

INFLECTION

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Feedback

Features:
Jack Self
Greg Lynn
Christine Mamsler
Nicole Lambrou

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FEEDBACK

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Nicole Lambrou is a practicing architect, urban designer and researcher. Her practice tinkercraft attempts to reveal and question the relationship between people, institutions and the makings of natures through design and research. Her writing and projects focus on how the politics of climate shape urban environmental transformations. She documents the work of design and planning professionals and everyday urban dwellers in making new natures in their cities and explores the values that drive their efforts.

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CONTENTS

06	Editorial	16	Jack Self With Great Power...	48	William Ward A Red Wine Cheers: To the Intimacies of Industry	86	Isabella Ascenzo How to Survive Aleppo حلب كيف تنجو
08	Olivia Potter Notes on Point Clouds	24	Kevin Jones Territories of Feedback: Process, Project and Pedagogy in the Design of a New University Library in Malawi, Africa	54	Joshua Bolchover On Frameworks	92	Jil Raleigh Treeplayer: Reconnecting People and Trees Through Sound
10	Sarah Hirschman Harold as Feedback's Foil: Improvisational Comedy and Architecture	34	Curtis Roth Ten Outsourced Interiors: On the Disentanglement of Creative Expression from Productive Labour	60	Hamish Lonergan Fuck Yeah Hume: Architectural Taste on Social Media	100	Greg Lynn The Future of Craft
		42	Alice Schenk-Green and Michael Thorpe 200 Years of Identity	66	Joseph Norster and Millie Cattlin Analogue Loop: These Are The Projects We Do Together	104	Christine Wamsler On Resilience and Natural Disasters
				76	Nicole Lambrou Making Landscapes Legible: An Ecology of Feedback Loops	110	James Bowman Fletcher Boiling Water: Contemporary Society's Misplaced Preoccupation With Time-Saving Devices
						116	Alexander Ford and Nicholas Gervasi Experimental Preservation: Architectural Assimilation of an Ephemeral Monument Through Experimental Preservation

EDITORIAL

*Lucia Amies, Samuel Chesbrough,
Sarah Mair, Olivia Potter and William Ward*

Inanimate data can never speak for themselves, and we always bring to bear some conceptual framework, either intuitive and ill-formed, or tightly and formally structured, to the task of investigation, analysis, and interpretation. —Rob Kitchin, *The Data Revolution: Big Data, Open Data, Data Infrastructures and Their Consequences*.

At present, the term ‘big data’ is virtually ubiquitous: think Cambridge Analytica, social credit and crime prevention systems powered by exhaustive data collection and targeted advertising in our email. *Inflection* vol. 5: *Feedback* is an exploration of how designers might manifest this trend within the built environment. Once the purview of software engineers and data scientists, trends in feedback collection, use and theory are now being influenced by designers, while their everyday practice is increasingly concerned with its outcomes.

While we speculate about the boundaries of design’s future, we also critique its present and revisit its past. The original provocation for this volume of *Inflection* used Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood’s unbuilt Fun Palace project as a framework for speculation. The project was a tongue-in-cheek (but also deadly serious) reaction to the marked increase in available leisure time in the post-World War II era. The allure and the life of the project (arguably) are not found in its architectural expression, but in Price and Littlewood’s utopian aspiration for the truly free society that it would facilitate. The data used here, however rudimentary, is just the glue that holds the project together—data is not just referred to, but utilised to achieve a defined ideological goal.

Regardless of whether the data designers work with is ‘low’ or ‘high’ tech, what matters more is the conceptual framework they adopt to organise and prioritise that data. Data analytics might be a more technically sophisticated methodology than a participatory design consultation, but that alone does not guarantee a positive outcome for each

stakeholder in a project. There is a pressing need for designers to re-engage with multidisciplinary theories and concepts that can help them take rigorous, principled positions on the increasingly difficult conditions of the “wicked problems” they encounter.¹ Sometimes, we draw such models from counter-intuitive sources: Hamish Lonergan contends that 18th century philosopher David Hume’s theory of taste and criticism informs our understanding of the oft-maligned style of architectural conjecture that we find in our social media feed. In the same vein, Sarah Hirschman demonstrates how a methodology borrowed from improvisational comedy could encourage a more egalitarian approach to the everyday practice of design.

The wealth of new data and feedback methodologies accessible to designers can enrich well-established modes of practice. Kevin Jones details how a conceptual understanding of feedback loops helped inform his design team’s approach to replacing the fire-ravaged campus library at Mzuzu University in Malawi, Africa. Here, structured and reflective collaboration with stakeholders and clients ultimately enriched the methodologies of each designer’s practice. In a similar vein, Millie Cattlin and Joseph Norster demonstrate how Price and Littlewood’s ambitions might translate to a contemporary, pragmatic context. As part of their work establishing their Melbourne-based exhibition space Testing Grounds, they have designed a space for flexibility and creative expression that is firmly grounded in modularity, affordability and practicality.

