

A MEDAL FOR



The 2008 MacDowell Medalist Thom Mayne onstage and receiving his award from Chairman Robert MacNeil.

Mayne

A year later, the thrill of MacDowell's Centennial Medal Day celebration still lingered as one of architecture's most intriguing figures took the August stage. Thom Mayne, only the second architect to be awarded the Edward MacDowell Medal (following I.M. Pei), impressed those assembled with his magnetic combination of modesty and a passion for the field in which he has been an innovator for more than 40 years. Remarks and witticisms by Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic Robert Campbell preceded the awarding of the Medal by Chairman Robert MacNeil, after which Mayne spoke at length about the vital relevance of architecture and the challenges and responsibilities it faces in our resource-strapped world. We invite you to read Campbell's and Mayne's warm and thought-provoking speeches in the pages that follow.

Like the open studio portion of Medal Day, in which artists invite members of the public into their creative processes, these pages also take a further look inside architecture at MacDowell. Since 1990, the discipline of architecture has been steadily growing at the Colony. This year alone MacDowell welcomed eight architects. Their work is diverse and their talents abundant, the common element among them being MacDowell's gift of time and space to fulfill the promise of both.

ROBERT CAMPBELL

I'VE REACHED AN AGE when my glasses are never at exactly the right distance from the surface that I'm reading from, so I'll do the best I can. I just want to throw out one comment. First of all, I'm not going to cancel Thom with hyperbole . . . Hyperbole is not the role of critics; we do it the other way around. I love Carter Wiseman's comment about how the artists here go to work, and I was reminded of something I read recently that the artist Chuck Close who, for all I know, might have been here, probably was . . . He said, "Inspiration is for dilettantes; the artist just shows up for work."

I want to say a word about the jurors. What happened was that Carter Wiseman called me up and said, "We're gonna give the Medal to an architect this year and you're chairman of the jury. Pick your jurors." I chose Billy Tsien, Bill Rawn, Fred Clarke — who's here today, who's a member of the board here — and Calvin Tsao. And I just want to thank the four of them for making everything very easy.

This will be a very informal talk. Thom said to me earlier that he was only going to riff off anything I said, and I said, "No, you are expected to deliver a significant



Thom Mayne in conversation with Medal Day presentation speaker, Robert Campbell.

address.” And I notice he’s been writing rapid notes at the bottom... But I will try to define him.

His firm is called Morphosis. Sounds like an evil genius in a bad Hollywood movie, I guess. My dictionary defines it this way: “Morphosis: the sequence or manner of development or change in an organism or any of its parts.” That was a very early and brilliant self-definition by this architect. Thom believes in a world that is ever changing, a world that is always uncertain, a world that is always open to questions and experiments. And he has a mission statement for Morphosis, which I also love because it’s so uncompromising: “We will hold to that which is difficult, because it is difficult, and by its difficulty is worthwhile.”

As Thom knows very well, his buildings are not always as humane and lovable as I would like them to be. But they are always brimming with energy and ideas, with invention, and daring, and challenge. Thom is unwilling to please us — and more important, unwilling to please himself — by appealing to sentimentality, by coddling us with what we already know we like. His firm today employs about 60 with offices in New York and in Los Angeles. The work is international. The firm has been the subject of a solo exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 2006, and many other venues.

What I find amusing is that prizes like the MacDowell Medal are not what Thom Mayne set out to achieve. He was also a winner in 2005 of the Pritzker Prize, which for architects is the equivalent of a Nobel Prize. Thom is the only American in the last 17 years to win the Pritzker Prize. Winning these honors for him defines a paradox, which is that if you challenge the establishment long enough from the outside sooner or later you are surprised to discover that you’ve been made a member of that very establishment while you weren’t looking. Thom spoke of the psychological difficulty of “becoming establishment when you’ve thought of yourself as a rule breaker all your life.”

Thom was born here in New England (if you consider Connecticut to be a part of New England); moved to Gary, Indiana, when he was an infant, where his parents divorced; and at 10 moved with his mother to a site near Whittier, California. His family was quite poor, and I again want to quote something he said: “My mother was completely cultured. I grew up on classical music and representations of great art. I grew up as a city kid in the suburbs. My first day of school, my bike and jacket were taken and I was beaten up. The aesthetic stuff was

definitely not what boys did. As a result, I became kind of a loner, and aloof.” I guess they didn’t know, the kids in those days, how big he was gonna grow to be.

