Archaeology of the Digital
Curated by Greg Lynn, an exhibition at the Canadian Centre for Architecture is the first to put together a nuanced account of the complex ecosystem that spawned the digital architecture we see all around us today.
By Matthew Allen
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A disheartening observation: most of what we think we know about the use of computers by architects during the personal computing revolution of the late 1980s and early 90s is hearsay, and it is mostly based on misconceptions. Part of the problem has to do with evidence. If we try to trace the genealogy of “the digital” from the many familiar techniques in use today, an explosion of computational practices in this pivotal decade begins to come into focus, but the details of how computers were used — who clicked which button when — remain almost completely elusive. The files lie forgotten on aging hard drives and the detective work required to piece the story together has been neglected. More troubling than this, however, is the pervasive misconception that experimentation was driven by young practitioners playing around with fancy software and stumbling upon flashy effects. “Archaeology of the Digital”, an exhibition at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) curated by Greg Lynn, is the first to start unearthing evidence and begin putting together a nuanced account of the complex ecosystem that spawned the digital architecture we see all around us today.
Greg Lynn turns out to be the cipher. Rather than attempting to construct a comprehensive account of “the digital,” the exhibition presents the material for something like an intellectual biography of its curator — four projects that are important to Lynn, someone at the forefront of digital experimentation. The architects of these projects were all reaching the height of their powers during this period, and each took up a unique potential of computation as a means to an idiosyncratic theoretical or practical end. The Biocentrum project by Peter Eisenman is proto-parametric; custom generative algorithms take some of the labour out of procedural design while strategically ceding some authorial control. Frank Gehry’s Lewis Residence was the first major test of his firm’s customized aerospace software, which bridged the gap between his analogue design methods and digital rationalization — a process that has become his hallmark. The Expanding Sphere of Chuck Hoberman inaugurated an era of close collaboration between design and manufacturing aided by an intricate knowledge of mechanical logic and computer programming. Shohei Yoh, in many ways the key figure, saw a deeper connection between nature and complex computational processes; his Galaxy Toyama Gymnasium, the only of the projects built at architectural scale, presents a compelling worldview in which structural optimization, engineered atmospheres, and a philosophy of life coexist convincingly.

"Archaeology of the Digital", installation view at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2013. © CCA, Montréal

But that is only the most schematic outline of a rich body of material. It leaves out, for example, the crucial role played by flaming robots. (Yoh’s preoccupation with the beauty of natural phenomenon does not exclude mechanizing floors and igniting jets of gas infused with liquid metals.) It also leaves out the important difference between curves that go whoosh versus those that go doink doink doink. (The former smoothness in preferred by Lynn as an implication of movement, the latter by Eisenman as an index of generation.) It is a testament to the institutional genius of the CCA that it is able to capture the shop talk that makes digital architecture feel at times like an occult practice alongside the documentary evidence that allows it to be historicised and approached critically.
It is incredibly important for architecture culture to begin to do this in order to remedy the disconnect, which was evident as the projects within the exhibition were playing out and continues today, between certain younger practitioners (such as Lynn) who saw a resonance between high-theoretical ambitions and the potentials of computation and a generation of theorists (such as Sanford Kwinter) who often saw architects’ infatuation with computers as a betrayal of deep thought. Architects weren’t just drinking the Kool-Aid, the exhibition claims — and it provides the material required to back it up. Much scholarly work remains to be done, but one thing so far is clear: digital architecture is not simply the result of inexpensive computers, but the unfolding of an explosively heterogeneous cosmology.
On top of this, it is clear that the evolutionary directions digital architecture took were not inevitable. Along these lines one would hope that an archaeological project would uncover material that defies preconceptions and requires historical and theoretical innovation. Perhaps the exhibition has done this, but its focus on documentation rather than telling the stories of projects leaves us to create much of the narrative ourselves.
More pressing issues raised by the show concern the ontology of digital material. How should digital work be collected and displayed? The exhibition includes screens with rotatable and zoomable models, but given that the process of digital production is so easily reproduced (compared to, say, painting), interactivity could probably have been taken further. At a more fundamental level, do museums need to collect working hardware and software along with digital files? Other museums have taken up these questions, particularly in regard to video games, and it’s exciting to see an architectural institution also at the forefront. “Archaeology of the Digital” is the first of three exhibitions, and it only scratches the surface of an anticipated 25 projects, so we can look forward to more experimentation.

http://www.domusweb.it/content/domusweb/en/architecture/2013/05/15/archaeology_of_thedigital.html