Designers could acquiesce to a popular consensus dictated by political or economic influences; but the practice of design is uniquely positioned to critique, and maybe even start to arrest, the more undesirable directions that we find our society heading. Jil Raleigh discusses how the *TreePlayer* app she helped develop fosters a cultural awareness of nature in Melbourne’s CBD, using a combination of publicly-available data and design ingenuity. Similarly, Nicole Lambrou posits

that deploying smart technology in eco-engineered landscape design can play a pivotal role in altering public attitudes towards climatic risk and resilience. In fact, it is the sophisticated knowledge and interpretation of these landscapes that determines our ability to meaningfully affect them. Nicholas Gervasi and Alexander Ford’s project refashions the monument into a dynamic force that speaks to the passage of time. Their proposal counterintuitively seeks to capture a temporal, fleeting phenomenon: a decades-old oil leakage from a wrecked World War II battleship, the U.S.S Arizona, becomes the site for reflection, homage and speculation. Gervasi and Ford imagine a monument that encompasses the present and future, not just the past.

Continuing squabbles over data ethics and privacy demonstrate that a proportion of those possibilities might not be all that desirable.² The daily movements and interactions of warehouse employees are being reduced to an efficiency calculation by sophisticated multinationals like Amazon and productivity gains are becoming dependent on constant surveillance and analysis.³ James Bowman Fletcher focusses on the technical improvements made possible by feedback loops using the seemingly banal task of boiling water, and reflects on how productivity efficiencies that could hypothetically result in the increased free time for workers that is typically re-allocated to contracted time.

Aware of their claim to agency, practitioners start to push for a more socially conscious and integrated role for design. In our wide-ranging conversation, author and architect Jack Self suggests that designers can, and should, advocate for an ethical agenda in their projects. Curtis Roth explores the complexities of authorship and design’s submerged complicity for working conditions through an exploration of the thriving art-copying market in Dafen, in the Shenzhen province of China. Roth commissioned

a series of reproductions from labourers, attaching an accompanying specification requesting that each painter also paint their surroundings, and that the reproduced painting be erased by a separate artist. The result is a series of complex, contradictory portraits that contain traces of the state’s fabricated agenda, the painter’s own intent, the authority of the designer and the squalid living conditions that make it all affordable. Roth’s provocation invites designers to consider the dense web of sociocultural, economic and labour conditions that professional authority distances them from.

By no means does *Inflection* vol. 5 claim to hold the answers to these provocations; rather, it posits a variety of ways to approach them. Our focus here is not so much the outcomes of data-driven design as it is the methodologies, processes and frameworks that designers employ to arrive at them: what do we choose to value, and how are those values expressed in our practice?

01 Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 155–169.
02 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013).
03 Tom Simonite, “Grasping Robots Compete to Rule Amazon’s Warehouses,” *Wired*, <https://www.wired.com/story/grasping-robots-compete-to-rule-amazons-warehouses/> (accessed October 16, 2017).

NOTES ON POINT CLOUDS

Olivia Potter

The cover image of *Inflection* vol. 5 is a point cloud representation of the South Lawn at the University of Melbourne Parkville campus, and was generated from a scan produced as part of Ben Waters' Studio 19: IMG.ING (Semester 2, 2017). Gregg Franz from FARO conducted this scan using LIDAR technology.

The car park itself sits below a grassed and tree-lined lawn, used by university students and professors to relax and catch sunlight between classes. These two levels (the car park and the lawn) were scanned separately and—because the technology measures the relative distances of point coordinates—the two scans of South Lawn were able to be stitched together to create a single swarm of points.

Designed by the architectural firm Loader & Bayley and completed in November 1972, at its time of construction, South Lawn was the only fully enclosed car park in Australia. Marked at one entrance by an 18th century door from Dublin and at another by two statues of Atlas from the demolished Colonial Bank in Elizabeth Street, the otherwise almost hidden interior uses parabolic concrete profiles set on short columns to support the lawn above.¹ The car park was used in George Miller's film *Mad Max* (1979).