He studied architecture at USC, then taught it at Pomona, and teaches now at UCLA. After he and six colleagues were fired from Pomona, they took 40 of their students and started a new school. The Southern California Institute of Architecture — SCI-ARC — is still flourishing today and is still regarded as a hotbed of innovation. Thom started his own firm, Morphosis, in 1972. He later took a year off and got a master’s degree at Harvard, thus giving him a legitimacy that you will all recognize.

Architects flourish in old age. My lawyer friends all quit at 60 and retire to Maine and start to build boats. Thom, who turned 64 this year, is only beginning his real career. Until well into his 50s, he was regarded as an *enfant terrible*. This could only happen in architecture. I.M. Pei — the last architect, and the only other architect who has won the MacDowell Medal — turned 91 this year in March, and is still producing amazing buildings. And I will just say a word or two about Pei. This year we’ll see the opening of his new museum of

Islamic arts in Qatar. This is the global culture, isn’t it? An American, born in China, designs a museum of Muslim art in Qatar. When he took the job, he studied up on Muslim art, and he now says: “The patterns created by Islam are so beautiful. You just don’t know how far we trail behind them.” Thom now is also working all over the world, in a world that is changing very rapidly. We were talking about this earlier: To be an architect today means to be an international practitioner.

The first Thom Mayne building I saw was an underground cancer treatment center in Los Angeles, designed by Thom with his then-partner. I don’t know how you’d go about choosing a more difficult job to pull off successfully as an architect than an underground cancer treatment center. But it was stunning; it just blew me away. It was the first I’d seen of him, and I’ve never forgotten it. It dealt head-on with the inherent cruelty of the situation — not pretending everything was okay, not frosting over the reality — yet inspiring confidence in the commitment and professionalism of the medical staff. And that of the architect.

I want to quote one sentence from the Pritzker citation statement back in 2005 that I think sums Thom up very well: “Thom Mayne is a product of the turbulent 60s who has carried that rebellious attitude and fervent desire for change into his practice, the fruits of which are only now becoming visible in a group of large-scale projects.” That was three years ago; now there are many more of those.

Most recently I saw his new Federal Building in San Francisco. I helped select him for this job. I was a consultant to the federal government, and I thought to myself — You’ve got to forgive me, Thom. Maybe I *am* damning you with hyperbole — I thought to myself, this guy has the potential to be a great architect, but he can be a little willful. He needs a strong client to hold his feet to the fire on practical issues. The federal government, in this case, proved to be that client. I’m very proud of the result, which includes the fact that the building requires no air-conditioning.

I toured just recently, a few weeks ago, a building of his under construction at Cooper Union — a fantastic building, maybe his best yet. And I was struck also by the warmth of his relationship with his staff members on-site. There was no I/thou; they were colleagues, they were

Wilder Green Supports Architects

ARCHITECTURE, AN ART FORM USUALLY LIMITED BY STRICT BUDGETS AND DEADLINES, became something else entirely for **Yanel de Angel Salas**. During her 2007 residency, the Boston architect found a sense of liberation in what she calls “the elasticity of time.”

“Without interruptions and daily chores, time expanded into a continuous and productive zone,” de Angel Salas remarked. “The amount of work I was able to get done at this early stage of the process will facilitate further explorations. The ‘white canvas’ fear is gone! The experience has been empowering.”

De Angel Salas is the latest recipient of the Wilder Green Fellowship in Architecture. Endowed by a 2006 gift from the Wilder Green Art Fund, the Fellowship provides a MacDowell residency for a different architect each year. The gift was made in tribute to James Wilder Green, an independent architect who directed The American Federation of Arts. A longtime program director at the Museum of Modern Art, Green served on MacDowell’s board for 25 years, often advocating for the place of architecture among the Colony’s disciplines and the inclusion of architecture in the Edward MacDowell Medal rotation.

“The Wilder Green Fellowship is a valuable way to honor Wilder’s lifetime devotion to architecture and MacDowell,” said Nancy Park, Green’s niece and director of the Wilder Green Art Fund. “I hope that this Fellowship will both enhance and help give greater visibility to the Colony’s support of architects.”

To date, more than 50 architects have used the tranquility of the residency experience to not only draft new architectural plans but also to produce conceptual drawings, monographs, exhibitions, and other projects that expand the field’s traditional scope. For more information on this Fellowship or others, please contact our New York office.



friends, they were of different ages and different degrees of experience who acted to each other as if they were equals.

