



J. Mayer H.  
In Heat, 2005  
Installation view

In 1932, the Museum of Modern Art in New York became the world's first museum to boast a department devoted to architecture and design. Curated by Philip Johnson, Alfred H. Barr Jr., and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the exhibition "The International Style: Architecture Since 1922," which opened in that same year, would introduce such notable architects as Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius to the American public while establishing the museum's role as a cornerstone in the architectural landscape.

Following suit in 1940, San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art organized its first architectural exhibition, inviting the progressive design society Telesis to mount a program that would encourage a broader understanding of the Bay Area's built environment. "Telesis: Space for Living" proved so influential that it prompted the city of San Francisco to establish an office of planning.

Henry Urbach, who was appointed the

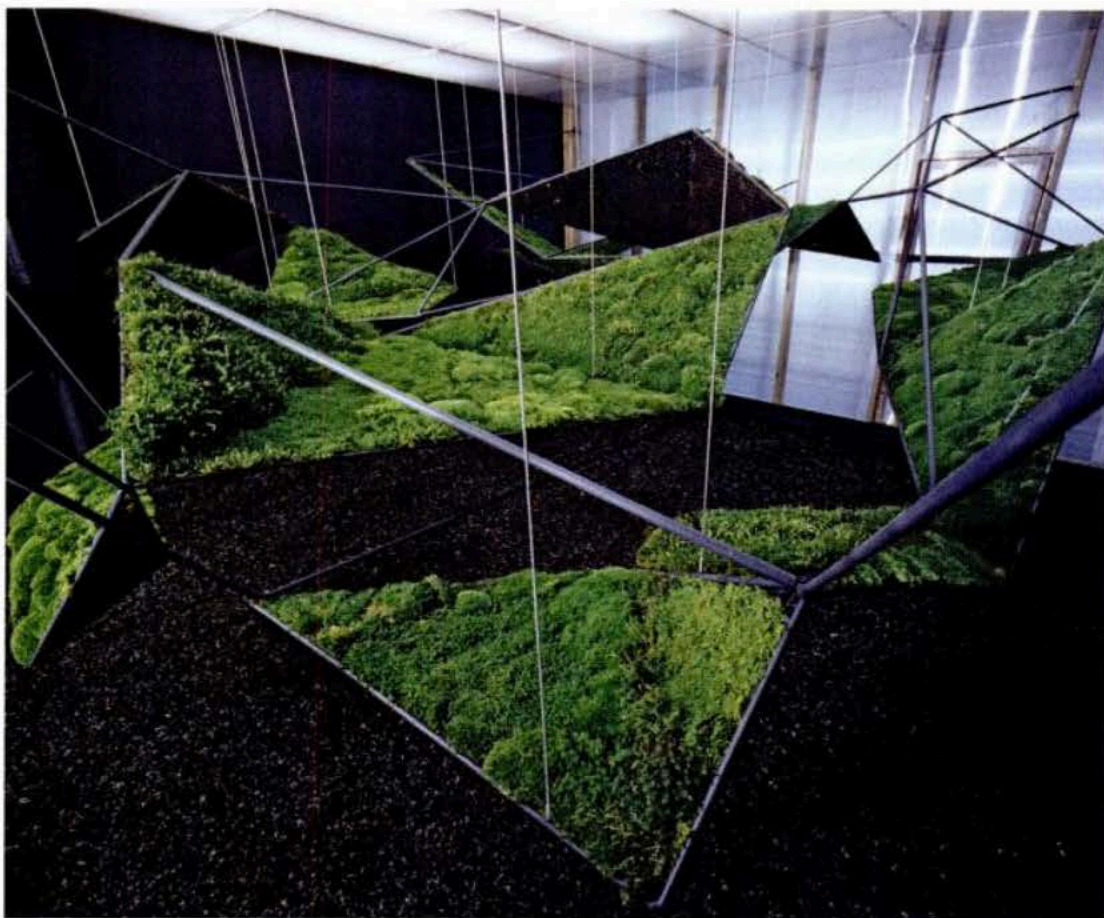
SFMOMA's Helen Raiser Curator of Architecture and Design in 2006, is aware of the opportunity for cultural impact offered by exhibiting architecture and design. Although the subject had found solid footing in the museum environment, in the late 1990s Urbach was the first to transfer the freshness and entrepreneurial zeal of the private-gallery art world to design and architecture. For almost a decade his Chelsea, New York-based gallery, Henry Urbach Architecture, operated outside of the mainstream, providing a fertile testing ground for progressive architects and designers to experiment—and the world took notice.

