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Kevin Kennon

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Does collaboration work?

interview with Kevin Kennon

3.19.10

How would you view collaboration, starting with your experience with the Rodin Museum?

Well, it seems like a very simple topic. One could argue against the methodology of the singular architect creating great works in his head, magically transferring those into paper, and that paper ultimately becoming architecture. We all know that is not really how things work. The culture of architecture is really quite social. You learn, and most of us I think, are drawn to architecture through the design studio, which is a very social environment. It can be anti-social too, but it is primarily social and I think that's what people like about it. So, the problem is that most of the normal organizational models for how to make architecture become more and more hierarchical in terms how work is done or segmented as we become more specialized within our professional lives. People in teams are specializing, and even at the most basic level, where designers are somehow separated from producers and managers, the standard triumvirate of architectural production is present. All those models are in some way constructed without taking into account the cultural dimension of both creation and production. The culture we've adopted, we've been exposed to, and we were initiated in as young students, seems to more or less disappear. It is one of the reasons, I think, why many young architects are interested in smaller practices, rather than larger corporate practices.

I've always been interested in

finding and celebrating collaboration because I think the best ideas are new ideas and it's very difficult to create something new when you are mulling things over in a box. It usually comes out of dialogue or debate; it comes out of all kinds of exchanges. Sometimes it even comes out of jokes. You can't really do that in a vacuum. So I would say that for most of my career, I have been attacking this problem of how to make architecture, and how to succeed within the professional culture of production while adopting a more native cultural model that is akin to the studio.

The first experiment in this was when I was a partner at KPF with the Rodin Museum. It was never really conceived by the client to be a stand-alone building, rather a strategy for locating various recastings of Rodin's sculpture in a shopping center. The first thing that I did was to say, wait a minute, let's collect all these and put them where they really belong—in a museum or gallery. Once we did that, gave it an identity within the larger program in downtown Seoul. We isolated the project as an entity that a number of people could begin to work on, then that opened up the way for creating a truly collaborative experience. This included not only the team itself, but also the engineers and to some degree the client as well. Collectively, I think we created an almost impossible structure that is something no one else had really done before. Within the overall culture of the office of KPF, there was a lot of skepticism about whether or not we could actually pull this off. When

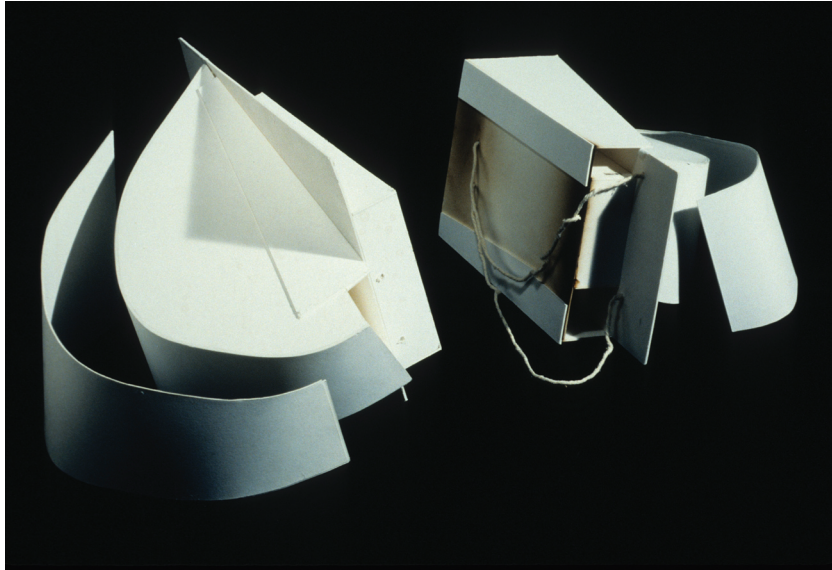
I was there, KPF had about 150 people, divided among 4 floors. We were able to secure the smallest space within those 4 floors and essentially take it over. The only work being done within that space was on the Rodin project, so it was very easy to feel that you were somehow separated from the rest of the organization. That was important because it created an almost guerilla atmosphere within the context of the firm. But, I don't think we would have been able to pull it off without the support of my partners. Even within the culture, which was not particularly collaborative, there was a great deal of skepticism. So, once the space and team were created, the objective became to create a museum dedicated to these extraordinary, and very expensive, newly cast masterpieces from Rodin and somehow make them relevant to contemporary existence while giving them a space where they could breathe and relate to one another in the hustle and bustle of downtown Seoul. The location of this happened to be next to a thirteen lane main street that you can't even cross by yourself; you have to go underground to get to the other side. But somehow upon entry, we wanted to create the effect of a foggy day in Paris. That, in and of itself, was a real challenge.

