

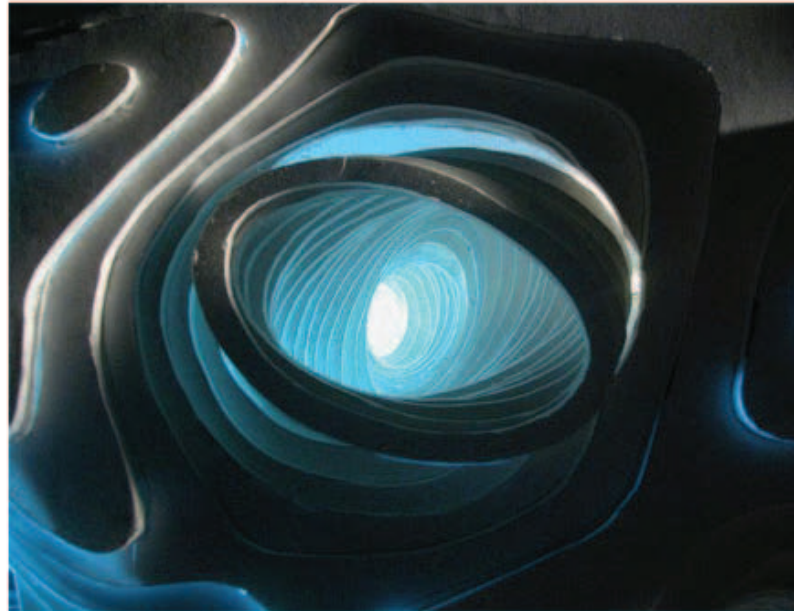
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Archinect explores the process behind the work of LA-based architecture practice Spacekraftlab with an interview by Paul Petrunia.

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Sonic Intervention : The Architecture of Sound

Feb 19, 2004

Spacekraftlab is an LA-based architecture firm run by partners Herwig Baumgartner and Scott Uriu. With twenty combined years of professional architecture experience, including positions under world-renowned architects Frank Gehry and Coop Himmelb(l)au, Spacekraftlab is taking their own work to another level with experimentations in electronic spatial definition. Baumgartner and Uriu pursue a real architecture that can be defined by the electronic space around us such as sounds, sonograms, and magnetic distortions. Somewhere between the "visible and intangible", they are continuing to develop their own unique approach to creating a completely new form of architecture. Some recent results of their experimentations can be seen in proposals for the Nam June Paik Museum in Seoul and a Media hybrid for the Museums Quartier in Vienna.



Museums Quartier in Vienna; click image to view gallery

Interview by Paul Petrunia:

Paul Petrunia:

What made you decide to work together and how did you both end up as Architects in Los Angeles?

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Spacekraftlab:

We come from very different backgrounds. Scott is from California and has lived here most of his life. He started out as Mathematics Major, and then changed to Architecture. He studied at the Architecture Association in London and at California Polytechnic Pomona. I started out as a professional musician, played in various different orchestras in Austria and majored in composition and electronic music at the Music University in Vienna. Later I decided to become an Architect and received my masters from the University for Applied Arts in Vienna. From there I worked for Coop Himmelblau in Vienna before deciding to move to Los Angeles to live and work.

We both ended up working for Frank Gehry where we met and decided to work together on competitions and projects of our own. It was a good chemistry from the beginning in terms of motivation and collaboration, which is hard to find. In a way it is like rock climbing. Some people prefer to go alone; we are just more efficient as a team.

Paul Petrunia:

How did you start your office?

Spacekraftlab:

We started out in a garage in Venice. No heating or cooling, concrete floors the typical LA startup deal. I remember the first winter was so cold that we had to wear gloves and ski jackets while working on the models and in the summer the homeless guys were passing by commenting on our projects and asking us for change. About a year and a half later we moved into a more comfortable studio in the garment district in downtown LA and that's where our studio is today.

Paul Petrunia:

Do you see Los Angeles as your home base for your operations?

Spacekraftlab:

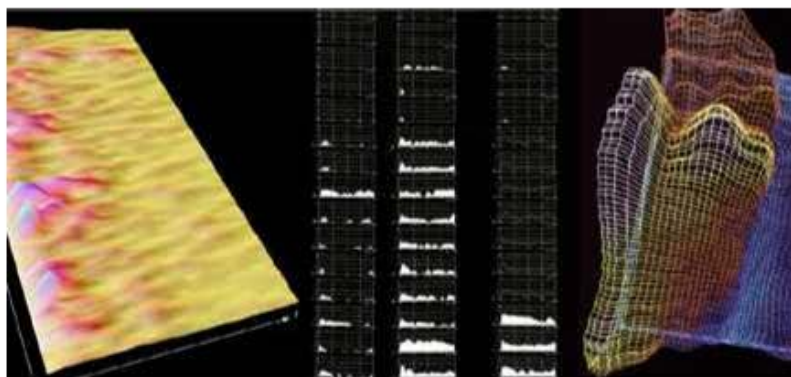
We think it is essential to have a sort of a base camp where you operate from, and ours is definitely Los Angeles. On the other hand we keep very close contact to our colleagues and friends in Europe and the architecture scene there. Architecture is still somewhat of a "Janus head" in this respect. On one hand it appears as a global profession on the other hand it represents a local identity.

Paul Petrunia:

What does sonic intervention mean and how does sound influence the way you are working?

