



All photos courtesy Rice Gallery

*Rip Curl Canyon* was meant to be a virtual landscape, which for some meant a virtual playground.

## Landscape in the Digital Field

*Rip Curl Canyon*  
Rice Gallery

Reviewed by Andrew Vrana

The emergence of landscape as a theme of discussion and production in art and design last fall in Houston was a local manifestation of a recent global interest in the subject. Landscape as either metaphor or artifice has become a means to model or realize various aesthetic visions and systemic organizations, from the painter's canvas to large urban conglomerations.

The Rice Design Alliance's *Resurfacing the City* lecture series featured an array of designers who operate between the disciplines of shaping landscape and planning infrastructure. In the recent past, the role of each design field was isolated by a separation between an urban and pastoral dichotomy. Landscape designers groomed nature into pictur-

esque idealizations, and planners plowed through everything without concern for aesthetics. The new complex of multi-disciplinary practice realizes that at some point everything became essentially urbanized, and that one has to absorb an understanding of ecology and materiality in order to organize complex systems of the landscape and urban fields. With this, a new vitality between the city and nature becomes possible.

Parallel to this discussion, Rice Gallery last fall curated a site-specific installation titled *Rip Curl Canyon* by Los Angeles' Ball-Nogues Studio. Benjamin Ball and Gaston Nogues, along with a team of students and faculty from the University of Houston College of Architecture and the Rice University School of Architecture, inhabited the gallery for several days in order to build an artificial landscape, one conceived in a virtual space far from the physical reality

of Houston. This simultaneous separation from and connection to place, on view last September 21 to October 29, was an important theme that contextualized the work.

Ball and Nogues are part of a trend in which young designers use the flexible space of the gallery or the temporary installation to experiment with architectural constructions that incorporate digital tools, material innovation, and non-standard modularity. Former collaborators with Frank Gehry's office who trained at SCI-Arc, Ball and Nogues are fostering a new instrumentality between a loose programmatic condition and a formal and material response.

*Rip Curl Canyon* was the temporary manifestation of a virtual landscape. The designers used a constellation of digital media to create a topography that was not modeled on an actual place, but which evoked a natural geological formation. Using the non-standard, curvilinear geometry that 3D software makes possible, Ball and Nogues produced a surface that took on the freedom to cascade and fold like an indoor ski-slope, or a surfer's "killer wave" frozen for posterity. The Gehry aesthetic was most apparent in the use of

vertically oriented cardboard sections that formed a surface through repetition and displacement. Nogues worked in Gehry's model studio, and was instrumental in the development of some of his cardboard furniture. In that furniture, a standard series of profiles are adhered together to form the shape of a chair. With *Rip Curl Canyon*, this technique was applied on a massive scale.

One stroke of clever ingenuity was the creation of a differentiated surface with a series of standard profiles repeated and supported by a shifting substrate made out of a reticulated plywood frame. This was an economical response to how the sections of cardboard were cut by a standard die at a box company in Dallas. To change the shape of the die would have been cost prohibitive, and also unnecessary, if Ball and Nogues could constrain the shape of a section while pushing the formal moves of the overall surface. This was achieved with parametric software that allows for the control of finite components of an assembly while the overall system of pieces changes shape.

Designers of jets, cell phones, and shoes have already used these tools, and now digitally plugged-in architects are



The plywood substrate that supported *Rip Curl Canyon* was a compelling sight on its own.



Though meant to be experienced up close, from a distance *Rip Curl Canyon* looked less like landscape and more like sculpture.

incorporating their potential. The plywood substrate was a compelling construction on its own. It was produced by Brochstein's, a local millwork fabrication company, using Computer Numerically Controlled (CNC) routing equipment set to specific dimensions derived from the digital model. The substrate arrived as a series of pieces that went together with minimal site work and within exacting tolerances.

Maximilian's Schell, an earlier installation by Ball-Nogues Studio at Los Angeles' Materials & Applications Gallery, was an elegant experiment in material lightness and minimal surface—composed of a series of CNC cut pieces arranged in a spiraling vortex array. Using translucent, gold-tinted Mylar, the construction was installed in an outdoor gallery space that allowed it to play off natural light as the day progressed, creating a shifting mirror image that projected onto the ground and passing visitors. This element of play was carried forward in *Rip Curl Canyon's* undulating surface, which was designed to be climbed and navigated by the younger visitors to the gallery.

The use of an art gallery to launch an architectural project is nothing new.

A number of designers who were once considered purely experimental, but who are now getting large commissions, started their careers in the controlled environment of the gallery. The recent retrospective of Zaha Hadid's work at New York's Guggenheim Museum traced this trajectory from her early paintings to her current urban and built work. Others have watched this trend and are realizing the power of working outside the typical understanding of practice while producing projects that experiment with ideas of material production and space making—all without having to keep the rain out.

One project that preceded *Rip Curl Canyon* with regard to this trend, as well as in theme, was 1996's *Skin of the Earth* by Raoul Bunschoten. Bunschoten ran a studio unit at the Architectural Association in London that used the gallery as the site of experimentation for partial architectures. *Skin of the Earth* consisted of a series of lead plates that were individually folded and collectively sutured together to create supple, pre-digital undulating surfaces that were a metaphor for the tectonic plates and metropolitan layers that form the epidermal surface of the global landscape. I mention

these references to contextualize the gallery based architectural project as being initiated by designers such as Bunschoten and Hadid, and to show how such work has evolved.

The Rice Gallery should be applauded for opening their curatorial agenda to include this kind of speculative architectural project. Along with the Blaffer Gallery, which a short while back hosted the work of the Ant Farm Collective, it is fostering a dialogue between art and architectural culture in Houston that is raising awareness on local and national scales. ■