What is interesting though, is when you take something that everyone says is impossible and you bring enough people together and say, "Well, here's the challenge. Everyone says it can't be done. Let's do it." I think in a way when it looks like it's impossible, and it's something where people are having to play at the very height of their game,

and are not getting discouraged by the challenges but are rather getting excited by overcoming limitations with the support of the group be behind it, it is intoxicating. I mean, it was an extraordinary experience for everyone involved.

The way we were able to bring structural engineers, mechanical engineers, and all of them, I think, contributed in a major way to how this thing was realized. Even when it came to the point where a firm in Germany was selected to manufacture this Gartner, they were very much involved in the collaboration too. We did run into some significant structural problems because it was so experimental. We originally decided upon a glass structure - a double-wall system with quadruple-glazed structural fins separating the two walls and providing structural stability, but the first batch of structural fins that came out started to crack. This happened one week before the Korean delegation from Samsung was to visit the factory to inspect the project. At that point, there was a very good chance they might kill the whole project if they felt that it was not going to be structurally stable.

So, we adopted a stainless steel truss frame to support the wall and had to design it all in the space of two days. That was due to my amazing engineer, Matt King. He and I were both there. The people from Gartner put their best engineers on it, and in those two days, we designed a beautiful lattice-like structure that is not visible through the filtered glass, and yet has a marvelous effect when



Rodin Museum, conceptual models - photograph taken by Timothy Hursley

you look inside and see between the glass windows. So due to the support network that we had created, we were able to turn a problem into something quite spectacular.

That was an early example for me that you get a lot out of collaboration. Creating the space to allow people to collaborate alleviated the fear that somehow people's ideas aren't going to be heard or that the only way to achieve these deadlines is with a really strong hierarchical model. Of course, there have to be people to say that this idea goes and this idea doesn't go, but you've already created that wonderful kind of working environment where no idea becomes insignificant. So it's really great for creating a sense of experimentation leading to practical application. It was also a great learning experience because we had a very young team; had we been more experienced we might not have even

taken the chances we did.

For me at least, the Rodin project began an exploration into how to create the right collaboration. One of things I have learned over the years is that there are different ways to collaborate, depending on the project and the overall organizational structure. In this case, within a larger corporate framework, we carved out a smaller kind of guerilla group to tackle the problem. In order for the collaboration to work, each situation has to be calibrated differently.

Another huge project you were involved in was U.N. City. Did you take some of the lessons and collaborative models from Rodin into that project?

Well, we tried to do that, we ran into culture clash. With Rodin, everyone came from the same office, and even though there might have been some



Rodin Museum - Seoul, Korea - photograph taken by Timothy Hursley

inter-office friction, there was a general culture that people understood. When we did U.N. City, it was essentially four different architectural offices trying to work on one master plan. It sounded good on paper, but how do you make it work? The two principal offices were KPF and OMA. So we tried to do something similar to the Rodin project. We set up a separate working area, a place called 'the gallery' at KPF that was essentially used for exhibitions. We took over the gallery - a windowless space - we set up desks, and there were folks from OMA and from Toyo Ito's office, and Davis Brody, and ourselves. Everyone was set up in this one windowless room, and it started off pretty well. I think the cultures didn't quite gel, but at least for the people at KPF it wasn't so strange.

