

## Studio in the Woods 2011



For the Chinese, wood is the fifth element, - right up there with earth, air, fire and water. For Studio in the Woods, now in its 6th year, the subject is both the material and its provenance. In a 3 day weekend on the Isle of Wight, dedicated groups of students and tutors, brought together initially by the abundant energy of Piers Taylor, work in wood, and in and around the woods. They start with the observation of nature and place, graduating to hypothesis and concept. The students are given recently felled trees to work with and are responsible for the milling of their timber. Then they become builders. Ted Cullinan and myself share the enjoyable task of providing a final crit for each teams work. This year was especially poignant as it was Ted's 80th birthday celebration, and it was great to have him back full of wit and wisdom, good health and uproarious good humour after a long period of hospitalization.

A group led by Gianni Botsford and Kate Darby built an extraordinary structure that captured the space delineated by sunlight that entered through two constructed "windows". Kate and Gianni have been part of the Studio since its inception 6 years ago and have built up a body of work around the movement of the sun, - the representation of the organic spatial forms prescribed by straight lines of sunlight. Ted Cullinan in his final crit paid homage to them as "cosmologists".

Toby Lewis, another SITW founder member led a team who constructed a suspended hammock-like platform, the shape being derived from a desire to create both individual and collective spaces, and to wrap around an existing wind-blown tree. Like many of Toby's studio's previous projects the establishing of angular and horizontal forms provides a counterpoint to the sloping topography of a natural site. Ted christened the group "the Levellers"

Erect Architecture's Barbara Kaucky and Susanne Tutsch and their students found a site on the edge of a small and delightful chalk pit cut into the sloping hillside. The scissor-like structure constructed had a Janus quality to it with a single platform viewing outwards to the larger landscape, and a stepped and canopied arena to observe the more placid environment within the hollow. Ted christened them the elves, for the way they quietly worked away in the miniature topographical environment that inspired them.

Studio Weave (Je Ahn and Maria Smith) chose a similar theme but a dramatically different site. With an unusually high proportion of tall men in their team Ted christened them the Giants and they crafted a gigantic megaphone-like structure that addressed the dramatic views, in one direction, towards the Solent, with an elegantly proportioned series of steps housed within a frame that reduced in size as it receded from the view. In the opposite direction the view was focussed onto the similar but upturned form that resulted from the team's endeavours the previous year. Once again there is a story of ongoing preoccupations.

Piers Taylor and Meredith Bowles led a team which decided this year to go for maximum intervention. There was a clear logic to the construction of a series of triangulated and cross-braced trusses each of which could be easily raised from the ground without scaffolding, but beyond that the structure seemed to grow wilfully and organically. It reminded Ted of the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock, the process being based on one structural move encouraging a counter move, and as with abstract expressionism one of the most difficult things to decide is when the work is complete. There was an intriguing element of surprise in discovering the logic in the chaotic structure that emerged

Surprise is what Studio in the Woods is all about. Surprise in the discovery and celebration of relationships in nature. Surprise at the beauty, colour, smell and extraordinary nature of new sawn timber. Surprise at the outstanding creative output of a group of students over only a two day project. In trying to summarise the output of this eventful two days, Ted and I were reminded again of the relevance of 'making' in architectural education. In an era where students are so often relying on secondary-sourced material and digital delusions, it is refreshing to find the principals of observation/hypothesis/fabrication/installation/revelation built into a creative design process. It is even more significant in the depths of a recession that young architects can more easily become builders, and extend the range of their vocation. Both of started practices where the understanding of building influenced our design: both of us enjoyed the process of construction ourselves. Studio in the Woods reminds us of the synergy between observing, designing and making. Long may it continue.

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