Catie Newell is founding principal of Alibi Studio and Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Michigan. Her recent work includes Weatherizing (Detroit, 2007), Salvaged Landscape (Detroit, 2010), Second Story (Hart and Chicago, 2011), and Aggregates (with Anne Hawkins, Houston, 2004). She is currently working on an installation in Flint, Michigan with Wex McGee called Glass Cast, and teaching courses on materials and volumetric manipulation. She presented with Catie this September in Ann Arbor to talk about her practice and her commitment to material exploration.

SS: You are tracing the house again, but this time it's not your project? And, how is it in dialogue with Weatherizing?

CN: Some people who had weathered the buildings 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 garage/crawlspace in the foundation of one of the demolished sites. The house had fallen victim to arson and was burned throughout. There are a lot of connotations for architecturally transformed domestic spaces. What do the buildings and what do to the materials. I had been interested in making a tube that would let rain and wind into a building, puncturing the skin of the house. I punctured the wall and realized the glass could look like a tube. I was turning the window into a volume instead of just a surface. I didn't know how many glass tubes would be too much, but I wanted to be responsible about how I played with the material. So I made a basic pattern driven by the decision to avoid puncturing the surface of the building.

CN: I started from the interest in weathering—

SS: Right.

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CN: This started with my interest in weathering—and the house as the apocalyptic barrier between inside and outside. The house became the medium through which I could break that separation down. I removed the window by filling it in, and then redistributed it throughout the wall, "shattering" the window into many glass tubes. But the shatter was not a mere surface displacement. The goal was to change the implied volume and make a new atmosphere out of the pieces that were once the house.

SS: You're shattering or attenuating the essence of domesticity?

CN: I would say it attenuates it. Also, the light is very important. The light glow from the glass tubes—there are also lights embedded in the wall—doesn't exist on either side. You cannot see the boundary because the glass tubes project a light both inside and outside. I started working in the house while it was boarded to be able to start by working, not by drawing. But when other designers started to work on the house and open it up, they took my darkness away. So I moved to the detached garage space so I could control the light. If this project adds darkness to then light, Salvaged Landscape adds light to then add darkness.

CN: This is certainly one of the more studied images.

SS: Let's talk about this image. For your fans, this is certainly one of the more studied images.

CN: It is completely captivating in its suggestion of a controlled allegory, and may be related to some form of justification.

CN: The house is becoming-landscape. Dealing with site and landscape is more contextual—it is a curated indexical relation to those sizes, scales, etc., of the material. On the exterior of each piece, one could read the bulbous quality of the wood, as a result of the process of burning and new growth. I wanted to comment that the material was native to the house. "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. It is, in Salvaged Landscape, I used the framing to aggregate shared dark wood pieces and people could recreate the house of the building. In Second Story I "altered" the house so people could occupy a taming 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 wall. It was a very simple thing 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 volume of the house occurred on the second story: in the gallery you walk relative to the suspended installation as if walking around a pyramid on the second floor. Second, the ghosting of the house allows you to enter the material volumes— you seemingly pass through the walls. And finally, the window is a three-sided passageway, a slit. 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 windows—into a new atmospheric effect, Salvaged Landscape turns the charred, post-annihilation condition into a landscape, Second Story seems to make the second story the focal soil, where the former material constraints are revived and become accessible.

SS: It's in dialogue with Weatherizing.

CN: Weatherizing is becoming-landscape. Dealing with site and landscape is more contextual—it is a curated indexical relation to those sizes, scales, etc., of the material. On the exterior of each piece, one could read the bulbous quality of the wood, as a result of the process of burning and new growth. I wanted to comment that the material was native to the house.

SS: You are tracing the house again, but this time making "occupied" the set of core relations that in the real house architecture leaps us from ever occupying. That's awesome.
Haptic 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 impression.

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

CN: There was haptic correction and control of every length and its weight 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 snaky mesh 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 tracing 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 light and the darkness. How the darkness is framed in a photograph as space... this gives the same space a dimension—something that darkness, I don’t want to simply capture what is there, but to manipulate the volume of experience. Photography helps me to alter the physicality of the project and find the things that I want to go 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 Aggregator, is that you lose 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 architectural complex to work against the sensibles?

CN: I make familiar spaces, domestic or not, unfamiliar. I amagazine architecture. There is something in that instinct that is stronger than making things that are entirely new. There is something in the translations and transpositions that can take on more because “the once resides” 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 occlusions, I want to agitate those spaces of architecture that are most ubiquitous.