But then, part of the deal was that we would move to Rotterdam for two weeks and work out of OMA, mainly

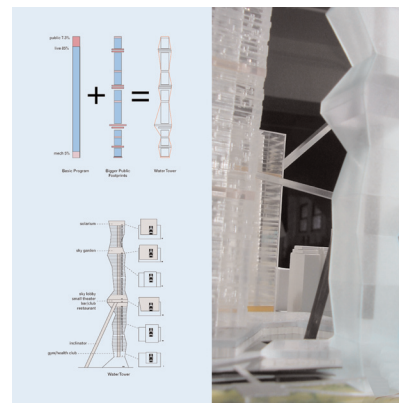
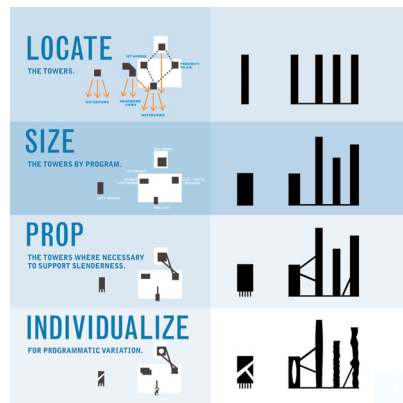
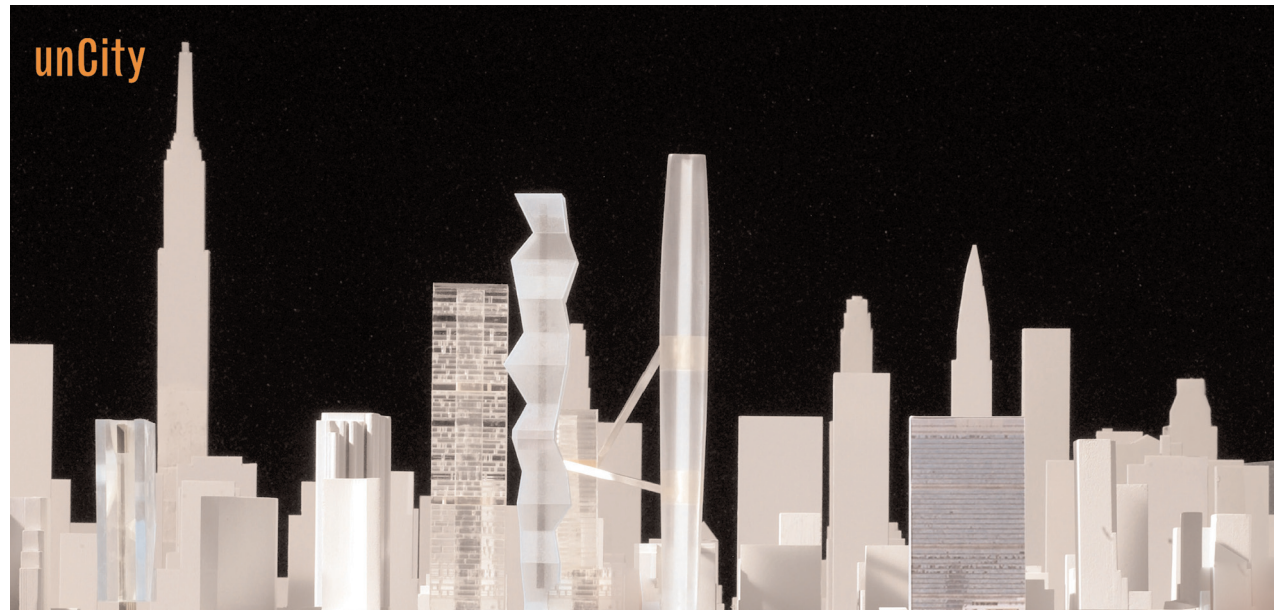
to accommodate Rem's schedule. I think it became a little bit different then, because that office was not a particularly collaborative working environment. Even though Rem talks a great deal about collaboration, the environment itself was essentially of the king in his court. Everyone in the office was trying to please Rem, who could be very demanding. One wasn't quite sure how everybody else fit into that because you either just went along with it, which was the prevailing culture, or you tried to modify it. But it's a very difficult culture to modify because of Rem's stature. It was easier to collaborate in Ito's office, probably because of Ito's personality. He's a more humble human being. At the end of the day, I think Rem had his own agenda for the project, and I'm not sure if we were particularly helpful in that regard. I think at some point, just by the proximity of people working

together, we were able to bring our own contributions to the thing. And because there were plenty of buildings to design, it ended up being more like, “well, we’ll work on this building, and you work on that building.” That is pretty much how it sorted itself out. I think that is more of a testament to how collaboration broke down, rather than saying everyone worked together. In order for collaborative models to work, there really has to be a sense of you checking your ego at the door as much as possible; it isn’t very conducive when not everybody does that.

