

Surface Relief: A Case for Things in the Round

Things in the round are optimistic and generative, hoping to draw out novel, possible futures for our physical realm and demonstrate architecture's agency in the world.

ELLIE ABRONS

University of Michigan

As a formal and material approach to architectural form making, “things in the round” describes more than three-dimensional objects viewed from multiple angles, although that is important. The term is applied also to describe forms that are conceptually in the round through an entanglement of associations, sensible qualities, and ineffable effects. As set out in this paper, this notion of things in the round reveals a potential in architecture's physicality to cultivate an audience and to draw people into engaged forms of both cognitive and sensory interaction with architectural things. Things in the round are optimistic and generative, hoping to draw out novel, possible futures for our physical realm and demonstrate architecture's agency in the world.

Without being oppositional, it is quite useful to explicate this idea of “things in the round” as a concept distinct from other approaches to architectural form making that are based on surfaces. Where surface-based approaches utilize two-dimensional profiles to produce shapes¹, the “round” uses three-dimensional curvature to produce figures and figuration. Here, the distinction between figuration and shape points to the latter's propensity for extrusion, and thus child-like reductions of form, and the former's tendency for sculpted forms, which leads to more nuanced associations with recognizable things. In other words, profile uses reduction to achieve abstracted shapes while things in the round use resemblance to produce familiar yet unknown figures.

Further, surfaces and profiles tend to be one-sided, intended to be viewed from one angle or position, and therefore prioritize frontality. Things in the round, on the other hand, are inherently multi-sided, intended to be viewed in motion, and thus prioritize the peripatetic. Closely related to this emphasis on frontality, surface-based approaches produce forms that can be apprehended in an instant, providing a type of image-based, graphic, immediacy that is accessible and populist. Round things, however, aim for prolonged attention through tactile and haptic experiences that combine with strong visual impressions to create sustained attention that, while still accessible and popular, offer deeper engagements.



Figure 1: *Texture Tectonics* by EADO & SIFT, 2015.



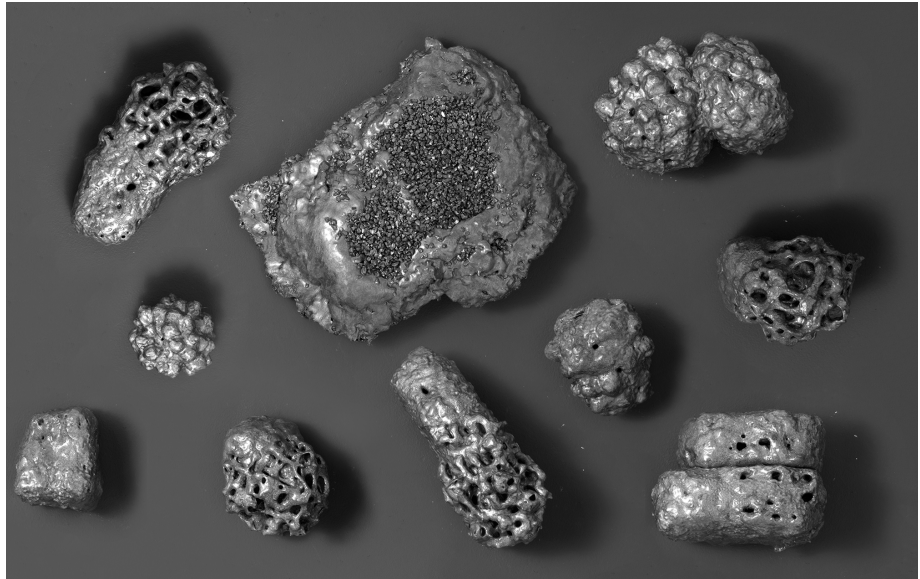
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This emphasis on “the round,” and its curving, undulating, bulbous, lumpy, or otherwise three-dimensional form replaces instantaneous comprehension with the curious pleasure of the unexpected and replaces the smoothness of planar surfaces with a focus on rich, textured, highly articulated ones. These two scales of engagement—a larger attention to overall figuration and a more zoomed in consideration of tactility and texture—produce things whose silhouette, whose appearance, whose disposition continuously change as one moves around, or between, them. The encounter with a thing in the round is thus fluid and in motion. The experience is not fixed or stable—and this elasticity produces a new architectural subjectivity defined by reciprocity between the thing and its viewer.