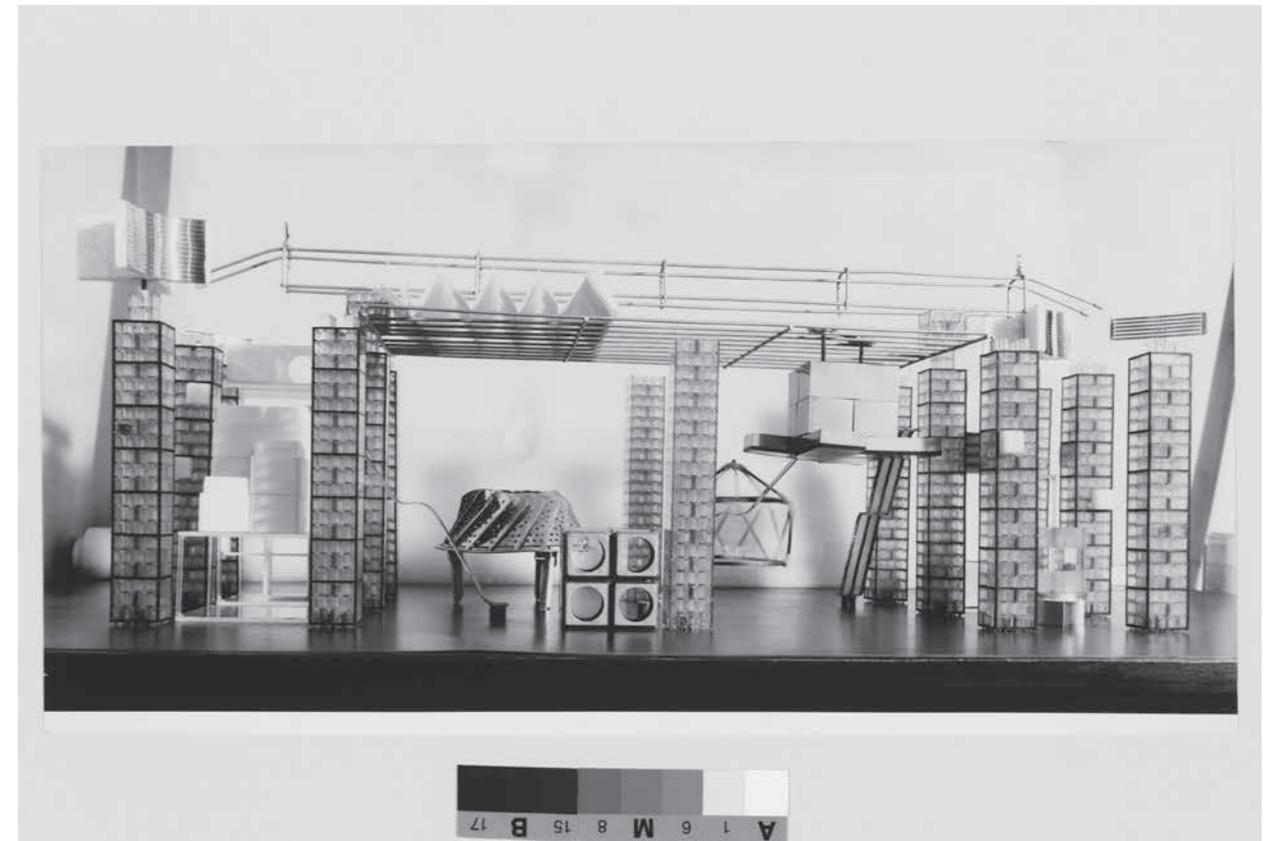
A LIDAR Scanner generates a point cloud by emitting rapidly pulsing (or continuous) laser beams towards objects. As it is doing this, the scanner also rotates around its vertical axis. Simultaneously, a mirror moves the scanner up and down. By turning on its horizontal axis, the scanner systematically

runs a three dimensional sweep of its setting. When the laser beam detects it has hit a surface, energy is bounced back to the scanner and a timer records how long this has taken. From this information, a distance can then be calculated to record the location of a single point.²

This process is repeated thousands of times; points are recorded and fed back to the scanning technology to generate a cloud of relative positions in space. Each of these points is accompanied by an RGB reading, produced from a series of photographs taken by the device's inbuilt camera. This technology creates a highly accurate, fast and detailed three dimensional image of the scanner's visible physical environment. This data and accompanying process of generating digital feedback holds countless possibilities.

Opposite: Studio IMG.ING, *South Lawn car park, University of Melbourne*, 2017. Point cloud scan by FARO. Image reproduced with author's permission.

01 Heritage Council Victoria, "Underground Car Park," Victorian Heritage Database Report (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, July 27, 2018), <http://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/3808/download-report>.
02 Leica Geosystems AG, "Laser scanning: Chapter 2 of 3 - How It All Works," (video) November 20, 2012, accessed July 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LD01UevAJI>.



Cedric Price, *Fun palace*, 1964. Model. Image courtesy of Cedric Price fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture.

The term 'big data' is virtually ubiquitous in both cultural and technical contexts. The fifth volume of *Inflection* is an open-ended investigation into how designers are interpreting and countering the prevailing narrative that pushes for greater efficiency and automation using sophisticated data analytics. *Feedback* gathers a wide range of responses, united by their collective advocacy for a sophisticated understanding of processes, frameworks and ethics.

Inflection is a student-run design journal based at the Melbourne School of Design, University of Melbourne. Born from a desire to stimulate debate and generate ideas, it advocates the discursive voice of students, academics and practitioners. Founded in 2013, *Inflection* is a home for provocative writing—a place to share ideas and engage with contemporary discourse.



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