

Beautiful Monsters

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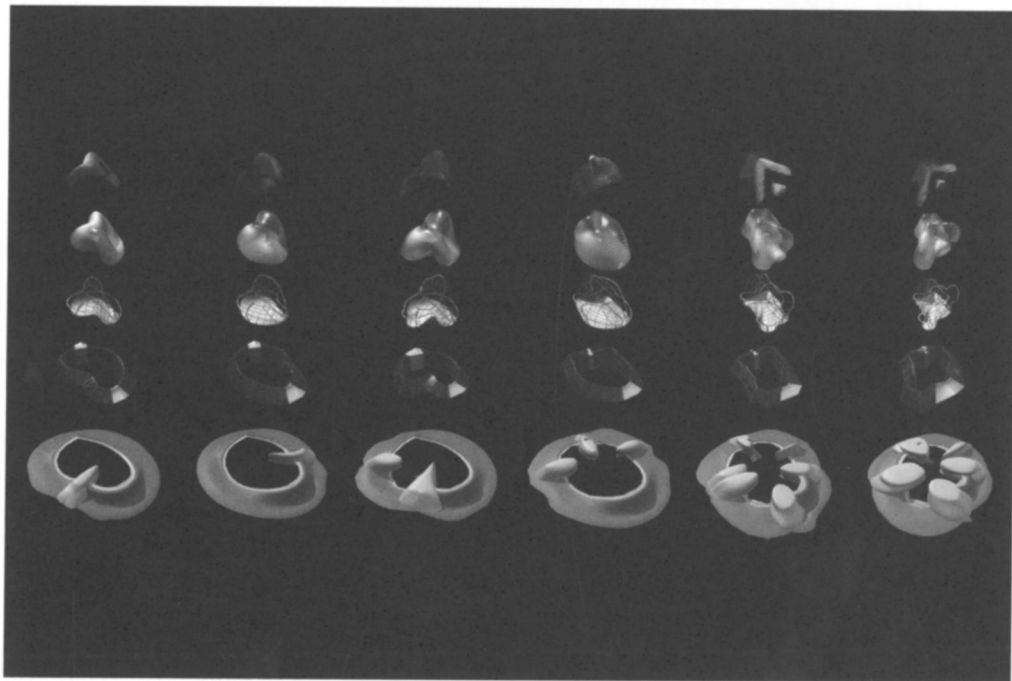
