our initial studies were of clouds emanating from the smokestacks of railroad cars. Dissipating into the sky, these clouds tended to have dark, thick tones at their bases and then would billow, dissolve, and lighten into the sky. Their vaporous, tonal metamorphoses inform both the architectural form of the building and the texture of its skin, through embossing.

To replicate the phenomena of clouds, we made several digital studies of a steam engine cloud and isolated a small area depicting the gradient from black to white. This area was then pixelated and overlaid onto the facade in accordance with a variety of contextual conditions pertaining to privacy, view, and light. Five types of pixels were designed and then transformed from dots to protruding diamonds, for capturing light. Custom dies for a CNC turret punch (like a large-scale typewriter) were manufactured. As two-by-four-foot panels run through the machine, a digital drawing instructs it to punch each piece of stainless steel with a pattern of diamonds, reimagining and transposing the cloud across the facade of the building. These raised diamonds catch light differently throughout the day and year; though fixed materially, each facade is a mutable surface. The building's color, shade, and depth are untethered. In this way, ornament is inextricable from architecture; while environment and site history are emblazoned in a dichotomy in which local context is fixed, even while construction is ever-changing.

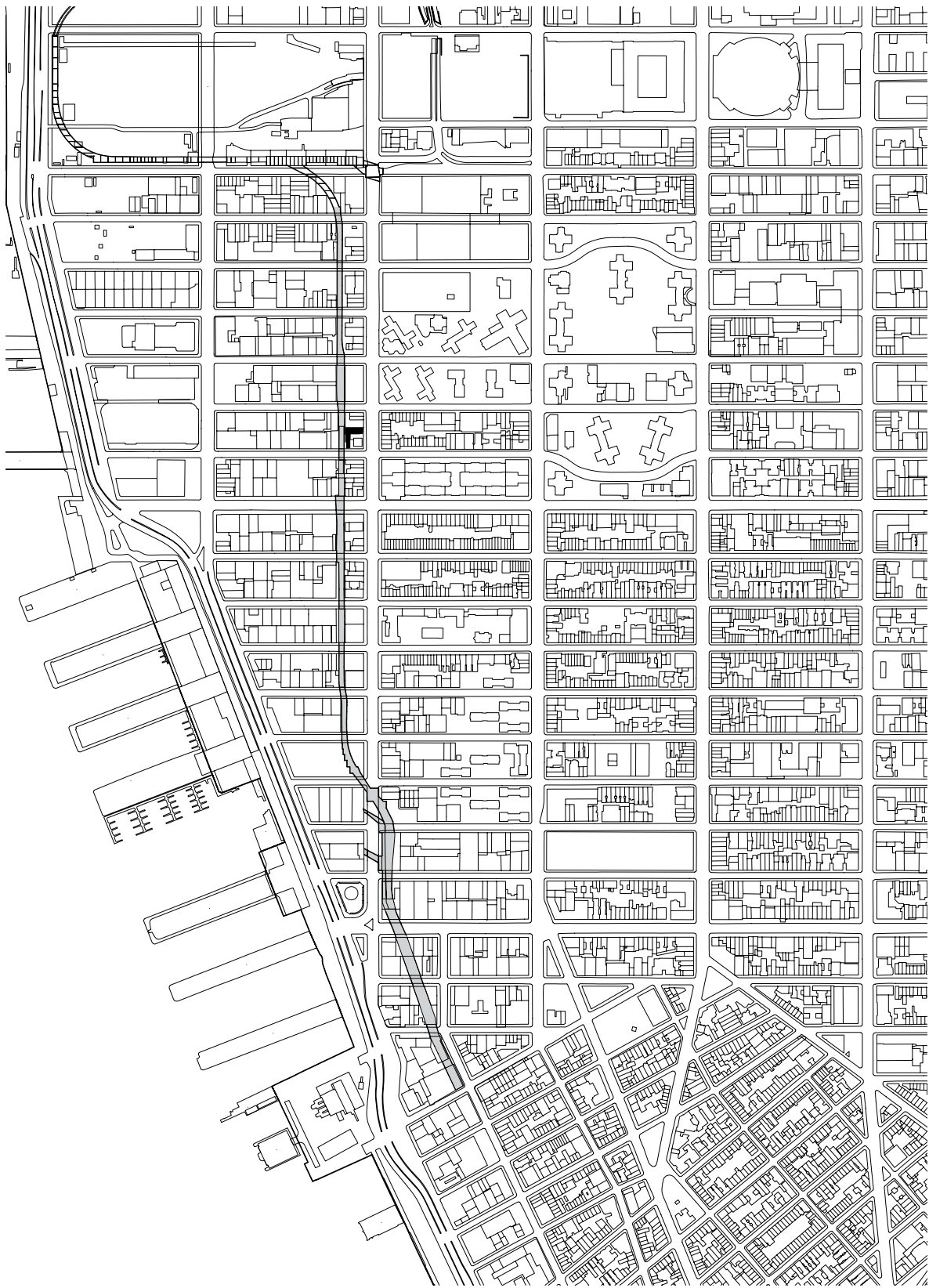
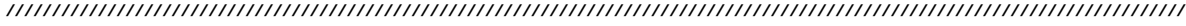
Steam train precedent

Pixelated steam cloud



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