

# TRANS-FORM-ers

Auckland Architecture Week, 2009

Report by Kathy Waghorn

TRANS-FORM-ers was a design studio run as a joint venture between The University of Auckland School of Architecture and Planning, AUT Department of Spatial Design and Unitec programmes in architecture and interior design. Around 400 students spent a semester designing and fabricating mobile pavilions for public display. The requirement was that on a given Friday evening these pavilions would convoy across the inner city – acting Pied Piper-like in arousing curiosity – before arriving at the old city bus maintenance sheds in the CBD, where they would “transform” in some way.

The requirement to traverse the city was addressed in the students’ projects in many imaginative ways. In one project a scaffolding tower recalling Brodsky and Utkin was towed through the city with Lycra-clad performers writhing atop, in another inflatable fingers billowed out the back of a family sedan, and in a third eight Vespa scooters carried riders whose plywood back-packs housed speakers, the eight tracks they broadcast weaving in and out of synchronicity as they negotiated the traffic. The overall affect on the Friday night rush hour in this infamously car-bound city was a chaotic Situationist-style delight, Love Parade meets oversize haulage with a touch of street protest thrown in for good measure.



Fig. 1. *Nom Inflate, the inflation process.*

On arrival at the venue surprising things tumbled out of curtain-side articulated trucks; one truck housed a timber crate-like contraption while another conveyed a pavilion made from 4000 inflated condoms. The public began to arrive to see things hoisted, unfurled, stretched, clasped, stacked, inflated and clamped as the pavilions (mostly!) took on their intended shape. Even before the audience could enter the pavilions, this setting up provided a spectacle in itself. Once the various offerings were up, though, around 4000 people clambered into and onto them.



Fig. 2 and 3. Nom Inflate, interior. Project by Melanie Pau, Howard Kang, Frances Lowe and Ashleigh Low of The University of Auckland. Photographs by Sav Schulman.

After two hours of trawling across, through, and under all 45 TRANS-FORM-ers projects, a valiant judge, Pip Cheshire, chose two particular projects on which to bestow awards. Nom Inflate from Auckland University (Figs. 1, 2 and 3), canily used the audience as the mechanism of transformation. Their parachute-like project required 50 people to pick up its edges, and then throw it into the air and over their heads. The transformation enacted was immediate and intense; one moment 50 people make a circle in an old shed, the next they find themselves in the svelte, chic, bubble-shaped lounge that results. The success of this project lay in its immaculate detailing, itself a result of much prototyping and materials research. Every aspect of the project conveyed this attention to the detail, from the length and capacity of the sand bags that weighted the bubble's edges, to the panel construction to trap air, to the cabling of lights concealed within the floor panel stitching. For 15 minutes, the time it took for the bubble to softly deflate, the lucky 50 luxuriated in the glamorous interior.

While the Nom Inflate project channelled luxury, This Way Up from Unitec (Figs. 4, 5 and 6) conveyed a sense of danger. The timber pavilion was a crate-like space, but one laterally sliced, with the resulting pieces in a state of constant movement. Entry was made through the gaps that opened up between slices, gaps that could just as quickly close, potentially jamming limbs, necks, heads, whole bodies. An oversized, machine-like contraption, with cogs and wheels all precisely assembled from timber, facilitated the movement.

At the University of Auckland the experience of large-scale fabrication is becoming an important part of the Bachelor of Architectural Studies curricula. Studios and events such as this allow students to learn through experience. This type of studio fosters the use of design strategies and techniques not promoted in regular studios, such as prototyping, large-scale modelling, stress testing and the production of shop drawings. To realise a project such as these for TRANS-FORM-ers, students are required to engage with the world, seeking out materials and systems, locating equipment, managing budgets and negotiating assistance and support. The students must work in small teams and thus experience the difficulties and rewards of the collaborative process, designing, presenting, project managing and fabricating through discussion and negotiation. Through such studios we intend that students begin to see constraint as a driver of architectural opportunity. The constraints encountered may include that of the brief, budget, site/venue, regulatory requirement, time and the collaborative work process. Through a well-designed and supported studio project such as this we aim to help the students maintain conceptual rigour in the face of these encounters. If TRANS-FORM-ers is anything to go by this seems to be paying off.

To see a video of TRANS-FORM-ers go to  
<http://www.creative.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/home/about/ab-creative-showcase/architecture-planning-showcase>

The TRANS-FORM-ers competition blog is <http://trans-form-ers.blogspot.com/>

The 2010 project is called SKYRISE City, info on  
<http://skyrise-city.blogspot.com/>



Fig. 4, 5 and 6. *This Way Up* by Ryan Ford, Pat Kelly, Craig Plant and Adrian Leat of the Unitec architecture programme. Photographs by Anna Tong.



Fig. 7. The crowd arrives as the TRANS-FORMers projects are set up. Photograph by Sav Schulman.