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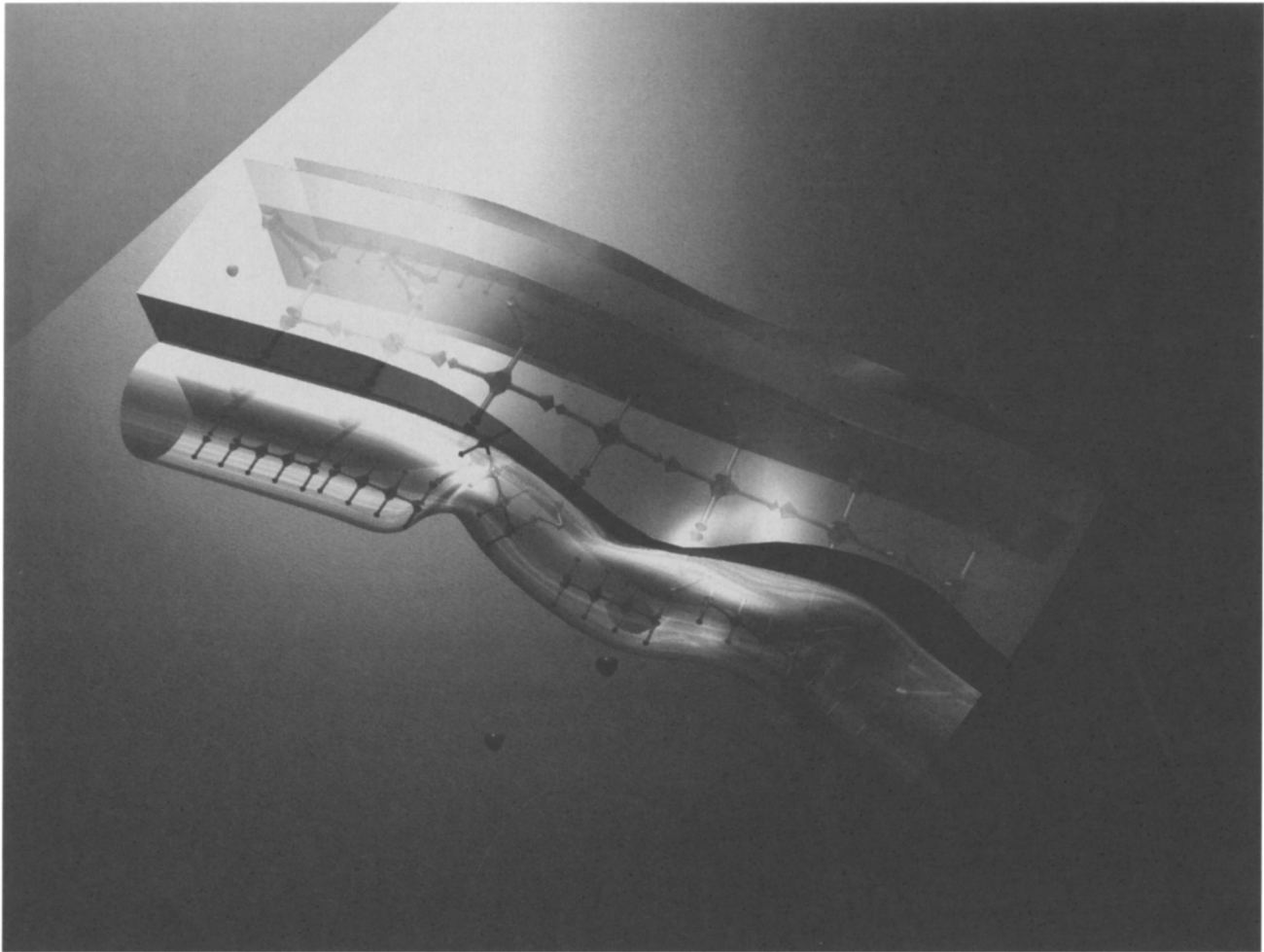


