

The David Schwarz Projects, a new series of exhibitions presented by the School of Art+Design, brings work by innovative contemporary artists to the campus and regional communities. The series offers the members of the community the opportunity to engage with relevant ideas, issues, and practices evolving in current art discourses. The David Schwarz Projects are made possible by generous support from David and Jeanne Schwarz.

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Kendall Buster

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The Richard & Dolly Maass Gallery
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Subterrain

The biological roots of architecture have consistently shaped discourses relating to the built environment from the perspective of human needs. The relationship between the natural and the artificial in design and construction is a dialectical one that shifts along an axis between explicit and implicit references mitigated by evolving social and political realities. However, architectural forms do not simply arise as morphological simulations produced for functional purposes. It is within the very human realm of ideology—and the cognitive processes, perceptions, and rhetorical impulses enabling its articulation and influence—that architectural forms gain status as cultural objects with all their attendant implications. The balance between human needs and ideological aspirations has occasionally tipped toward the latter, with architecture functioning as a tool of utopian “social engineering” strategies, resulting in instances of alienation that still breed discontent and rippling violence today. A growing consciousness of this delicate equilibrium, however, also served as the basis for initial discussions linking theories of architecture and art, which have since developed into proposals of a reciprocal relationship that attempts to successfully bind the logic of construction with the visceral nature of expression.

Kendall Buster has built her artistic practice over the last twenty years around the intersection of art and architecture and various exchanges between notions of biology and ideology, construction and expression. The ambiguities that inevitably arise in such seemingly incongruous conflations are finessed by her focus on producing situations that consistently privilege an intuitive rather than a rational experience of constructed space. While her work often contains the aesthetic tropes of functional architecture, Buster never indulges in the wholesale resolutions that characterize permanent structures. Rather, she positions her projects as conceptual proposals or preliminary models in which the anatomy of a structure is exposed and open to scrutiny. Because she subscribes to the understanding that architectural forms are always in service to the empty spaces they create, her work is ultimately an attempt to reprogram existing spaces in order to mute the authority of inscribed function and insert a more interactive, meditative dynamic. Her choice of permeable materials (various transparent or translucent fabrics and paper in her most recent projects) to enclose her structures allows a visual breakdown of barriers between interior and exterior perspectives and enables viewers to reflect on the physical and psychological ramifications of being inside or outside. The vocabulary of forms Buster has developed often seamlessly integrate references to cellular configurations and iconic architectural schemes in such a way that the affinity between processes of growth in the microscopic domain of life and the complexes of urban environments is easily articulated.

Subterrain, Buster’s project produced specifically for the School of Art+Design’s Richard & Dolly Maass Gallery, is a phalanx of columns that sweeps upward to connect in a plane parallel to the gallery ceiling. Made from a golden-colored lightweight ballistic nylon (a staple of outdoor lifestyle products such as tents), the columns have a pliability and weightlessness that belie the iconographic stability these supports have exuded since classical times. The body-column metaphor is at least as old as Vitruvius, but it continues to resonate as a fundamental concept grounding architectural thought in relation to the proportional framework of the human body (with the ancient caryatids being the most illustrative manifestation). Beyond this figurative association, Buster’s cluster of columns also suggests trees forming a forest canopy or the nave of a Gothic cathedral with its vaulted ceiling. Rather than standing in heroic triumph over gravity, Buster’s columns appear to have descended vertically into the space from a supporting horizontal plane. The space the columns contain remains active as a result of light penetrating through fabric skins and registering subtle changes in density and shadow. This effect is most visible when viewers meander in the gallery space, their bodies appearing and disappearing in a choreography dictated by the maze Buster’s forms produce.

The specific design of the Maass Gallery allows for an entirely different appreciation of *Subterrain* via a second floor balcony that accommodates a bird’s eye view of the gallery as an open container. From this perspective, the columns that redefine the gallery space are completely hidden. The irregular hexagonal grid from which the columns protrude takes precedence as a two-dimensional blueprint defining the patterned spatial arrangement below. In writing about her interest in the hexagonal grid, Buster notes that it “is a modular design of remarkable efficiency that is associated with honeycomb construction and the building skills of insects. The tight packing that a hexagon shape allows creates a seamless connection from cell to cell, and an infinite number of units can be configured to produce a surface without any leftover space.” These observations suggest that the hexagon shape is inherently associated with notions of growth. Her grid is, in essence, an expandable “field,” the scale of which is determined by its surrounding architecture in the same manner as the frame of Greenbergian Modernist painting delimited a mere fragment of flat canvas that could otherwise stretch ad infinitum. From above, each cell appears as an empty vessel or vortex pressing down into the space. This interior perspective suggests an abysmal void with the same intensity that the exterior perspective below produces a sense of lively volume. The profound fluctuation between above and below ground views underscores the idea that architecture’s occupation of space creates both absence and presence at the same time.

Operating on multiple registers and instigating a wealth of associations, *Subterrain* illustrates the complex dynamics and primitive origins of our relationship with constructed space. Living our daily lives within and around architecture, it is easy to ignore the implications of the psychological frameworks and social contracts we enter into with each new threshold. Using the context of art and the attention it requires, Buster’s projects intrude upon our normal experience of space and ask that we untangle a complicated network of assumptions about the forms which surround us.