The concept of “things in the round” opens up beneficial territory for architectural form making. One, it allows for a new conception of abstraction. Historically, abstraction liberated architecture from representation through a stripping away of associations and attributes. As such, it strove to create a universal language of expression that could be read, like a text, into form. Modern architects wished to divest architecture of its role as the embodiment of power and culture through a rejection of ornament and instead, turn to structure and function as the means to achieving formal harmony. This type of Modernist abstraction was invested in an architectural metaphysics that bears little relevance in today’s world of globalism, plurality, and complexity. The myth of essentialism has been largely debunked (one can find this across disciplines through post-structuralist thought, science studies, and so forth), but the literal and conceptual thinness of the surface do not allow for an alternative project of multiplicity to emerge. Things in the round, however, offer an opportunity to reconceive of abstraction as a means to multivalence rather than unity. Their forms allude to familiar entities—such as animals, babies, or rocks—and thus approximate articulated objects with known associations. However, they never resolve those associations into one discernible entity; they layer associations across scales and through volumes to produce multiple readings, conceptions and images. Here, abstraction moves something *towards* another thing as opposed to away from it—or more accurately, towards many things—while denying apotheosis in order to preserve ambiguity and the seductive quality of pre-climactic experience.

Another benefit to this approach, things in the round allow architecture to communicate differently. Like a moth to the flame, architecture and architects have returned time and again to questions of architecture’s capacity to deliver a message, its methods of doing so, and the meaning it conveys. From architecture conceived as the embodiment of

Figure 2: *Erratic* by Norell/Rodhe, 2013.



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cultural (or godly) ideals, to a system of signs and symbols like operate like language, to a denial of its communicative role, the ideologies have been varied and cyclical. Things in the round accept and embrace architecture's communicative nature with an emphasis on the modes of delivery rather than the message. They have nothing specific to say, a contrast with surface-based approaches that tend to deliver a single message through clearly defined methods. For example, the tectonic surfaces that Kenneth Frampton describes in his seminal book, *Studies in Tectonic Culture*, communicate the poetics of their construction.² And Peter Eisenman's House VI (Frank House) from 1975 is comprised of abstracted planes and structural elements that index the process of their formation. Here, surfaces are a notational system that communicates the origins of the design.³ Perhaps a more contemporary example would be the intricate assemblies of Marc Fornes & THEVERYMANY that use thousands of customized parts and gradient color shifts to speak the language of architecture's digital turn: topology, curvature, and continuous change.⁴ In contrast to all of these examples, things in the round do not speak clearly—they mumble and whisper. They do not deny communication, but rather embrace the possibility of unintended meaning, misreading, and obfuscation in that exchange. They achieve this through the means of abstraction aforementioned (alluding to the familiar without representing it) in addition to a tendency to look like different things from different angles. Something that confuses apprehension and changes appearances may very well be communicating, but it cannot deliver a clear message. This refusal to overtly communicate one message allows things in the round to engage in more informal conversations where their role moves fluidly between objects of contemplation and subjects in dialogue with each other and with us.

Lastly, things in the round anticipate an architectural subject, producing more intimate and meaningful engagement with architecture's audience. They do not attempt to control the circumstances of viewing but are invested in elongating the timespan of subjective engagement through formal allusion, highly articulated textures and surfaces, and elastic forms. As previously described, this approach encourages the subject, or viewer, to move around the object, to inspect it closely and from afar, to notice it and consider it, but not to feel obligated to interpret it or discern its meaning. It produces a counterintuitive combination of vague forms of resemblance with extreme surface articulation, provoking architecture's participants to engage the thing directly as a physical and sensorial encounter.

In conclusion, the concept of "things in the round" allows architecture to leverage its physicality towards engaging its audience. Materiality and form are pointed towards producing

Figure 3: *Rocks* by SIFT Studio, 2014.



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ENDNOTES

1. See Somol, R.E. "12 Reasons to Get Back into Shape" *Content*. Eds. Office of Metropolitan Architecture and Rem Koolhaas. Köln: Taschen, 2004: 86-87
2. Frampton, Kenneth. *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995
3. Peter Eisenman, House VI (Frank House), Cornwall, Connecticut, 1975
4. See March Fornes/THEVERYMANY's website for multiple examples of this type of work: theverymany.com



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curious things that reference their origins and ecologies (technological, material, referential and so forth) but do not speak clearly of them. This approach places weight on investigations of form and architecture's persistent "problems" (such as the corner problem, the window problem, and the ground problem) but does not lead to an autonomous discipline. Its focus on the production of cognitive and sensory interaction with architecture ensures this. This focus on physicality leads to an engaged discipline, but not a contingent one. Ultimately, the ambition is to marry formal and material innovations with socio-cultural proposals—lending architecture agency in the world. It does not lead to architecture that is derived from its context or even attempting to relate to it, but rather one which constitutes its context. It looks for agency in the thing itself.

Figure 4: *Between You and Me* by Meredith Miller and Thom Moran, 2015.

Figure 5: *Mirror Mirror* by EADO & SIFT, 2013.