Which I hear is the complete opposite case with the Viewing Platform. Is it true the idea came from a dinner party conversation between you, Liz Diller and Ric Scofidio?

Actually it was Liz, Ric, David Rockwell, Herbert Muschamp, and myself. And it was more of a coming together; I think many people were at that point a week after 9/11. I remember it was the first night that Odeon re-opened in Soho when I actually brought up the subject of having gone there a couple of times and it was complete chaos. People wanted to see. Clearly they had every right to make some kind of sense of it. There was an almost visceral need on the part of people to come down and see this. Liz and Ric had previously written a lot about the idea of touring disaster sites and David and I sort of came together as kindred spirits, and were skeptical of how the New York architecture establishment had come together to try and solve these big issues. We thought, “Let’s see if we can try and accomplish something small to give people some kind of perspective in order to make sense of this in a dignified and humble way.

In the beginning, we were able to meet with the Mayor, and we basically pitched the idea, which he liked. The number of people, the lack of crowd control, and the sense that it was



becoming rather mawkish, were all real problems for the city. Wasn’t there some way we could get around that? We developed this idea, and Herbert wrote a big article in the New York Times about it. What was great about it was that I likened our collaboration to an air, land and sea campaign. There was an air war, which David more or less conducted. It was really about fundraising because the city did not have any money to do this. That is something people never understood—this was all a private enterprise and there were a number of very significant anonymous donors. I hope one day we will be able to reveal the good citizens who raised the five hundred thousand dollars it cost to build the platform.

The ‘sea war’ was really kind of strategic, and I would say this is

where Liz and Ric came in. They knew how to tackle the problem with an understanding of the cultural history of similar events. Although this was the most horrific, the recognition that there is something within the social psychology of human beings helped to make sense of the insensible. The first thing people try to do is go to the site where the disaster occurred.

Then finally there was what I did, what I call the ground war, which is how do you design this thing; how do you build it? How do you put it together in a simple way that would be meaningful? What materials do you use, and so on. We worked with, in this case, a scaffolding company that didn’t quite donate their services but more or less worked at cost to build this. And, the mayor actually picked the site.

Then we had tremendous support from all the city agencies: the Department of Design and Construction, the Department of Buildings, the Fire Department, all the agencies in the city that would normally take forever to navigate all streamlined because it was coming from the top. And I think everybody involved was highly motivated. It turned out to be a big success; over a million people visited the platform.

One of the things we were very clear about from the beginning was that it was only going to be a temporary structure, and that was why we built it the way we did. It was just a stop gap until something else could come along and take its place. But I think in a way, it was a very simple structure and the way people

appropriated the structure, which was right next to the untouched, St Paul's cemetery, was quite beautiful. The fact that people would have to rise about 20 feet above the ground made it so that when you got up to the end of the platform, it was always extremely quiet; you couldn't hear anything. It was a transcendent experience for most people.

I'm very proud of that particular involvement. Again, it was about people coming together, drawing on their life, professional, intellectual experiences and capabilities, and trusting everybody within that realm. It was really something quite meaningful and beautiful. What made that one so easy was that there were only four people involved.

Four people who seemed to have checked their egos at the door.

Well, yes. Under the circumstances how could anybody have an ego? It would seem to be the wrong thing to do. Yeah, people did it out of an incredible sense of humility. I think that was exhibited in the design of the platform itself and the effect that platform engendered in folks.

The Incubator project, which followed the Viewing Platform, was another endeavor that was for the good of the city. It seems to have severed as yet another example of a collaborative model.

Yes. In this case, David Rockwell and I asked, "what would be the next step and could good work come out of, let's say, civic-minded architects. Instead of waiting for government agencies or private enterprise, could there be another model? So, we preconceived an arts center and then got together a number of very important non profit groups.