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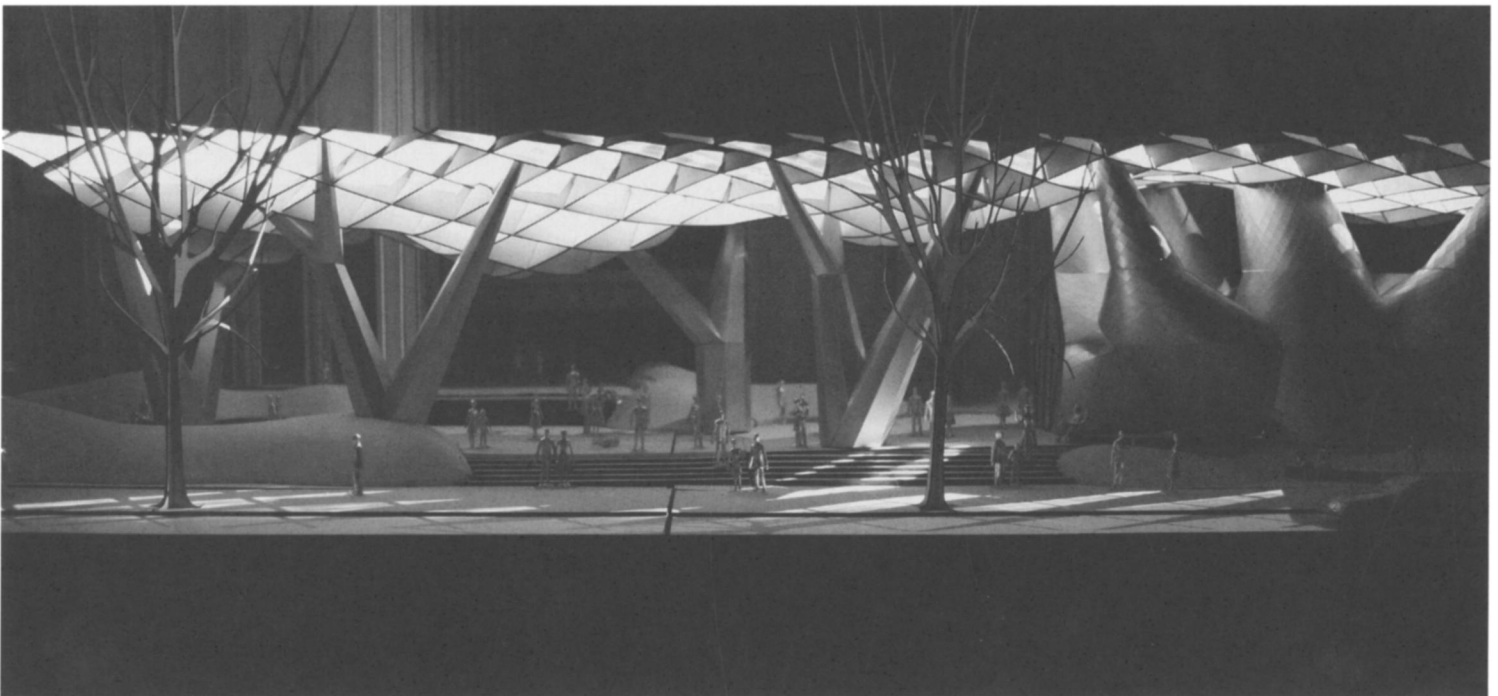
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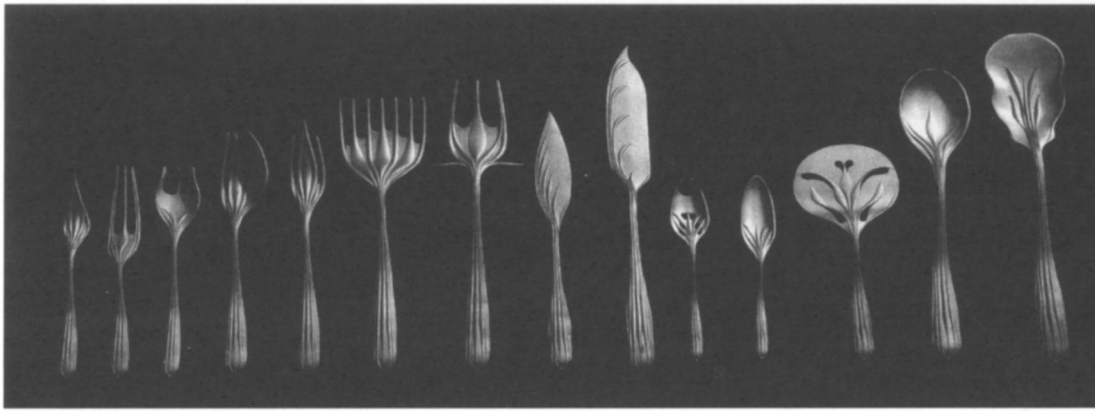
Greg Lynn FORM, Embryological House, 1999.