One more quote from Thom: “I have a long attention span, and when I grab on to something, I stick with it. I was named ‘pointer dog’ by my former partners.” He’s always been a teacher as well as a practitioner. Thom is among those who are leading the world of architecture away from its obsession with the isolated building regarded as a kind of work of sculpture, considered as an aesthetic object, into a consideration of the whole world and the building’s place in it. Not just the physical world, but the social, economic, and political world, and the crisis of diminishing resources. This is the direction in which architecture must move — to think of itself as part of making a whole world, and not making a beautiful object.

I want to end with something he said to me when we had lunch the other day in New York. He told me about an exercise he gives his students. He holds up a plastic glass, and says: “The assignment is to redesign the plastic

glass.” He said when he did that in the past, everybody would do something formalist. They would warp the shape, they would add pattern or color, they would change the material — they would deal with it as an art object. He said now, his students ask a different set of questions: How many plastic cups are there in the world? How long do they last until they are thrown out? Where do they end up when they are thrown out? How long do they last after that? If you compacted all the plastic cups into a single, solid cube, what would be the mass of that cube? Suppose we abandon plastic and go back to glass or ceramic cups that we can rewash and reuse? That opens a new question, the question of water supply.

That, to me, is the way we are increasingly going to have to think about architecture, by asking those questions on relationships between architecture and everything else. Those are good questions.

Please join me in welcoming a great questioner, Thom Mayne.

THOM MAYNE

THANK YOU SO MUCH. Bob, you gave me a lot to work with. I’m gonna start out kind of parallel to what Bob was saying, and I have no notes, really. I just have a letter I’m going to read that I got from **Catherine Ingraham**, an architectural critic, a teacher, a longtime colleague, and a friend of mine that couldn’t be here today. She says, “Dear Thom, Congratulations on receiving the MacDowell Medal. I’m very sorry that today I was unable to be there in New Hampshire for the ceremony. Enjoy. When I bring to mind your extraordinary architectural work and The MacDowell Colony, it seems on the surface as if an enormous flying saucer has landed in the middle of a grass field meadow.” And she goes on to be very complimentary.

When I came out of school and started practicing architecture, it was kind of an unusual time. I’m very lucky in that I kind of arrived at a very particular time in history, when I’ve been allowed to engage in asking questions. Really, the differences in architecture are the type of questions that begin the process of thinking, that

develop ideas of what architecture is and isn’t and how it makes connections to the world.

And for my complete life, I’ve been engaged in a dialogue with my colleagues — a dialogue in this thing we call the world we live in, this reality — that has to do with the beginning of the types of first principal questions that one discusses in terms of the meaning of architecture. It started maybe with some criticism or some provocation, because the discussion here — the flying saucer, several things that Bob mentioned . . . Well, maybe when I was in my 20s, 30s, maybe even in my 40s, I was interested in provocation. And I was very, maybe, insistent, on provoking, and insisting, in a very willful way, maybe, on the autonomy of architecture, and on the autonomy of the individual that is allowed the freedom of determining the types of engagements in which architecture is allowed to participate. I’m a person that has no interest in architecture in terms of its stylistic preferences. I’m interested in how architecture

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“Subprime” Art



WHOEVER BELIEVES ART AND COMMERCE DON’T MIX should consider the work of **Damon Rich**, whose show, *Red Lines, Death Vows, Foreclosures, Risk Structures: Architecture of Finance from the Great Depression to the Subprime Meltdown*, opened at the MIT Museum in Boston in September. The show is an installation of models, photographs, videos, and drawings that immerse visitors in one of the most contemporary of debacles: the ongoing housing crisis. Exploring the relation between finance and architecture, the exhibit offers information on the obscure history of the mortgage (literally translated as “death vow”) and presents the darkening realm of today’s real estate markets. To complete the show, Rich, an urban designer, spent a year interviewing representatives from the Mortgage Bankers Association and Comptroller of Currency in Washington, D.C. He also hung out at Boston bars

talking to brokers and researched the labyrinthine worlds of foreclosures and lending. “It has been a sobering education on the strange role of architecture in this calamity that goes so far beyond architecture,” he says. “Sometimes it feels like the project is chasing the apocalypse!”

In addition to his own work, Rich is the founder of The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), a Brooklyn-based nonprofit that seeks to educate people about places and how they change. Facilitating collaborations between advocacy groups, architects, artists, city workers, educators, policy makers, students, and more, CUP’s work has examined public housing, the prison system, even the mysterious alpha-omega of garbage. CUP’s work was recently honored when it was included in the 2008 Venice Biennale.



