

# LOOK/LISTEN

## St. Louis Magazine's arts blog

EDITED BY STEFENE RUSSELL

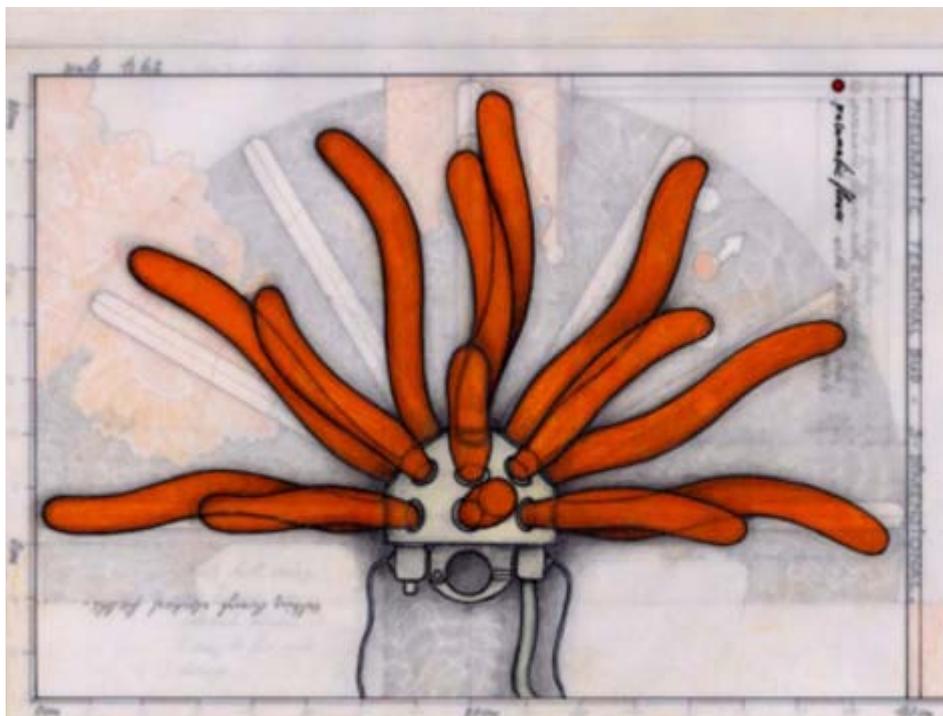
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### Preservation and Architecture

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**InterActive: Visionary Architecture from Around the Globe, Tonight at the Sheldon**



**Thomas Nicolai-AAA, Daisy.World mechanism, drawing detail. Image courtesy of Thomas Nicolai, Erfurt, Germany.**

A few Fridays ago, we sat down with [Jasmin Aber](#), curator of [InterActive: New Technologies in Contemporary Architecture](#), which opens tonight at the [Sheldon Art Galleries](#) and runs through January 24.

Aber, an architect educated in England and licensed in Germany, as well as a researcher and consultant, is one of the founders of [Berkeley's Shrinking Cities International Research Group](#) (SCIRN), a coalition of architects, urban planning experts and academics who are studying why cities decline and shrink, and what can and should be done to reverse that trend. Aber's own research within the group focuses on emerging strategies of revitalization that advantage of the indigenous cultural and creative resources, make them accessible to people in visionary, creative ways, and you create an environment that naturally attracts people ... and inspires them to stay.

One way of creating welcoming, exciting cities is to harness the potentials of cutting-edge architecture: for example, using digital technology to create buildings that respond and interact with users/passers by and to the environment. . This is what *InterActive* is all about, and includes photographs, blueprints and video footage—with many of these projects, you really do need to see the building in motion to understand exactly what it is and what it does—from around the world.

Organizations included in the exhibit include ART+COM (Berlin, Germany); Blipcreative (London, England); Experientiae Electricae (Osserain-Rivareyte, France); Simone Giostra and Partners (Brooklyn, New York); Greyworld (London, England); LAB[au] Laboratory for Architecture and Urbanism (Brussels, Belgium); Modulorbeat (Münster, Germany); Thomas Nicolai-AAA (Erfurt, Germany); and realities:united GmbH (Berlin, Germany). The Sheldon Art Galleries are located at 3648 Washington, and the opening reception runs from 5-7 p.m. tonight. —*Stefene Russell*

For a preview of the projects, [click here](#); and read our Q & A with Jasmin Aber [here](#).

*(And in full disclosure: Aber is the partner of our new Editor-at-Large, Malcolm Gay; even if this were not the case, we would feel that this exhibit is too important not to cover!)*

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Q & A With Architect Jasmin Aber, Curator of InterActive: New Technologies in Contemporary Architecture



SLM: Do you want to start out by describing your background a bit, just to give people some context in relation to the show?

