

The Yellow Egg, Architecture and the Digital Tsunami

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Nick Ervinck is not just a sculptor – he is an architectural sculptor. His work has the scale and presence of architecture, it interacts with architecture or it simply is architecture. Over the past 10 years, Nick's development and trajectory could be perceived as a microcosm of the many influences, preoccupations, formal fetishes and technologies (both virtual and actual) that informed architectural discourse and experiment in the same period. This, combined with a lively sense of humour and a pronounced surrealist streak, can make Nick's work seem at once startlingly beautiful and strange and yet part of a genealogy of Modern art that stretches back to Hans Arp and even, in the later pieces, to Salvador Dali's nuclear mysticism.

In the light of recent architectural innovation, Nick's work seems to be subject to the exact same imperatives and dynamics as that of any forward-looking architect. These themes, notions and forms appear in Nick's work in an intertwined simultaneity, becoming visible, disappearing, then eventually newly visible to then metamorphose later on.

Ten years ago, as Nick began his career as an artist, a number of architectural positions were evolving that were actively trying to re-articulate architecture in the face of what became known as 'the Digital Tsunami'. Following the 1980s, architectural deconstruction had, in a maelstrom of artful nihilism and vagrant geometries, preferred nothing but formal dexterity. It had declared the equivalence of everything and, by the way, that there was no God. In the 1990s, the weather changed and the digital storm clouds gathered. Initially, the architectural discussion was about the liberation of cyberspace for architecture, that the absence of gravitational and material constraints would allow architects to speculate on architectures that were dynamic, double-curved, floating and loaded with Data.¹

As the decade progressed, it became clear that the conflict between the real world and the burgeoning digital one was causing buildings to twist and contort in ever more complex, metaphorical ways. This, coupled with the expansion of global consumerism (after the fall of communism), generated large-scale architectural hybrids for which the rules of architecture hadn't been written. These imperatives finally bent buildings way out of shape, often into massive architectural grotesques that combined shopping mall, tourist attraction and transport interchange, housing and data port.

Nick's work, in the opening years of this century, appears to depict this torsion, this extrusion and distortion. Works such as IEBANULK, IENULKAR and EGATONK clearly explore buildings grappling to accommodate larger, ever more complex functions, with EGATONK appearing to be medieval vernacular architecture writhing in the wake of this digital trauma, much like a man in a straitjacket.

At the same time as Nick was producing these works, architects

were moving away from their initial infatuations with the abstractly digital to more nuanced methods of employing or embedding the virtual in reflexive relationships with buildings, geographies and bodies. To do this, architects had to find ways of translating digital impulses and data into real-time movement and material morphological change. This resulted in an interest in sensing technologies and the choreography of inputs and outputs, which in turn created the possibility of weaving spaces together across large distances and the potential to allow small changes in phenomena that occur far away from a particular building's site, to affect larger changes in the building's shape or materiality. This was the genesis of creating hybrid electronically mediated architecture.²

This emergence of the "other" space of electronic difference that acts like glue holding older architectures and places together can also be seen in Nick's work from this time. Works such as COLBATROPS, CORECHNOTS and TRIAFUTOBS depict the special and spatial qualities of this cybernetic glue. Nick's buildings are contorted, are up-ended, infiltrated, levitated and finally broken apart, combined into new wholes that contradict the established typologies of architecture. These works define a cusp condition, just before a massive perturbation that will redefine Nick's work as well as the very basis of architecture itself. Likewise, a step change was simultaneously happening in architectural theory: nothing was "offpiste" anymore since the old doctrines, such as "Form follows Function" or "Truth to Materials", were of little use in these new contexts. This was, perhaps, already happening but the new digital technologies brought the changes to an abrupt head.

Equally, architects sought new ways to capture movement, create interaction and to design complex digital and actual spaces – throwing one into the other and back again at various scales. This also had ramifications for the changing status of the architectural drawing in the wake of 3D scanner technology and digital fabrication techniques. Architects started to talk of "diagramming" architectural work to describe these metamorphic hybrid spaces. The topic of "where buildings begin and end in the face of web presences, social media, reflexive sensing and the Internet of things" is an important architectural discussion that continues to this day. Concurrent with this is the question of how we can reconcile material and binary/digital opposites. And how do we affect the architectural alchemy of the twenty-first century, where objects simultaneously have many forms? Nick's work also exhibits this simultaneity. His works can manifest themselves as renders, digital 3D prints, robotic milling instruction codes and beamed projections. So his work is conceived in a virtual in-between space and he gets to choose how to condense its reality into a myriad of possible outputs.

It is no coincidence to me that Nick's work also started to explore these issues, predicated with the extensive use of the colour yellow. Nick is, as are all of us who are interested in the metamorphosis of objects mediated by new technologies, a modern day alchemist. It might be wise at this point to describe this arcane yet surprisingly contemporary art. The old alchemists perceived the world as infinitely transmutable and cyclically distillable. Alchemy is the art of the metamorphosis of material, both spiritual and

actual. Alchemists see their transformations as a way of refining the basest of materials into progressively purified forms. Nick's work shows this cyclic transmutation from work to work.³

It ends in the making of "gold", the "Philosopher's stone". Alchemy's metamorphic stages are characterised by colours, heavenly bodies and animals. Yellow is often one of these stages. This "yellow" stage is described as injecting new life into inert substance. This rejuvenating material has been called the Yellow Ferment, which appears like a golden wax flowing out of foul matter. Chinese alchemists called this substance the Golden Pill, which marked their intermediary Yellow Phase (the Xanthosis). We see the Yellow Pill manifest itself in Nick's work with SIUTOBS and we see its enlivening wax in many forms in YARONULK, NAPELHIUAB, ANIHUAB and BORTOBY.

