

Agitating Architecture: A Conversation with Catie Newell of Alibi Studio



Weatherizing, Detroit, 2010

Catie Newell is founding principal of Alibi Studio and Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Michigan. Her recent work includes *Weatherizing* (Detroit, 2010), *Salvaged Landscape* (Detroit, 2010), *Second Story* (Flint and Chicago, 2011), and *Aggregates* (with Anne Hawkins, Houston, 2004). She is currently working on an installation in Flint, Michigan with Wes McGee called *Glass Cast*, and teaching courses on materials and volumetric manipulation. Scapegoat met with Catie this September in Ann Arbor to talk about her practice and her commitment to material exploration.

Once Residences

Scapegoat Says: Many of your projects involve interventions in unoccupied houses. The house is a readily available medium to work on because of the urban condition in Detroit. Is there a position in your work about these houses as materials?

Catie Newell: The house has a consistent presence in my work. Given their strained physical state and ghostly abandonment, all of these sites I have called "Once Residences." No one is living in them, but the materials and the volumes are there capturing interior and exterior existing conditions. Generally, reoccupation is unlikely so there is the opportunity to experiment with the houses being something else.

All of my work goes back to an idea that Alibi Studio is working on and that we call "Inhabitable Textures." In each project, we are exploring how manipulating a material also manipulates its volume. For each of the three houses used in *Weatherizing*, *Second Story*, and *Salvaged Landscape*, the fact that they are domestic allows us to play on the familiarity of the volume, but we're also playing with deterring occupation. In some cases, the space is intentionally very difficult to occupy.

SS: Can you talk more specifically about the material manipulations of each project? For example, in *Weatherizing*, the building is punctured with glass rods.¹

completely. I positioned the length of the tubes to respond to the form of the spaces as well as to create a new bodily experience for the occupant of the space. Some people have said that the aggression of the work is due to its denial of occupation, which exists at the scale of the body and where the new volume changes the way the space can be occupied.

SS: Do you agree with that?

CN: I want it to be haunting and aggressive. I don't want to say otherworldly, because the works are of this world. I'm not interested in discussions that project a program, but the "unoccupiable" dimension is really important. The work reconfigures typical materials through a thickness that denies the usual proximities and adds tension to passage and occupation.

SS: So you are making decisions based on physical experience in the space, at the scale of the body.

CN: It tends to be my body, because it is a convenient measuring tool and usually on site, but it is not at all about my presence. I'm just a good ruler for the space while I'm working.

SS: The 1:1 scale is a way of amplifying familiarity. The domestic scale is recognized by our indexical relation to those sizes, scales, etc., of the space of the house. What about the glass?

CN: The tubes are cut from a factory-standard, 5-foot length that is cut, bent, and flared at different lengths. I worked with chemistry instrument makers at the University of Michigan to do this, and I wanted to be able to capture different parts of the ambient conditions to siphon and direct the atmosphere through the envelope. Each tube registers the atmosphere differently to circulate it through the house. Each has its own placement, rotation, and bend; if it is bent, it is also flared on that side. If we were in the space, I could explain to you why certain bends and flares exist. They create a certain contour inside, and both complicate and express the building. They agitate the space.

I was afraid that people would break into the space and smash it all. Instead people broke in, but they didn't smash anything, so I am convinced they just broke in to be in the space.

Impure Geometries

SS: What about *Salvaged Landscape*³ in Detroit, how did that project come about? Is it in dialogue with *Weatherizing*?

CN: Some people who had seen *Weatherizing* approached me; they had two houses that were about to be demolished and they asked me to create an installation in what was going to eventually be an exposed gallery crawlspace in the foundation of one of the demolition sites. The house had fallen victim to arson, and was burned throughout. There are a lot of conversations in Detroit about how to take down buildings and what to do with the materials.

Many people had been gleaming materials, scrap metal, etc. from the house. For me the material potential of the space was in the charred wood. I knew I couldn't make materials like this—you can't machine something to look like this charred. Also, the wood is not burnt entirely through, a raw state remains in the centre of the material. On the exterior of each piece, the bulbous quality of the wood, as a result of the fire, creates impure geometries. Not to mention the material was native to the house.

During the demolition, the second story of the house fell through to the first. This made

me realize that the materials create a volume that can be rearticulated as a new atmosphere. At some point the house was stable enough that the additions were removed and the project took on its form. For a while it was an earthworks piece, a dark pit of a house. But then I realized I could use the house as formwork and put its pieces back into the space. As such, I could play with a new type of room within the house, as well as the permitted or restricted paths of the occupant. This would occur through the editing of these volumes, both the original house and the installation embracing the consideration that the altering of the volumes is the manipulation of the exact same, and limited, material.