YA: Sure. I am an architect; I was born in Germany and studied architecture in England, and I really work in two areas [of architecture]. I do academic research as part of an international researchers network. A few of us started this research at UC Berkeley California, which has now evolved to a center at the institute of urban and regional development (IURD). We do research into declining cities around the world. So we study the phenomenon of shrinkage, and we are working on coming up with typologies of shrinkage, and I'm working with the second part of the research, which is emerging strategies in urban regeneration and re-development. This is the academic side of my work but as a practitioner, the other half of my work is designing for building what I research and write about—my architecture has been really influenced by my research over the past few years. But now I'd like to shift my energy from more research to more practice work and consulting.

SLM: I imagine in St. Louis, you have your work cut out for you ...

YA: Well, really, I came here to work on this research, to use St. Louis as a case study, and now I am becoming more involved on the practice side ... taking the abstract meaning the academic discourses and applying it to real solutions in the context of a city. I am still trying to figure out how to include St. Louis in the narrative in a constructive way. The ideal scenario involves academic discourse as well as practical applications. You find cities where leadership creates a diverse, interdisciplinary group of people, who make

visionary decisions for a city. And by interdisciplinary I mean also involving the community utilizing local culture and assets, to really create a common vision for the particularities, peculiarities of that city in an imaginative way instead of using cookie-cutter strategies. Taking all these various—usually fragmented—powerhouses and encouraging them to put their resources together for the good of the city and the community. Which perhaps explains why cities like Chicago. Minneapolis has done so much better with the economic changes. Or let's take San Jose, California; they are really trying hard to first of all come up with a vision for downtown that's authentic ... to have 'Silicon Valley' downtown. They are planning and designing for originality and don't want to pretend like it's San Francisco, because it isn't and can never be. So it's not a cookie-cutter identity for the city, but really uses local assets, local culture, and celebrates those, which makes downtown something inviting—and something you won't get anywhere else, because it's the real deal. It also means involving the young and outsiders who can see what is great about their city, where the locals don't see anymore because it's always been there.

SLM: Well, like Memphis is about the same size as St. Louis, but it's managed to leverage its reputation as a blues capital to really create a tourist industry, whereas we haven't really done that.

JA: It's like this: how can you introduce yourself to the world, if you don't have a front? You have to have an interface, right?

SLM: And St. Louis could have an amazing interface, if it recognized the value of what it has.

JA: After I came here, I got introduced to the blues scene. The jazz and the blues in this city are under-celebrated. I can tell you that if you had these kinds of cultural resources say in Germany, there would be people queuing up the block! This is the last generation of these musicians, and I cannot believe that there are only one or two places in this city to go hear them, and generally they are these little holes in the wall, it's hard to find them. And you will hardly see a white person there. This is an asset that has not been nurtured and those musicians are aging fast.

SLM: Well, and this happens on all levels—I live on the Northside, and there are people who are afraid to come to my house. But if you run the crime stats on the Safe City website, the crime rate, compared to the places I used to live in South City, it's substantially lower.

JA: There's a fragmentation problem, and it's not really tapping into the assets. I cannot emphasize that enough.

SLM: Do you want to talk a little bit about the project in the Sheldon show, the artists' studio project you designed for North City? [Note: the photo in question was a conceptual drawing of a series of proposed art studios on the North Riverfront that would broadcast, on the side of the building, webcam feeds chosen by the artists themselves.]

JA: HOK invited me, hired me as a consultant to work on a master plan to use, apply findings of my research in some form in their projects: to use creativity, art, culture and the cutting-edge as a catalyst for revitalization. This was an incredible opportunity for me to actually translate a lot of the global examples—there are a lot of cities around the world that have experienced some of the same problems as St. Louis and other rust-belt cities have, with declining industrial economies and a new economy, most cities have difficulty reinventing themselves. But there are a few who manage to

just do that. And some of those few definitely used the creative force as a central strategy. So I got a chance to do an archive of what's cultural, what's an asset here, and develop something that would empower the immediate community, but would also result in a community that's inviting, that comes up with ideas, to promote and nurture and value the spirit of invention. For example, what I did was try to find a way to give the artists' studios a presence at the street level, so that the façade also becomes a screen. And it's immediate. One of the building series has what you saw, a modular façade, where the artist can show their working studio to the outside at street level, the street becomes a gallery, a gathering place to watch the artist's work ... or artists at work.