PHILIPP HOPPE Cologne, Germany

Philipp Hoppe continued work on his project *Cubic Cloud*, a winning entry in the mind(21) factory International Ideas Competition and shown at Kunsthaus Graz in Austria.

Cubic Cloud conceives an architecture of tiny radio-controlled fog particles that float around to create constantly changing artificial atmospheres, exploring space as an immersive medium of actual and virtual components. The work is documented in part at <http://cubiccloud.org>.



DENNIS MAHER Buffalo, New York

Dennis Maher continued a project that he has been developing over the past five years, investigating relationships between demolition and restoration. He has been assembling the remains of demolished spaces into a range of paintings, sculptures, and installations and translating these assemblages into a series of maps for the Undone-Redone City. The work proposes a host of new environments that emerge from the fragments of reorganized urban remains. He also worked on a series of material studies and photographic collages that synthesized discarded materials found in and around the Colony.





Architects-in-Residence



LARRY BOWNE Manhattan, Kansas

Larry Bowne worked on *Chthonic Mappings*, a suite of drawings merging hand- and computer-generated images. The drawings explore divergent interior topographies: at the urban scale, *Exhumed Infrastructure* seeks the metaphysical amidst contemporary urban systems; *Spiritual Longings* uncovers memories of traditional iconography; and *Psychic Soundings* discloses affects of mood and sentiment. While at MacDowell, Bowne also administered the construction of two projects: an advertising agency in New York City and a renovation and addition to a weekend house on Long Island, New York.

David Pressgrove's work deals primarily with low-income, affordable housing, especially the architectural language commonly shared in the construction of housing in Mississippi, pre- and post-Katrina. "The word 'abstract' or 'abstraction' surfaces as more and more significant," he writes, "[but] working with volunteers on the Mississippi Coast or with Habitat for Humanity in the Mississippi Delta, the notion or idea of abstraction could not be further away. When we look at, analyze the structure, the form, the assembly, the method in architecture, what are we doing really? When we synthesize this, how might we build better, *much* better, and more beautifully? What are the possibilities of affordable housing?" At MacDowell, he further explored — in physical model form — the aesthetics and structural possibilities of such materials, methods, and modules of construction.



DAVID PRESSGROVE Biloxi, Mississippi

Jason Van Nest worked on a series of five houses that provide a modern interpretation of John Ruskin's architectural theories. In order to realize these designs, special software was written to lay out custom shingles, clapboards, and other repetitive elements in user-defined patterns. When the five houses are completed, the software will be posted online so that any designer can expand on the experiment.



JASON VAN NEST New York, New York

"A residency at The MacDowell Colony is an aberration in the best way. It is a temporary departure from one's normal mental state that enables an otherwise impossible continuity of thought. What might usually be a fleeting idea has a life span of significant duration at MacDowell. In this context, ideas are capable of being suspended, allowing observation and considerations from all angles. To those who create, it is a gift without parallel."

—William J. O'Brien



WILLIAM J. O'BRIEN Austin, Texas

SINCE MACDOWELL MADE ARCHITECTURE ITS SIXTH DISCIPLINE in 1990, it has attracted a growing number of diverse and dynamic professionals. This year, the Colony hosted eight architects, whose projects not only prove the range of geography from which Colony artists hail but also the spectrum of work happening in this laboratory of creativity nestled in the New Hampshire woods.



MARK GAGE New York, New York

Mark Gage worked on a book involving architectural thinkers — both contemporary and historical — and their thoughts on aesthetics, providing ongoing commentary alongside the texts. The anthology will be a reintroduction of aesthetic discourse into the contemporary architectural obsession with form and technology. The book will examine the emerging interest in formal aesthetics as a vehicle by which the field can seek a new and vibrant 21st-century architecture.



MATTHIAS NEUMANN Brooklyn, New York

Matthias Neumann continued working on a survey of past work to be formalized in a publication *normaldesign, circa now*. The survey included his finalist entry to the World Trade Center memorial competition in New York City, built work for artists Vik Muniz and Janaina Tschaepe, collaborations with videographer Adi Shniderman and choreographer Ella Ben-Aharon, and his winning competition entry for the Africa Centre in Cape Town, South Africa. He also continued work on a fictitious architectural and urban history of *Neutral City, Kansas*, a theoretical pamphlet on alternate histories of western architecture.