You can see where the gasoline was thrown to start the fire and that is part of the positioning of the piece. As you walk toward the spikes in the piece, you are following the gas stains of the arson. The passage way was carefully placed to coordinate with the remaining structure of the house. I also wanted to work with light and dark as materials. Light can get through but we don't know where it will be.

SS: Is darkness a material in your work?

CN: It is definitely a material. But what is the definition of a material? I'm not prepared to answer that, even though it is a really big question for me. But darkness is a necessary component of altering space within my work, allowing the boundaries of the work to remain allusive and intangible. It can change everything. I wouldn't call darkness immaterial; for me it is a very real material. I am interested in darkness as a spatial tool—I call it "intentional darkness." I want it to be very, very dark.



Salvaged Landscape, Detroit, 2010

SS: Let's talk about this image. For your fans, this is certainly one of the more studied images. It is completely captivating in its suggestion of a controlled aggregation, and maybe relates to some of your earlier work on aggregates. Are we actually fascinated by the section as a kind of architectural pornographic image? Is this an allegory of our pornographic architectural imagination?

CN: To answer the section question, the most important thing about this was to create a radical difference from one side and the other, but both sides had to be made of the same material. This is just a simple maneuver to achieve that.

SS: The way you play with the membrane, the skin of the house...it's like *Weatherizing*.

CN: There is something with aggregation and intricacy for me that I haven't entirely finished with yet.

SS: But there is also a double articulation of surface, where the inside and outside, while composed of the same material, express entirely different relations to the viewer. Neither side can be anticipated or assumed when viewed from the other side.

CN: This way the viewer goes through the thickness but can't see the charred spikes until you come around a corner, thus confusing and delaying the expectation of what is to come.

Curating Demolition

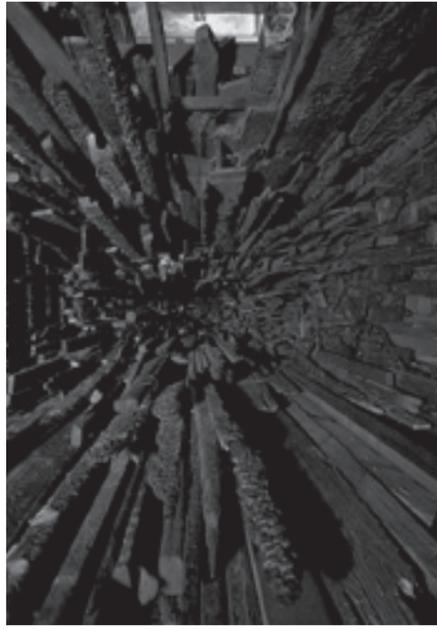
SS: Is the organization of materials mostly intuitive and idiosyncratic in *Salvaged Landscape* and other projects, or is there some other objective logic? And, how is it standing up?

CN: I started from the ground, stacking and working with the charred cantilevers, allowing them to create patterns. I knew the outer edge of the piece would eventually be exposed but it wasn't until the piece was eventually removed from the formwork of the existing house by demolishing the rest of its unusable volumes that we saw them. But it is important to explain that it is never fastened to the remainder of the house; it only attaches to itself.

SS: I am interested in how your work seems to trace the potential for occupancy, but in the act of tracing, it also eliminates occupation as a possibility.

CN: This leads to *Second Story*.⁴ If, in *Salvaged Landscape*, I used the framing to aggregate charred wood so people could reoccupy the thickness of the building, in *Second Story* I "skinned" the house's wall so people could occupy a tracing of the house. Six-thousand bent acrylic rods were stretched to trace the surface of the house's second story as a skin. They were then removed and suspended from the gallery ceiling. It was a gallery piece so I wanted to make a work that created a kind of occupation that wasn't possible in a house. This happens in three ways. First, the skinning of the house occurred on the second story: in the gallery you walk relative to the suspended installation as if walking around the perimeter of the second floor. Second, the ghosting of the house allows you to enter the material volumes—you can walk through and inside the walls. And finally, the windowsill is a thickened passageway, a sillway. It is related to *Salvaged Landscape*, but I think all the projects actually dream about each other, despite their different materials and formal commitments.

SS: If *Weatherizing* turns the material condition of an essential feature of the house—the window—into a strange new atmosphere, and *Salvaged Landscape* turns the charred, post-arson condition into a landscape, *Second Story* seems to pose the house as a ghost or soul, where the former material constraints are reversed and become accessible.



CN: *Second Story* is still concerned with atmosphere. Acrylic rods extend the house, similar to the glass tubes in *Weatherizing*, tapering until they are so thin that they attenuate into nothingness. I couldn't do it with glass, but the acrylic let me create a much longer, whisker-like form. Acrylic defies gravity; how the acrylic curls depends on how you pull and stretch it. This let me work with light and shadow as materials. The whiskers let you get close, but stop you from passing through; instead, they force you, politely, to travel through all the new places of occupation that didn't exist in the real house.