Greg Lynn FORM, Citron House
Amagansett, New York, 1994.



Greg Lynn FORM, 5900 Wilshire Blvd. Restaurant & Trellis Pavilion
Los Angeles, California, 2006.



Greg Lynn FORM, *Flatware*, 2007–present.

Beautiful Monsters

Greg Lynn

Due to the mapping of the human genome, the advances in genetic design in crops, livestock and medicine, and the general convergence of biology, life sciences, and information sciences, the popular imagination rightfully is fascinated with monsters. Instead of ideal form, we now are looking towards teratology or the study of individualism that does not emanate from a perfect type but is instead perfect in its uniqueness. This does not mean that we are free to willfully design a variety of fanciful custom objects. Rather, we must update the architectural disciplines' concepts of species, generic form, typology and uniqueness. Too often there is a naïve view of information science and computation leading to mindless variety rather than a thoughtful consideration of new concepts of individual and species as well as an engagement with architectural history.

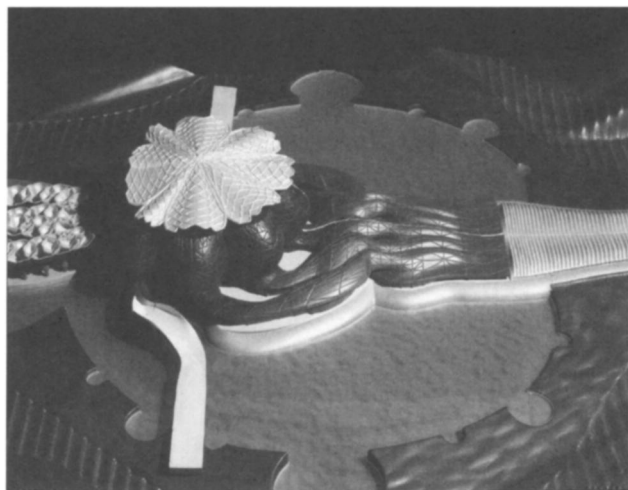
When it comes to monsters, I think of William Bateson. His study—a whole school of thought which looked at biological form in terms of teratology rather than typology—was very interesting to me, especially around eight to ten years ago. All of my interest in variation and iteration, in fact, comes from a study of monsters in terms of typology and form. It was important for me that instead of finding a typological argument for form and design (where you try to find the perfect, ideal thing) I found a whole school of thought based on the study of monsters: the exceptions and variations rather than the norms or the rule. I'll also admit, there is something about monsters that connotes 1970s Japanese pop culture and Hollywood B-movies from the '70s and '80s—both things that I really do love. Right now, more than anything I have ever done, I am trying to engage Japanese popular culture and imagery. While not uninterested in high culture, I have always felt that popular culture is more relevant to architecture.

I am slightly ambivalent with regards to the 1990s experiments with the computer, which produced a lot of simply ugly, misshapen work. These were learning experiments, and the designs were often described by both their authors and critics as monsters. I must say I have no great affection for, or interest in, Frankenstein-style monsters (i.e., things that are inelegant, grotesque or abject). As opposed to ugliness, I'm far more interested in the new beauty. Today, there is a discourse surrounding the grotesque that I believe is calcifying the experimental processes of the '90s into a formal style, which I see as simply people's resistance to getting better with the technology and doing elegant, beautiful, resolved things.

We must distinguish something unfamiliar or unprecedented from something that is badly designed. It may be that when we see it, we know it, but the most likely discerning characteristic would be the presence of rigor, proportion, harmony and composition, as even an unfamiliar monster can have these qualities. The new is always going to look strange simply because it is new. If it doesn't look strange there is a problem. If it looks familiar and perfect, it's not new.