Over time the wax becomes more heated, more fluid and more fecund. As the yellow material further liberates itself, it becomes more biological, taking up forms analogous to aged and gnarled tree roots and sea-ravaged driftwood, EGNABO, OLNETOP, searching for further wet sustenance. In the end, it metamorphoses into the complex geometries of the "splash" or the abstraction of human and animal form. This series of sculptures and images includes the IKRAUSIM prints, where the evolving liquid forms into arteries and networks of coagulated elasticity, a kind of primeval proto-matter.

In and around 2009, Nick's work starts to explore the sensuousness of the body but also, in other works, the screaming rawness of the viscera. In YAROPRA, the voluptuous curves and reciprocations of the body and communities of bodies evoke Arp's work. But this piece also recalls the geometries of proteins, with their "active sites" of potential connection, and still uses yellow. In IKRAUSIM the yellowness seems to form alien skulls with unnaturally large eye sockets. In KOLEKNAT, horns, horses' hooves and spiky spines evoke a strange and disturbing creature. It is a fully-fledged angry chimera, ready to bite and scratch.

So previous architectural discussions about "bigness" become conversations about a natural biological bottom-up "smallness" that to some extent builds itself, with some natural pseudo-sentient imperative⁴

Nick's yellow alchemic substance starts to form complex systems, to evolve and further anthropomorphise. Many of Nick's pieces of this period channel Munch's "The Scream" (1893), such as LUIZADO: are they a beautiful warning? Simultaneously, Nick's sculptures diffract into thousands of bits, each with a sense of itself in the system, into alien heads.

Works such as LEKZAORZ, NOZIORZ, GNITRAORZ, EDNIRIAORZ, and AGRIEBORZ talk of alien natures, cyborgian warriors that almost belong to the screaming worlds of Warhammer 40,000. The juxtaposition of "low-code" commercial or popular ideas, themes and aesthetics with "highcode"

ideas, themes and aesthetics from art theory and art practice is a trait of Nick's work that he shares with Salvador Dali. He does this to create a dissolution of the two codes in order that they blend into a new whole.

Dissolution is also an important alchemical stage.

Architectural spaces, materiality and ambiances are experienced through the body: as biology and medical hubris change the body, the possibilities

or the myopias of the body change accordingly and architecture follows. The bodies that support these heads, if alive, would experience our architecture differently to us and would make extraordinary architectures for themselves. Architecture is fundamentally body-centrally formulated by a symbiotic relationship that is so deeply embedded it is often invisible to us. The digital and its impact on the body can make us much more aware of our own delicate machinery and its vulnerability and sensitivity.

During this period, other colours start to pervade Nick's works: once again, often alchemical: whites, reds and blacks.

Nick's extraordinary decade-long journey has been an exploration of the visceral, graphics, software, analogue and digital construction techniques at all scales and, above all, of his own creativity. There is a freedom in Nick's creative quest, it feels neither dogmatic nor overtly academic and yet is overflowing with references. While he channels many sources, Nick always adds a new slant, continually searching for the next thing, the next ingredient and the next formal articulation.

So, to conclude, Nick's work is part of an artistic continuum, his preoccupations, to a certain extent, paralleling a time of considerable change in architectural form-making and theory. Nick has, under his own terms, recognised and utilised these same forces of technology, perception and digitalisation that have so changed architectural discourse in recent years. Nick's ways of working can be seen as analogous to the alchemic opus. Indeed, any artist or architect who fully engages the metamorphic forces of virtuality is by definition an alchemist magician, conjuring form and materiality from nothing. In his recent work, Nick has explored a less abstract, more biological series of preoccupations and his work developed into ecologies of forms that make a larger, more complex whole. This too is a contemporary architectural endeavour. There are many parallels in our respective worlds and so there should be! I, and I suspect many others, are waiting for what happens next – perhaps a full-blown architectural commission that further explores his experience of turning doors, lights, ornaments, balustrades and artistic interiors for buildings into integrated pieces. This would surely be extraordinary. Will the implied movement in the work metamorphose into actual movement in future work? This is where the technological imperative is driving us.⁵

Whatever it is, I welcome a new member of the tribe and I'll be watching.

1 Neil Spiller, *Architects in Cyberspace*, London: Academy Editions, 1995; Neil Spiller,

Architects in Cyberspace II, London: Academy Editions, 1998.

2 Neil Spiller, *Reflexive Architecture*, London: Academy Press, 2002.

3 Neil Spiller, *Digital Dreams: The Architecture and the New Alchemic Technologies*, London: Ellipsis, 1998.

4 Neil Spiller, *Visionary Architecture: Blueprints of the Modern Imagination*, London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2006;

Neil Spiller, *Cyberreader: Critical Writings for the Digital Era*, London: Phaidon, 2002;

Neil Spiller, *Digital Architecture Now: A Global Survey of Emerging Talent*, London

and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008.

5 Neil Spiller and R. Armstrong (eds), *Procell Architecture: Architectural Design: 81*,
London: John Wiley & Sons, 2011.