SS: You are tracing the house again, but this time making "occupiable" the set of constraints that in the real house architecture keeps us from ever occupying. That's awesome.

Haptical Correction

CN: The geometries of the acrylic rods have various logics, but there are locations when they become very clear. All the diagonal and vertical patterns respond to the house. They have a very rigorous imprecision.

SS: Do these patterns relate at all to your physical presence while installing the piece?

CN: There was haptical correction and control of every length and its whisker while installing. There were set zones of densities and maximum and minimum lengths in sets of angles but not fully prescribed to exact dimensions. So, while I made a pattern before installing, I couldn't predict the snarly mess that the whiskers would create until it was being installed.

SS: Did you know that Second Story would be suspended in the gallery—that the house would float, but that we would be the ones floating? Can you talk about the structure and how it floats?

CN: The structural lines of the house were aligned with the trussing of the gallery to suspend the acrylic rods on a grid of strings. I always knew that the project would be suspended, but during the installation I decided I wanted to make sure nothing touched the ground—only the shadows get to touch the wall and ground. Darkness, illumination, light, and shadow have the ability to completely and drastically change the experience of a space, but it is so fleeting and impermanent that it can be altered quickly.

SS: What do you see as the relationship between dark and light as materials in your practice of documentation? Is it a way of transposing the affective experience of the work through material manipulation?

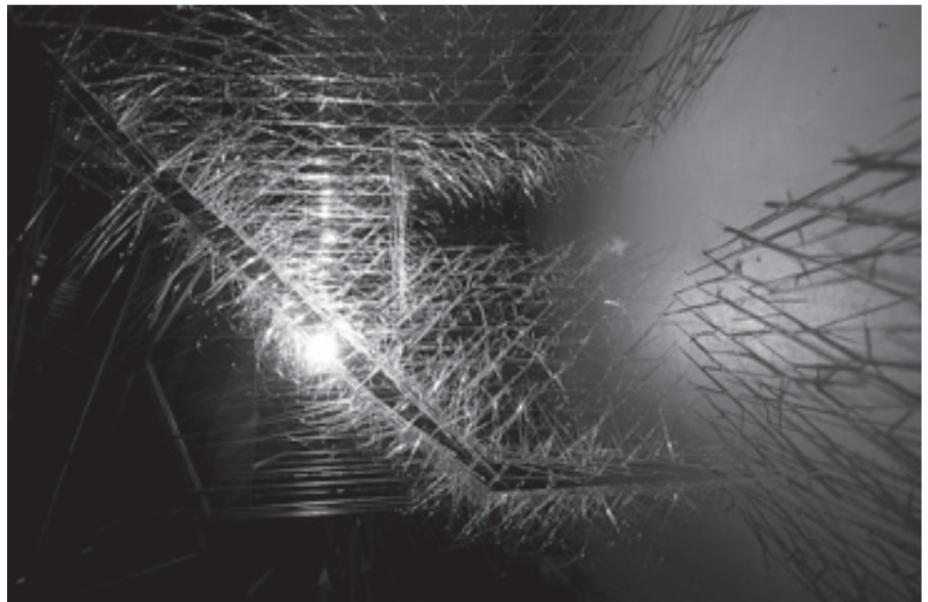
CN: Lightness and darkness are best captured through photography, which is a very important part of my practice. It is a whole other exercise where I am completely distanced from my act of creating the work itself, and begin to investigate its other volumes through the light and the darkness. How the lightness is framed in a photograph as space...this creates other dimensions as well. With darkness, I don't want to simply capture what is there, but to manipulate the volume even more. Photography helps me to alter the physicality of the project and find the things that I want to work on next—things that aren't quite material and yet can't be drawn. So for the next project I will have to be looking at Second Story a lot more.

SS: A consistent aspect of your work, even in an early work like Aggregates, is that you close spaces, but even more, you challenge fundamental assumptions of domestic architecture. If a child draws a house, they include all the things you have somehow removed, changed, or made strange. Is it an architecture-complex to want to pervert the essentials?

CN: I make familiar spaces, domestic or not, unfamiliar; I'm agitating architecture. There is something in that instinct that is stronger than making things that are entirely new. There is something that can take on more because the "once residences" have been changed. These are already part of the work—whatever the essence may be for someone, the semantic associations are an important material in all of my work. With material manipulations and changes in volume that deny physical occupations, I want to agitate those spaces of architecture that are most ubiquitous.



