Sharing Our Skin
Matthew Ritchie

For the last several years David Adjaye and I have been discussing "Just what is it that makes most of today's buildings so similar, so unappealing?" How can we contribute to a different kind of building system, one that contributes to the built world and the production of knowledge? In contemplating this kind of practice, numerous catch phrases come to mind: Generative, recuperative, collaborative, interdisciplinary, relational, hybrid, crossover, pluralist, cross-cultural, post-colonial, post-black, and post-white. None are quite right. The right word for practices dedicated to full participation in the forthcoming super-positional state is a simple one: Sharing.

It certainly sounds like an old-fashioned idea. But to share is not only to give but to receive. Building systems that share effectively must share more than efficiencies of scale and energy; they must share strategies of meaning. In our experience teaching together, David and I have frequently emphasized the need for large-scale solutions grounded in specific materiality over ideology. The organic aggregation that characterizes spaces suitable to sustain human meaning does not happen through master planning, pastiche, faux-iconization, or disguises. Rhetoric is always defective when confronted with reality. Markets and exchanges, civic, corporate, and criminal, define and defy top-down edicts of spatial resourcing. Cities have not speeded up; they have slowed down. The core modernist argument, that individual creative expression should conform to the efficiencies of human technology, is no more plausible than stating that it would be more efficient for humans to regress to the mats of bacteria that colonized the early seas. In a 12-billion-person world, we need a new strategy. Fortunately, a new state is emerging from the informational
chaos—one that we can perhaps frame more closely with the chimeric word “superposition,” a term borrowed from science.

Despite Richard Hamilton’s presciently postmodernist work of 1956, post-modernism crashed at exactly the moment its skill in challenging ideological conformity would have been most useful. Robert Venturi’s second book, Learning from Las Vegas (1972), proposed a client-based structure for postmodern architecture—a tango with the global oligarchy under the guise of renewed social meaning, followed by a compensatory academic crouch. Almost contemporaneously, in “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1973), Rosalind Krauss defined postmodernism in the arts as cultural terms held in opposition, among which were landscape, art and architecture. Even after the expansion of the field of post-minimalism, artists were rarely to be found in the precincts of architecture schools.

We can superficially trace one cause for this alienation to the rival programs implied in Krauss and Venturi’s models. A softening of the terms of postmodernism rapidly solidified during the final collapse of the Cold War order and introduced us to the so-called “End of History.” Influential art works that deployed surrealist dream language inside the formal terms of post-minimalism and pop marked an evolution away from social meaning, like their parallels in the architecture world. Today this work can be more properly understood as “multi-positional” instead of “oppositional,” and conforming to the first stage of Vattimo’s “Three Deaths.” Over the same period, the public face of postmodern architecture devolved into iconic expressions tacked onto prefabricated frames, in a succession of short-term gestures defined by their introverted relationship to the history of form rather than social meaning. After 1989, the artists of “relational aesthetics” quickly sketched a world in which works were “in constant dialog with the context from which they reproduced.” But relational aesthetics could also be described as a variant of multi-positional practice with one significant inversion: Its positions are occupied in relation to
landscape and architecture, and occupied solely through an immaterial gesture.

By 1995, the evolution of human and non-human computational and information systems expanded the field of cultural production still further and relocated the center of urban focus from the dérive and the feuilleton to the flash mob and the smart phone. Any single artist or architect trying to demonstrate or understand the underlying nature of their own “expanded field” had to consider their practice in terms of every possible position that could be mediated by computational space, a space particularly absorbing and recursive for architecture. Computational space itself has no meaningful aesthetic, only a series of nested workspaces and filing systems, whose overall appearance is the haphazard result of legacy coding and commercial guesswork. Like the façade architecture Venturi describes in Learning From Las Vegas, its relationship to meaning is transactional and highly degraded. Since 1995, “public architecture” has all too frequently deployed the idiosyncratic façade systems developed in computational space draped over structural distribution systems, not to locate or create “place,” but to facilitate brand recognition and ease of use.

That the key forms of social interaction that might be mediated through the large-scale structural relationships of art and architecture had been reduced to a gesture in front of a façade was poignant. It occurred just as computer aided design systems began to offer the most precise and authentic method for perpetuating an individually expressive mark or gesture over a large-scale system. But a side effect of embossing or “tattooing” buildings, screens, clothing, and people has now subtly permeated both the art and architecture worlds, opening up the possibility of the return of the renewed social meaning of the information tattoo—exactly what prompted Adolf Loos to write “Ornament and Crime” (1908).
The skin, the primary human system for communication and homeostasis, is of course a key concept in understanding both the façade and the gesture. Just as surely as skyscrapers are not social spaces, curtain walls are not skins, dynamic systems in constant dialogue with their context on every level from energy exchange to communication. In *Patterns That Connect*, Carl Schuster documents the tattooing of a Tupanimba warrior as directly representing the number of his kills. In the contemporary Russian mafia, spiderwebs and skulls serve exactly the same purpose. The concept of the skin can not only be directly linked to the patterns of intergenerational meaning and biological communication Schuster collates, but also to Latour’s metaphysical ontology of actants, irresolutions, translations, and alliances, all grounded in the concept of sharing human and non- (or trans-) human space. Skins are social organs, creating and embodying the same intergenerational, communicative, and metabolic building systems and drivers that constitute their interiors. The reconsideration of the building skin in numerous contemporary architectural practices has had extensive parallels in the art world in both projective and embodied works. In Shelley Jackson’s *Skin Project*, a story is tattooed onto the skins of 2095 volunteers, one word at a time.

