

## Constructing New Work Roles for High-tech Times

By Lisa Delgado

**Event:** Building in the Future: Recasting Labor in Architecture

**Location:** Center for Architecture, 02.24.10

**Speakers:** Peggy Deamer — Principal, Deamer Studio & Professor, Yale School of Architecture; Phillip G. Bernstein, FAIA — Vice President, Autodesk & Lecturer in Professional Practice, Yale School of Architecture; Scott Marble, AIA — Founding Partner, Marble Fairbanks Architects & Faculty, Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation; Chris Noble — Partner, Noble and Wickersham

**Organizers:** Yale School of Architecture



Toni Stabile Student Center, designed by Marble Fairbanks Architects.

Jongseo Kim

There are books aplenty about how digital design is spurring formal innovations in architecture, but one new book, [\*Building \(in\) the Future: Recasting Labor in Architecture\*](#) (Princeton Architectural Press, 2010), focuses on a different, equally important topic: the seismic shifts in labor roles that have accompanied technological advances. At a recent book launch event, some of the book's editors and authors discussed the ways in which the work — and the self-image — of architects is transforming.

The book grew out of interviews and conversations at a Yale symposium in 2006, and the essential issues remain the same today, said Peggy Deamer, who co-edited the book with Phil Bernstein, FAIA. Advances in technology are accompanying a shift away from the ideal of the architect as a highly individualistic “Howard Roarkian figure.” Instead of striving to be a “master architect,” architects now gravitate more toward the role of “master builder:” someone who organizes and depends on the expertise of contractors, fabricators, etc., to create a project in tight collaboration. “The fabricator or sub, who used to be an anonymous character at the end of the food chain, offers essential input into the possible parameters of the design solution, thereby claiming authorship rights,” she said.

This shift in the division of labor is ill understood, and for the architect, it is rife with issues of risk vs. control. “The authors want to have us make sure that risk — as the essential ingredient to innovation — still has a place,” Deamer remarked.

For tech-savvy firm Marble Fairbanks, embracing risk is essential to what they do. The firm's forte is “pushing these technologies and these new working protocols in the interest of design and innovation,” Scott Marble, AIA, said. For the Toni Stabile Student Center for Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, the firm experimented with breaking down the usual hierarchy between architects and consultants. Marble Fairbanks collaborated with a range of other design and technology entities, which they treated as equals in the design process. The unconventional approach allowed the small firm to greatly expand its capabilities.

To design a cloudlike pattern of perforations in steel ceiling panels in a social hub, Marble Fairbanks enlisted the help of design firm Proxy, which provided a script to create a pattern that would meet the necessary acoustic requirements. Stevens Institute of Technology's Product-Architecture Lab was recruited to help develop a sunshade system for a glass-enclosed café. The collaborators used a series of computer scripts to develop the design of steel panels whose patterns of perforations and corrugations reduced the heat gain by 80%.

The project highlights the importance of “designing design,” as Marble called it. With these new technologies, “design

processes themselves need to be foregrounded as an issue to take on,” he said. “Same with fabrication. With direct file fabrication technologies, the potentials of material — the potentials of craft, even — begin to be reformulated.”

Bernstein remarked that in three-and-a-half years “there has been a tremendous acceleration in the kinds of technologies that are available to the building industry.” The adoption of building information modeling (BIM) has increased dramatically, and other technologies may herald new shifts in the work of architects, in which the design process and field implementation become linked even tighter. With the book, he hopes “to create a theoretical frame in which we can begin to explore these options, because the technology is moving even much, much more quickly than we could possibly have known,” he said.

Lisa Delgado is a freelance journalist who has written for *OCULUS*, *The Architect’s Newspaper*, *I.D.*, *Blueprint*, and *Wired*, among other publications.

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