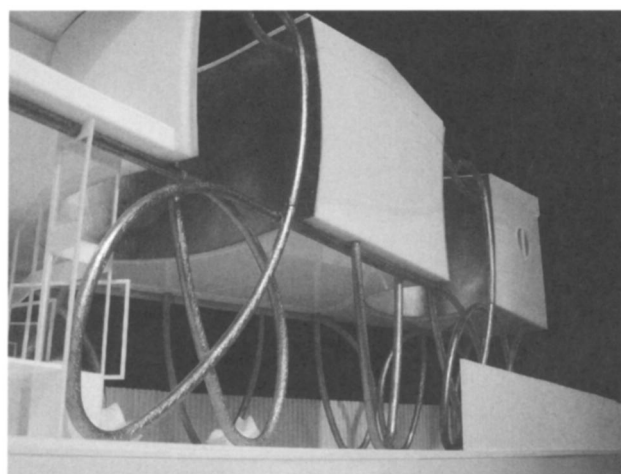
Speaking of things that are not new, a reaction to Post-Modernism rejuvenated an enthusiasm for mid-century Modernism in our discipline. The refinement and continued fascination with mid-century Modernism by young vibrant architects and designers astounds me. I prefer to refine unknown things rather than familiar things. There is a quality of strangeness that comes out of a new medium, but that shouldn't be confused with the amateurism that inevitably comes with a new medium. Of course, nobody can be expected to have facility in something that he or she is attempting for the first time. When it comes to architecture, we've had 10 years of learning to work with the computer. Now, everyone must start to discriminate qualitative differences such as aesthetic differences. It is important to figure out what is simply amateurism and what constitutes the new medium.

The way we, as architects, relate to the computer is extremely important. Much of the work using the computer as a design tool originated in the late 1970s with intellectuals from UCLA like William Mitchell, George Hersey, George Stiny and Richard Freedman, who combined a design methodology of shape grammar with their very early experiments with and exposure to the most primitive computer modeling and rendering programs. This eventually led them to train computer software to design “Possible Palladian Villas” as well as other design logics using the computer as an algorithmic tool. All of this was an extrapolation on the work of Rudolf Wittkower and Colin Rowe in a digital design medium. The first attempts to harness the new dimensional tools were therefore, in this regard, to first assemble variables, define their interaction, and then to pray, wait, invisibly guide and/or filter the results, hoping for a happy accident that might resemble a design solution. This approach assumes a model set of variables that is correct at the outset; so the quality of the information being input for random mutation and recombination was seen as the important design decision. This explains why Palladio was selected as the model. The very first attempts at finding multiple solutions took this form and in many ways this unguided anti-design methodology is still adhered to by some designers. Mere variations or versions based on randomization, external or internal constraints still has a place in the academy and in some offices but the resulting work can only be described as ugly, grotesque, monstrous or, most accurately, amateurish. In any design field, the only way to efficiently, artistically and predictably realize the design of a collection of individuals within a coherent species or family is by defining the design task as the design of a family of variations. The Embryological House was my first attempt to define the design task as neither an ideal villa with variations, nor a random variety of accidental houses, but a coherent family of houses none of which was more commodious, functional or delightful than any other, as all were individually perfect: like my children, different but equally loveable. In order to begin such a design agenda, the first task is neither the design of an origin (Wittkower and Rowe) nor the design of random constraints and mutations (Darwin), but the design of a generic primitive.



Greg Lynn FORM, Ark of the World Museum
San Jose, Costa Rica, 1999.

Unfortunately, there are many offices that do a form and then just vivisection it, or try to expediently break it down, and who don't really understand the medium of the computer. 99.9% of practicing architects use it as a tool. There are even younger offices around that really use the computer as a tool and celebrate their role as tool handlers without really focusing on design, expression, and their audience. Ironically, most of the architects that do use the computer as a medium also are interested in the grotesque, the ugly, and the abject. So the question of Monsterism is a good one at getting at the status of aesthetics today. It should be noted that aesthetics is not style or shape, but the way in which we communicate with our audience culturally through space, form and material. If monstrous aesthetics is tool- or technology-driven, then let's pass on this aesthetic and settle for something we have some facility with, like groovy mid-century Modernism. If popular culture, related design fields, high art and a media-saturated audience are looking for architecture to rethink itself through a language of contemporary surfaces and forms though, then count me in with the new medium. When dealing with the public audience for the built environment—let alone a client or an occupant of design—I don't want to be a tool. I would rather be an artist with something new and beautiful to contribute to the world, even if it is a monster.



Greg Lynn FORM, Slavin House
Venice, California, 2007.