Again we divided up the tasks; David, with links to theater, was able to get a number of important theater companies' signatures—Actor's Studio, and a number of others became

anchors for the performance part of the Incubator. I essentially worked with the Public Art Fund and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council to develop the visual arts part of the program. We conceived the building to be a place where the public could go and actually see artists perform and display their work. It wasn't meant to be a very big thing, but over the years, with a lot of prodding from Daniel Doctoroff and the Department of Economic Development, the city, and the Mayor's office, now Bloomberg, it kind of became a big thing. We also received a small grant from the American Express Foundation for study and from there the project took on a life of its own.

We looked at a number of sites downtown, and we worked very closely with a group of Lower Manhattan residents. In of itself, that political process was really quite daunting. Ultimately that's what killed the project, because we couldn't quite get the residential support for the project. But it was also an amazing experience in the sense that we did not have the usual constraints; we could design something that was cutting edge. It was a hybrid building, nothing quite like it anywhere in the city.

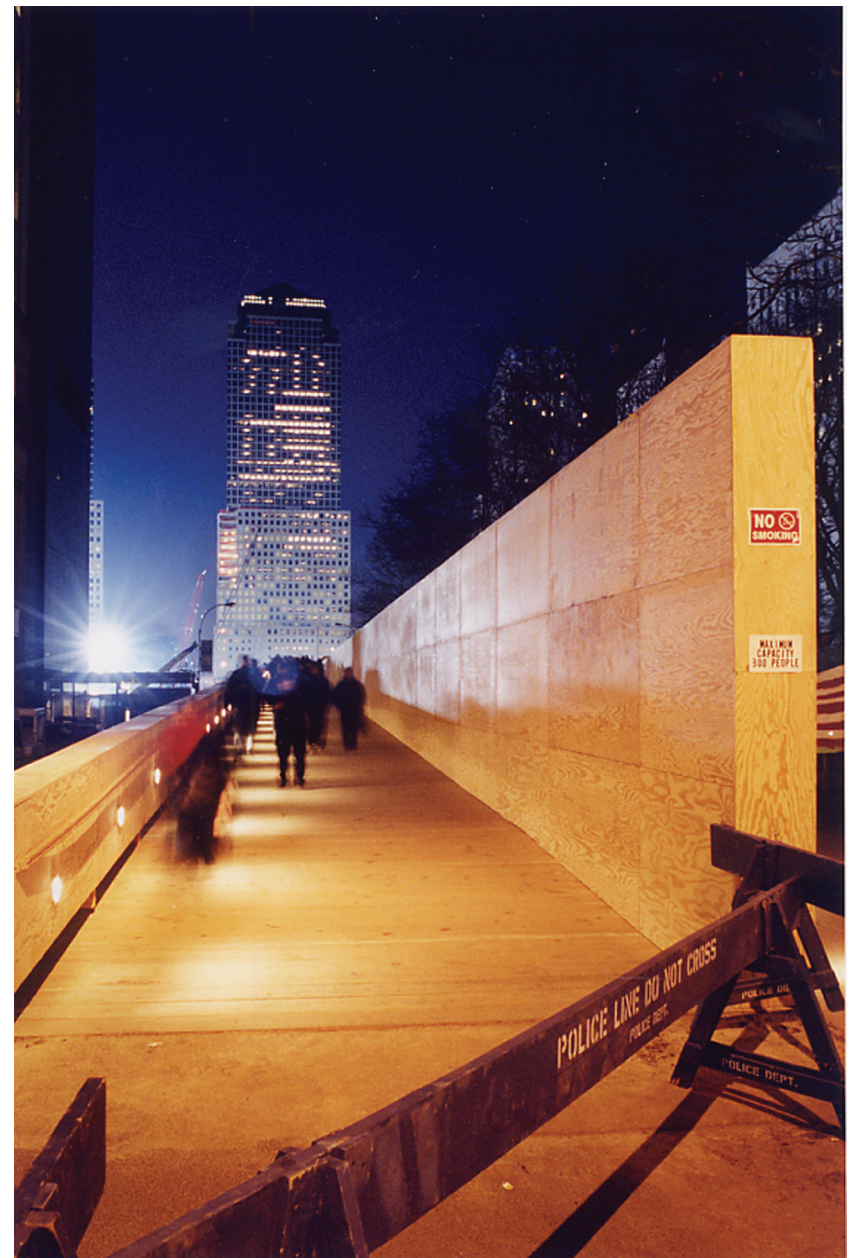
It seemed to be the kind of thing people were starting to think about as a way to revitalize downtown, not merely with new real estate, but also with new kinds of cultural program. The fact that it would have a living component as well would help to sustain the operations of the enterprise. I think the collaboration here had as much to do with the organization as it had to do with the design. I mean, our office designed the project, but David was really instrumental in selling the project and garnering support. David rather selflessly recognized what each entity's strengths were and worked accordingly. It was too bad the project wasn't realized, but we did end up winning a number of awards for the project.