Spacekraftlab:

Sonic intervention is a larger topic we have been developing on for a while. It is a theoretical investigation in sound as a three dimensional tool. We first had this idea when we visited the "cite sonar" exhibition in Paris which dealt with the idea of an acoustic identity of a city. We started to collaborate with a programmer and developed a specialized software that analyzes different characteristics of a sound and translates this analysis into a three dimensional medium. Some of these ideas were implemented for the Museums Quartier Project where we used the sonogram of a voice recording as a form generator and conceptual framework for the project.



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Paul Petrunia:

How does your music background influence the idea to use sound as a generator for forms and concepts?

Spacekraftlab:

We would say the influences are definitely there at least on a conceptual level. But the bottom line is architecture is architecture and music is music. However there are ideas which came out composition techniques that were fascinating and influential for both of us. For example the experiments of Iannis Xenakis with the "Unite Polyagogique Informatique du CEMAMU"¹ ; a program developed in the early 70's that translated graphical notations into sound and resulted in great compositions like Mycenae Alpha. But also the experience with musical notations by Anestis Logothetis and of course there is always John Cage who we admire as a great inventor on many levels.

Paul Petrunia:

Could you explain how you use the digital and analog working processes in your work?

Spacekraftlab:

We have the saying that we will use whatever tool will get us there and if it doesn't exist yet we will invent it. Therefore our working process is basically a mixture of digital and analog methods. Sometimes we build physical models, digitize them, bring them into the computer, modify them and then bring them back into the physical world by rapid prototyping. Other times we design everything in the computer and even have custom programs written like we did for our experiments with sound and electronic space. We have a very fluid process that goes across the whole spectrum of available mediums. In a way we think it is time to overcome the big "wow"¹ of the digital euphoria of the 90's and just look at it for what it is, a tool and not a recipe for design.

Paul Petrunia:

Many of your projects are museums spaces. What makes a museum space an interesting program for you ? Has there been a change in the way we perceive art?

Spacekraftlab:

The turning point really is the way in which we consume information today versus lets say 20 years ago. That has very much changed our perception and reception of many things including art. The contemporary museum can no longer only be an exhibition space by itself, but needs to feed the growing appetite for information if it wants to be able to compete with the information highways surrounding it. A contemporary museum as we envision it is an information hybrid moving beyond the sole functionality of being a representative exhibition shelter that makes it an interesting program for us.

Paul Petrunia:

How did you end up doing a project for the Museums Quartier in Vienna?

Spacekraftlab:

It was an invited competition that had an interesting mix of people. There was the so called "up and coming"¹ offices which we were part of and then they had the old stars like Zaha Hadid, FOA, Eric Moss, Morphosis, etc. The topic was an announcement system for one of the largest contemporary art museums in Europe. Our approach was to design an information hybrid and event structure. In this context we developed a unique approach architecturalizing the idea of the electronic space. We recorded and analyzed the phonetics of the word Museums & Quartier and transformed it's sonogram analysis into a three-dimensional shell, a 120 feet long walkable information center and billboard.



Museums Quartier in Vienna; click image to view gallery

Paul Petrunia:

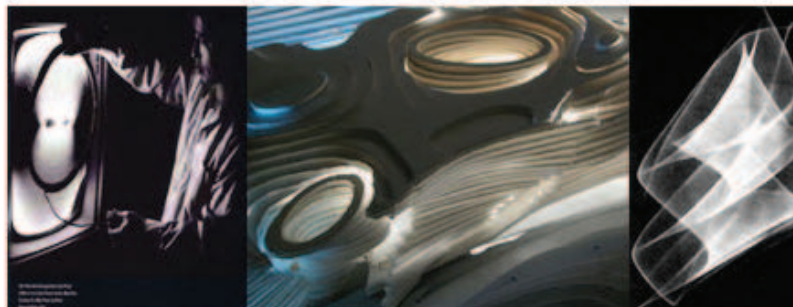
You speak about the electronic space and how it affects a physical reality. Was this one of the concepts for the Nam June Paik Museum and how does this effect design?

Spacekraftlab:

Our interest in the correlation between the virtual and the physical exhibition space was one of the main reasons why we entered the Nam June Paik competition. For us it was the perfect opportunity to try out the idea that the electronic space surrounding us can be sensible, dynamic, and can articulate into an architectural reality.

Based on Nam Jun Paik's early experiments with magnetic distortion of television images we decided to architecturalize this idea into an exhibition space for a museum of electronic art. We created a field of magnetic power points positively and negatively charged within the footprint of the museum, letting them deform its surrounding context. Later the power points translated into "negatively" charged circulation cores which pull space and visitors into the museum, while the positively charge pavilions created exhibition spaces within the museum and are used for special installations such as the Nam Jun Paik Room.

The outcome of this experimental design approach was a museum for electronic art related to the Artists work in a conceptual way, which we translated into a structural system, materials and special dialog between exhibition spaces for the physical and digital art.



Nam June Paik Museum; click image to view gallery

Paul Petrunia:

What projects are you currently working on and what are your plans for the future?

Spacekraftlab:

In the office right now we have a number of projects of vastly different scales. One of particular interest is an urban scale proposal for downtown Los Angeles that is in parallel with the current re-development going on in this area. It is a theoretical project right now, but we hope we can realize at least parts of it. At the other end of the spectrum we are working on a few residential buildings where we are implementing some of the same architectural language and philosophies explored in our theoretical projects.