SLM: You know, we've talked a lot about St. Louis, but what makes this show at the Sheldon so exciting is that you're gathering work from all four corners of the globe ... one of my favorites is Nicolai's project. [That is, German architect Thomas Nicolai, whose Daisyworld, included in the show, is meant to be "mounted on a large urban building like the Cannon Street tower in London," and is "comprised of a series of orange and blue rubber arrays that would 'grow' and 'die back' in an ongoing cycle using a system of rubber tentacles or 'petals' attached to a scaffolding that are inflated by a pneumatic system controlled by a computer program."]

JA: Nicolai is not as known as he deserves to be; this is going to be his first major show in US. In a few days he is going to be part of another big event in Berlin's media conference and exhibition. This is a project he's been working on for quite a while, and one of my favorites, a lot of fun, spectacular. Every drawing is hand-done. He's one of the few people left on this planet who still draws everything by hand for the final presentation and working drawings, not just hand drawn sketches. Like in the old days. He's having a little bit of trouble finding money to produce a prototype, but he wrote to me last week that he now has a funder. It's very expensive to produce a prototype of these sensor-driven flowers.

SLM: And then we were talking about, back at the gallery, about that brilliant building in—Tokyo, right? [ART+COM's "Duality," a "reactive environmental installation in the city center of Tokyo ... Passersby trigger the installation that interplays between solid and liquid, virtual and real, light and water: Their footsteps generate virtual waves that transform to real water waves in the pond."]

JA: It is a lot of fun, in fact. And ART+COM did an interactive media interior for the BMW museum that opened a few weeks ago in Munich. We just couldn't get the material for the BMW building so soon because the building just opened, and there were IP issues. But we have GreenPix as well, the zero-energy media wall that also just went up in Beijing near the site of the 2008 Olympic games. It's all about sustainability using integrated solar chips—a groundbreaking project applying sustainable and digital media technology to the curtain wall. It's the first time anyone's done anything like this.

SLM: There was another project that used panels—it almost looked like big sheets of computer data, but as you get closer, you can see that it's a configuration of little panels ... [LAB[au] laboratory for architecture and urbanism's "Framework 5 x 5 x 5"]

JA: Yes, that is a very interesting very different prototype in this genre.

Another good example how a façade or a wall can change its surface, three dimensionally, a simple sequence of square panels that adjust themselves according to how its set it to react to sound, light or movement. Technically complicated, you'd need an engineer to explain it, but it's a very interesting concept.

SLM: So this is why you guys are using the little video screens—so people can actually watch these projects in action, and it'll make more sense.

JA: Yes—that's the thing. We would have loved to put the actual prototype piece there, so people could go around and see, but obviously there are limited funds for these types of exhibitions, therefore we have videos that show these projects in real life, how they perform. And the show, the purpose is to show what kinds of multifaceted projects can be done—it's not so expensive anymore. Even two years ago, these projects would be unaffordable, unless you had corporate funding. But these days, they are a lot more affordable. And contrary to what some people say, like the example in Japan, your investment can also be about sustainability.

SLM: The tribute to the Unknown Artist [created by London's Greyworld] is also pretty interesting.

JA: The sculpture reacts to the people, and within limitations imitates what passersby do. But these guys, Greyworld, have done amazing fun things in big and small places. Their work is all about making the city experience more like a playground. For example, the piece they did for the London Stock Exchange, which was inspired by bubbles in a water tank. They have created this park where the benches and the bins very slowly move positions. So you're kind of just sitting there, and the next thing you know, you're sitting somewhere else! [Laughs.] Which is a way to change your point of view. [Laughs.] Serious engineering for very playful purposes. In all the projects I have seen coming out of that office, lead by Andrew Greyworld, the aim is surprise, for strange and fun things to happen. We wanted the moving park piece for the exhibition, but those bins are expensive and already part of their environment of the park, so they sent us something tangible from the Unknown Artist project.

SLM: I think having something in there that looks like a human being, though, that moves, might help them make the leap to buildings and wrap their mind around the whole kinetic architecture concept, maybe.

JA: That sensory interaction, and the fun aspect, helps people connect with it too. This exhibit is about what's possible in terms of breaking boundaries, and understanding interactive technologies is not just for advertising ... they can be used to design for fun, to help sustainability, and to create inviting, curious environments. To me, the most important potential it offers is the participatory aspect. It is powerful stuff—a medium that I like to use to connect communities. A great example is the fountain in Millennium Park that has created so much excitement. People now are going to Chicago not just to see the big skyline and the skyscrapers but also to see Millennium Park. Why? What draws them? When people can be part of something bigger than themselves, it changes everything, it makes them come out, play and connect.