It was interesting because we were able to work on it at a very deliberate

pace and there was no real established deadline. Though it was another kind of model, in some respects it was similar to the viewing platform. But, because it involved garnering a lot of support from non-profit organizations and a lot of political support from the city agencies, it took a long time to develop. Within that time frame however, we were able to experiment a lot with different sites, with different partners, and we were working with many different related companies on

the project. It was something that, in the long run, would have been a great project for downtown. It's unfortunate that the residents couldn't see beyond their own myopia.

It was a terrific lesson in how civic-minded architects could come together and propose projects. Even if those projects aren't realized, they already have an effect on the thinking and also on the policy development of the city. The bottom line is that even if the project isn't realized, you



Ground Zero Viewing Project - New York City - photograph taken by

were able to involve so many different kinds of people and create a support network around it. That ultimately leads to a better understanding of a particular area within the city. To me, that contributed a lot to the overall thinking for the revitalization of that part of downtown.

The Incubator project never became realized, but it has been published in many different articles and journals. We find the design process on this project to be rather insertional. Could you elaborate upon that?

Yeah. If you look at the buildings, they have been very influential. Although, due to the intricacies of the project, they haven't been fully understood by many people. I think future scholars will have a field day with it.

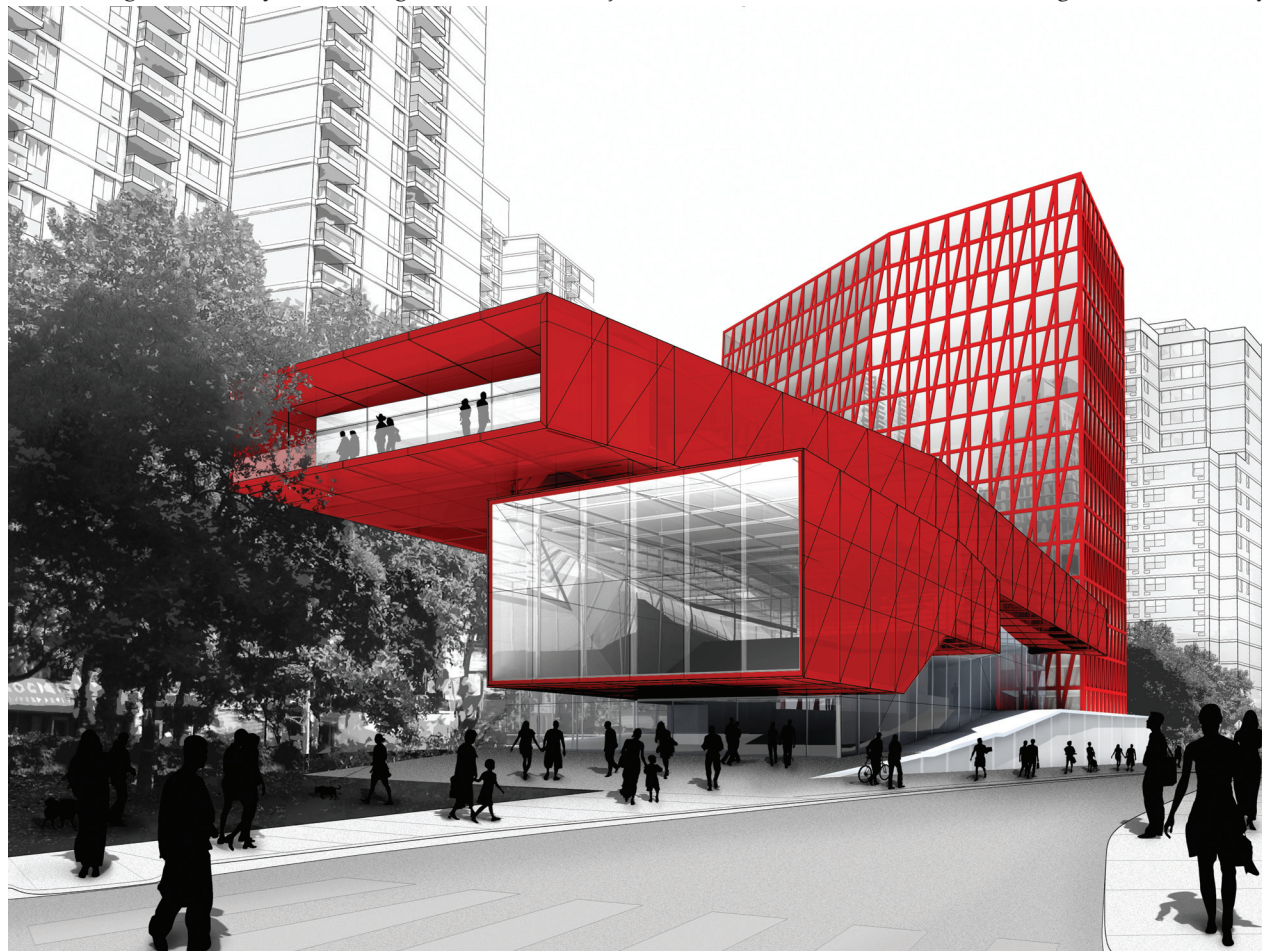