William O'Brien developed two essays concerning methods of formation in contemporary architecture. The first essay points to creative practices and cultural precedents from the 1950s to highlight conceptual overlaps with contemporary architecture. The second essay underscores similarities among parametric, post-minimal, and alchemical design practices.



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affects and shapes human behavior; how it affects us in terms of our social and cultural engagements.

What happens, I think — what’s happened with me, what happens, I think, with all architects — is that you come out of school, and you work on small-scale projects. You involve yourself in developing a broader set of . . . they say “theories” but an idea structure — the notions that you’re interested in that form the basis of your work. You’re also developing a set of formal ideas to respond to that because again, our work is nothing more but concretizing the world. We make it permanent, in some way. And you do it with small-scale work, so it’s not particularly significant in a political sense or a broader, social sense. And you do this for kind of an extended time, 25 or 30 years.

And then you reach 48 or 49. In my case, I was getting a bit antsy; I was getting a bit angry because it seemed like it was time to go to work. And you can’t go to work yet because you’re not yet an adult in the architectural world. And you reach 50, and you’re now allowed to be . . . to do work of some sort of significance, meaning that it has an elevator. The big joke with my friends, my contemporaries, was that at some point, at about 40 or 45, we’d be having breakfast and [we’d say], “No more stories about any building if it doesn’t have at least one elevator!” You get to do kind of bigger buildings, and then things change because, of course, of the questions you’re asking now, and the ability to grow, to change, to evolve. And again, at a time in history which is only engaged in change. It seems to be one of the issues we have politically: whether we have a population that is capable of adapting to the huge amount of change that is taking place in our society, and be comfortable with that.

Again, I’m a person that is a little worried about the over-investment in history and in the conserving nature of this culture, which is not useful to architecture. And here I am, in fact it was stated earlier — I think Robert MacNeil

Two Claim Prestigious Awards



TIM BIES/OJLSON SUNDBERG KUNDIG ALLEN ARCHITECTS

National Design Award recipient, **Tom Kundig**.

nature of his work, the use of kinetic architectural features, and the reinvention of structural elements that are often overlooked.”

Another 2008 award — this time given by the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) — was bestowed on **David Kamp**’s firm, Dirtworks, in the category of residential design. His Beach House in Amagansett, New York, was chosen from a select group of projects worldwide and cited for its “impressive sustainability.” The Beach House celebrates the dunes of Long Island while also calling attention to the fragile ecosystem in which they exist. The two most significant ecological innovations for the project “prevented erosion of beach sands by establishing a dense network of native plants” and “recharged groundwater by maximizing impermeable surfaces.” Founded in 1995 by Kamp, Dirtworks is an internationally recognized and award-winning landscape firm. ASLA was founded in 1899 and represents more than 15,000 members nationwide.

mentioned both the conserving of an institution and its relationship to the challenging of that. And I would be a little more aggressive, because I think it would also represent the evolution, let’s say, of also the institution, and the relationship of its reflection, which again, architecture is a part of.

As this takes place, now we’re looking at kind of larger-scale work, and the questions change. And in my case, it’s been really kind of a lovely last decade, where the questions now have to do with broader issues. Bob mentioned it in the last discussion, where it wasn’t that

long ago that architecture, at a smaller scale, at the level of a domestic residence, etc., was more associated with aesthetics, and a much more complicated set of ideas, which are located artistically, conceptually.

Now, as the work gets larger, and we’ve evolved in terms of a culture — I’m talking about architecture — we think quite a bit differently about it today even than we did 10 years ago. We work through very complicated computational methods that allow us to work intricately in ways that were unimaginable when I went to school. We see the world in broader and broader terms within a global structure, which is the essence of our work. And this has to do with the discussion of the cup, with the idea of [moving from] the aesthetization of the cup to looking at it within broad, macro terms. One can connect one’s personal habits, one’s actions, to larger, broader influences, which in fact seem to be the essence of where we are today, of being a citizen. With myself, it’s had to do with a radical shift in producing work which now allows us to deal with issues at this larger scale. It’s the future of architecture.

I would like to thank the MacDowells, who still live today. We’re all here because of them, and I honor them. Great idea. It still works, affecting many people. It’s terrific. I’m really honored to get this award. I’m especially honored to receive this particular award at MacDowell because it facilitates one’s inner world, one’s private world, outside of the immense vicissitudes of day-to-day life, which form this immense clutter that doesn’t allow us to grasp who we are, personally or as a culture.

I’m greatly honored. Thank you so much.



Picnickers lunch on the MacDowell grounds at Medal Day.

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