Salvaged Landscape, Detroit, 2010



Second Story, Flint & Chicago, 2011

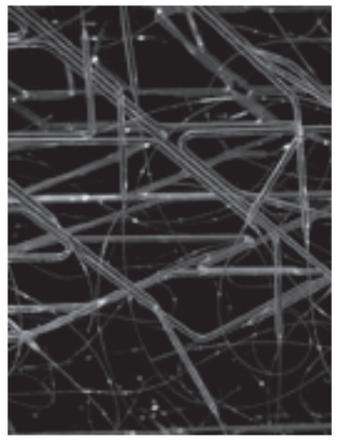
Catie Newell is Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Michigan and founding principal of Alibi Studio. She has a Masters of Architecture from Rice University and a Bachelor of Science from Georgia Tech. In 2006 she won the SOM Prize for Architecture, Design and Urban Design with her project Weather Permitting. Before joining the University of Michigan as the Oberdick Fellow in 2009, Newell was a project designer and project coordinator at Office dA in Boston. Newell's work and research captures spaces and material effects, focusing on the development of atmospheres through the exploration of textures, volumes, and the effects of light or lack thereof. The work often reconfigures existing domestic spaces. Newell's creative practice has been widely recognized for exploring design construction and materiality in relation to location and geography, as well as cultural contingencies. Newell won the 2011 Architectural League Prize for Young Architects and Designers. Following the interview with Scapegoat, her project Salvaged Landscape was awarded the Use of Urban Space juried award at ArtPrize 2011.

Notes

1. Weatherizing, Detroit, 2010. As a material study and electrical experimentation, this alteration to a stand-alone garage mutates and activates the barrier between the atmospheres of the interior, and the greater surroundings on the exterior. Of nearly one thousand glass tubes, the work spatializes and amplifies light conditions, both natural and artificial, and the flow of air. Varying in length and bends, the aggregation of the glass tubes works as a material substrate upon which energy is captured in the form of a glow, and an accumulation of hollow channels conduits for energy, air, and precipitation. Mysterious and moody, reliant on the immediate qualities of the atmospheres, the luminosity becomes an eerie register of the seemingly intangible surrounds and a foil to the once apathetic barrier.
2. Weatherizing was completed as part of a project by the Taubman College 'Five Fellows'; additional work can be found at <http://www.tcmap.umich.edu/architecture/faculty/fellowships/5fellows>.
3. Salvaged Landscape, Detroit, 2010. Grand Rapids, 2011. Detroit, 2011. Framed by the setting and pace of demolition, Salvaged Landscape reappropriates a Detroit house hit by arson to create a translation of the original volume and materials, using intricacy, mass, and intentional darkness. Key- ing into the opportunities present in its own timeline, Salvaged Landscape was constructed with the demolition of the house occurring around it. Leaving the existing stable walls of the house as forwork, the salvaged charred wood was configured piece by piece into a new, denser volume that explores thickness, texture, and occupation. The wood was sliced on one end to expose and contrast the raw conditions against the exterior, the dark bulbous lengths were suspended inward. The work adds a new room to the house, only made possible through the presence of arson and its necessary demolition. The work was then transported away from the original house, further adding to the story and reconfiguration of the materials and volumes. Salvaged Landscape was awarded the Use of Urban Space Award at ArtPrize 2011.
4. Second Story, Flint, 2011. Chicago 2011. Amplifying, transporting, and distorting the volumes surrounding and within a contested existing domestic environment, Second Story reconfigures spaces that were once familiar into an "other" occupation and visual register. Used to imprint the space and excite the atmosphere, this inhabitable texture is driven by the manipulation of factory-standard acrylic rods to capture, manipulate, and distort the existing volumes of the second story of Spencer's Funeral home in Flint, Michigan, a house slated for demolition. Inherently transparent, the material both captures and permits the passing of light, visually distorting its presence and the view beyond, through refraction and reflection, altering both the context, the perception of its physical boundaries, and heightening the role of the building in the neighborhood. The work agitates, relocates, and makes accessible new volumes otherwise once unoccupiable; the exterior zone, the wall depth, and the depth of a window sill. As a further technique of distortion and interplay of tectonic connection and assembly, the acrylic rods are systematically manipulated through the use of heat. One such technique allows for the bending and forming of components to create a pattern that resonates with its context, but also distorts the a priori relationships within the house to construct depth and volume originally unused or nonexistent. A further alteration is the tapering and pulling of the material, developing extensions and strands that flee in near weightlessness in pursuit of space, altering the perception and depth they occupy. The otherness of Second Story is further heightened by suspending the piece above the ground by tethering it to the building's roof trusses so that it hovers to promote an ephemeral sense of space, an attuned acknowledgement of its surrounding, and an implied stretched atmosphere.



Salvaged Landscape, Detroit, 2010



Second Story, Flint & Chicago, 2011