First of all, it was all in how the group came together. In my experience, with most of the people I had collaborated previously there was some sort of divide. The work that David Rockwell does is nothing like the work that I do. Many people have commented on what strange bedfellows we were. But again, that has a lot to do with our personalities; we like each other. That is something we came into through the process of collaboration. In this case, almost everyone were already friends, or at least peers. So the situation was very much, "let's put together a team of our generation and see if we can win." We found out afterwards that we were the first group to be selected by the committee.

To some degree, we represented an ideal; we represented the younger generation; we were international in scope but shared a common spirit. It's the closest thing I can think of to getting all your buddies together and working on a project. There was a kind of intensity to that because of the amount of scrutiny that was invested in everything we were doing. The press was keenly interested such that we had a camera crew following

us everywhere.

Thornton Tomasetti donated their entire space which acted as neutral territory since it wasn't anybody's office. It was sort of like we created our own little clubhouse around this thing and then brought in some of our best people and everybody just lived and hung out there. Everything about it was really a great deal of fun as well as extremely hard work. I would say that everyone within the group was fundamentally an optimist. Compared to say working with Rem and OMA though Rem is very talented, very good at what he does, a very smart guy, there's a kind of cynicism there. In our group, there was nothing like that. Everything was about, in spite of the horror, looking to the future in a very optimistic way. Optimism infused the whole project.