Even as one very old mode of sharing—the performative skin—has returned to architecture and painting, another entirely new phenomenon has emerged to claim our attention and compel us to reevaluate the meaning and boundaries of the very idea of sharing.

In 1995, a team of scientists produced the first physical example of a Bose-Einstein condensate, a bizarre fifth state of matter in which atoms are held in multiple quantum states, physically superposed not over but within each other. In this esoteric material, all atoms share the properties of all other atoms while also retaining their own identity. This is a sharing beyond culture, beyond skin. The definition of information as not only comparable but directly transposable to a physical
state has also arisen in a series of laboratory experiments conducted in 2010 physically creating Maxwell’s demon, eradi-
cating four thousand years of debate over whether “form” and “content” are the same thing—namely, information. Not only are they a unitary concept, but at low temperatures they are super-positionable and therefore do not enjoy any inherent oppositions at any scale. In thermodynamic terms, the information universe operates at exactly the right conditions for this to occur in information systems today. Ginestra Bianconi and Albert László-Barabási have comprehensively described the architecture of such complexity and how the condensation of computational networks can be physically understood as the informational equivalent of a Bose-Einstein condensate. Through the medium of computational space, a final state of total information and cultural condensation becomes not only possible but inevitable.

Although this super-position has not yet been fully realized, we can see it coming in every aspect of human relations. In the 21st century—all appearances to the contrary—everything will be shared. Although income inequality is rising, so are sea levels. Although fresh water for consumption is more widely available than ever, so too is contamination. Every person in the U.K. drinks antidepressants recycled through the shared sewage system. Although the quality of individualized human violence is decreasing, the quantities of institutionalized brutality are increasing. Although exports are growing globally, importation of invasive bio- and civic systems are too. Although the financial system is distributed unequally, its risk is still distributed among all. Although the political spectrum may be superficially polarizing, it is only following the power law of all spectra. The Manichean dynamists of the last century have already given way to the community organizer and the corporate strategist, neither of who believe in a bipolar world—only in different forms, systems, and ownerships of distribution. If standard thermodynamics, with its explicit demands of conservation and efficiency, was the physical model of both
modernism and postmodernism (which simply placed competing local thermodynamic systems in opposition), perhaps this fifth state of matter can serve as a model for our evolving world.

The question is not whether to share, but how to share productively. New systems of sharing, such as super-positionality, and old ones, such as genuinely performative skins, will define the result. Created systems that rely on mandates and externals, whether oriented toward Hegelian truths, Zion, or commercial efficiencies, will fail. Only created systems like skins and super-positions, which distribute and recognize information and materialization through something like Latour's networks, have the potential to occupy multiple meanings in the forthcoming super-positional state. Without constant updating and correction of legacy viruses not even our much vaunted “information culture” will survive us. The paltry fifty-year lifespan typically demanded of contemporary built structures and the less than fifty-year lifespan for every ever artwork produced using video, plastic, glue, or lights both speak to a highly problematic relationship with sharing over time. If our next buildings and artworks do not participate in that sharing, they will be as swiftly outdated as the “ornamental” systems Loos once decried, but lacking even the sentimental attachment we place on such historical artifacts. Tribal tattoos and Art Nouveau buildings have retained more meaning and are more socially valuable than the efficient buildings Loos proposed and the box-facades Venturi endorsed. In 2012, the exurb can no longer be understood as the space to which urban society will migrate, but the catastrophic side effect of speculation in false concepts of refuge, with the largest increase in poverty and lowest resource base of any form of community in the U.S. Who will weep when the last Wal-Mart is torn down, when the last Starbucks closes?

Like many indigenous peoples, the Okanagan of British Columbia understood this problem in both “shared skin” and super-positional terms: “Unless place can be relearned, all
other life forms will face displacement and then ruin. Without this self and this bond, we are not human." Participation in a shared aesthetic and material language is what defines a civilization, a culture, a home. Which is precisely what Loos, in his demonization of Papuan tattoos, missed. In the right context, at the right party, a tattoo is more useful and efficient technology than anything else. In the right context, sharing is the most powerful idea of all.

Notes
1. "Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?,” by Richard Hamilton, was created in 1956 for the catalogue of the exhibition "This Is Tomorrow."