Which brings us to what you are doing



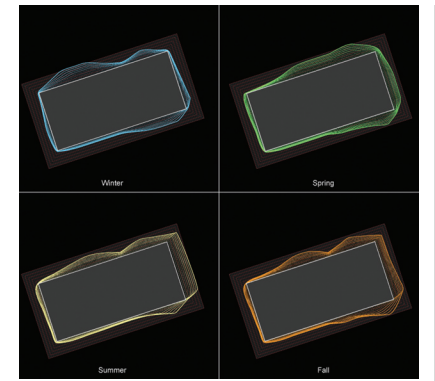
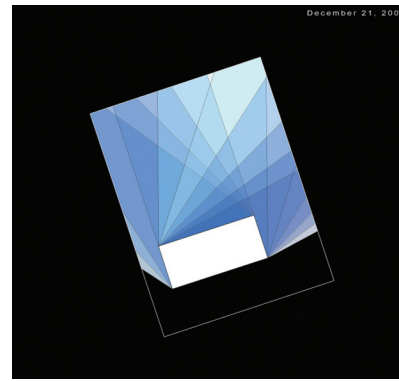
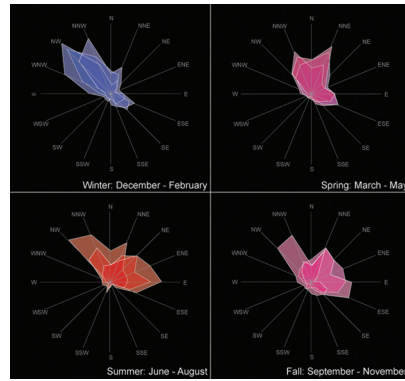
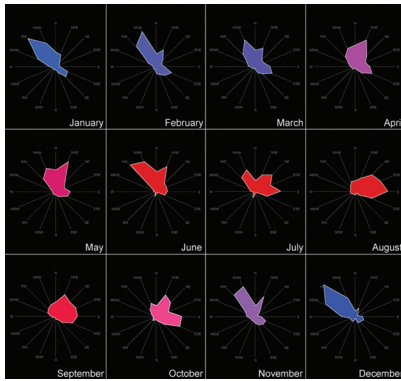
right now in the office, while you're also Executive Director of The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies with Greg Lynn, Bruce Becker and others.

The founding of Kevin Kennon Architect and the Institute coincide; they almost happened on the same day. So from day one the two have somehow linked together. The Institute obviously has a history and the reason I got involved had to do with a lunch with Peter Eisenman. He basically suggested that I do this. But at the time I didn't really think of it in terms of its relationship to practice.

There is a physical connection; the students have to walk through the office to get to their space, and everyone in the office has traditionally participated in instructing the students. And, people from the outside act as jurors and critics of

what the students are doing. But I think the unique thing that we did in setting up the Institute, which is very different from the old Institute, was that we made it about the students. The old Institute was set up to be a think-tank—in a classic sense—and ultimately it became a school. But we reorganized the structure to be from the bottom-up. We conceived a program of individualized study, almost like a tutorial system, where students would come and we would construct an individual curriculum for them around their interests and statement of purpose.

What's interesting is that when students come together, it takes away a little of the competitiveness you find in more traditional studio work. It's actually turned out to be a really remarkable experiment because the work that we get is extraordinary.



The fact that the students are doing different things allows them to open up to each other and be able to make lateral connections between what people are doing.

But, I also think it's starting to have an effect on how we practice within the office. We encourage the students not to pre-think what they are doing, to actually suspend whatever they know about the project and deconstruct the methodologies around particular buildings and projects. It frees up thinking about architecture and this process has had a huge effect on our work in the office.

I've always wanted to establish an office that was small enough where everyone could feel they were part of something, an office that would be dedicated to always trying new things. Participating in the institute is a great intellectual exercise but, to some degree, it's also about creating the right social and psychological atmosphere where people feel they can let go of certain predilections of behavior and thought that might be holding them back. That's what you need in an office environment that's going to be dedicated to coming together and innovating.

What do you see as the future of collaboration?

A lesson I've learned recently, as I've been on a number of selection committees, is that it's a very rare that you get the opportunity to see your colleagues present. It's amazing how it simplifies this mystifying thing

that we do. But presenting the idea of collaboration to potential clients is actually an extremely difficult thing to do. I think there is something within human nature, especially when looking at risky enterprises, that makes us want to know that there is somebody in control. Someone who, through their personality more than anything else, we feel has the right kind of flexibility, intellectual perspicacity, is nimble and humble, whether they really are or not, somehow those qualities become very important when you are selected as an architect. It gets confusing when you bring a number of people into the presentation and the audience, in this case the client, sees the performance in a very different way. They are looking for the interactions amongst the players, and not quite listening to what they have to say - not picking up on that great model, or that great idea. It's astounding how people are attuned to the nuances of behavior and how readily it comes across when, people work together really well or there seems to be friction between them. As much as I love collaboration, how do you sell collaboration? I don't know the answer.