Now that he's at SFMOMA, has Urbach gone mainstream, or will he bring his unique outlook to a larger audience? "The SFMOMA was consistently one of my gallery's best clients," he tells us, "so I feel confident about taking that tradition forward." During a recent heat wave we sat down with Urbach for a chat over iced coffee. ►

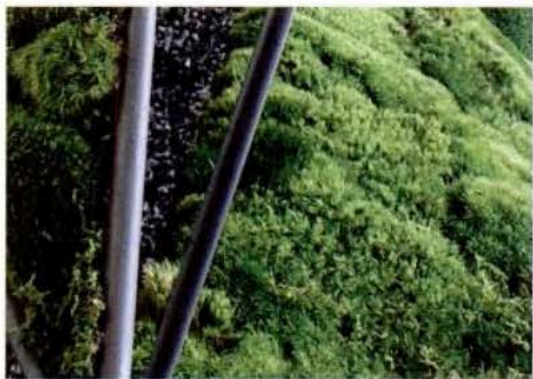
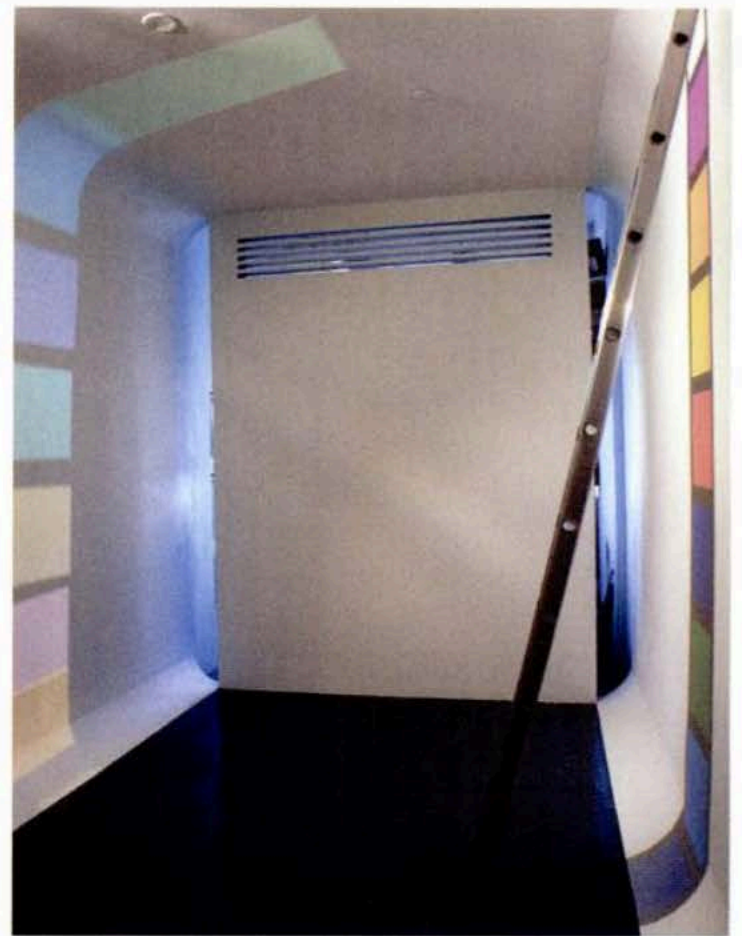
## Henry Urbach: Curatorial Explorer



PHOTOGRAPH BY WINNI WINTERMEYER



Stephen Dean  
Balance 385, 2004  
Installation view



Freecell  
Moistscape, 2004  
Installation view

**You ran a private gallery in New York and now you're a curator for an art museum. How different are the two roles?**

I'd say it's both similar and different. A gallery is a public environment where you get a lot of different people coming through, and as much as possible you want to be able to address and relate to them. With a museum the same is true, but much more so. It's a larger audience. It's a broader public—especially for a department of architecture and design in a modern art museum where a lot of people are coming to see shows on painting, sculpture, or photography, and wander into the design gallery.

**So where does design fit into a museum that's basically an art museum? Even if an object has origins as a tactile, everyday-use kind of product, does it become art when you rope it off and put it in a museum?**

It's a very strange and interesting hybrid that makes for a lot of challenges and a lot

of opportunities. It's part of the legacy of modernism with the founding of the Museum of Modern Art [in New York]. Including the architecture and design department at the outset had very much to do with the modernist notion of an alliance of the arts in the service of social betterment. At the SFMOMA, we inherit that.

What I think is really great about that is it pitches design on the same cultural level as the fine arts and creates an opportunity for interesting dialogues among the fields. Now more than ever, the interstices between the arts and design professions are rich sites of experimentation. It puts us in a good position to navigate that in-between space.

**And how do you go about that?**

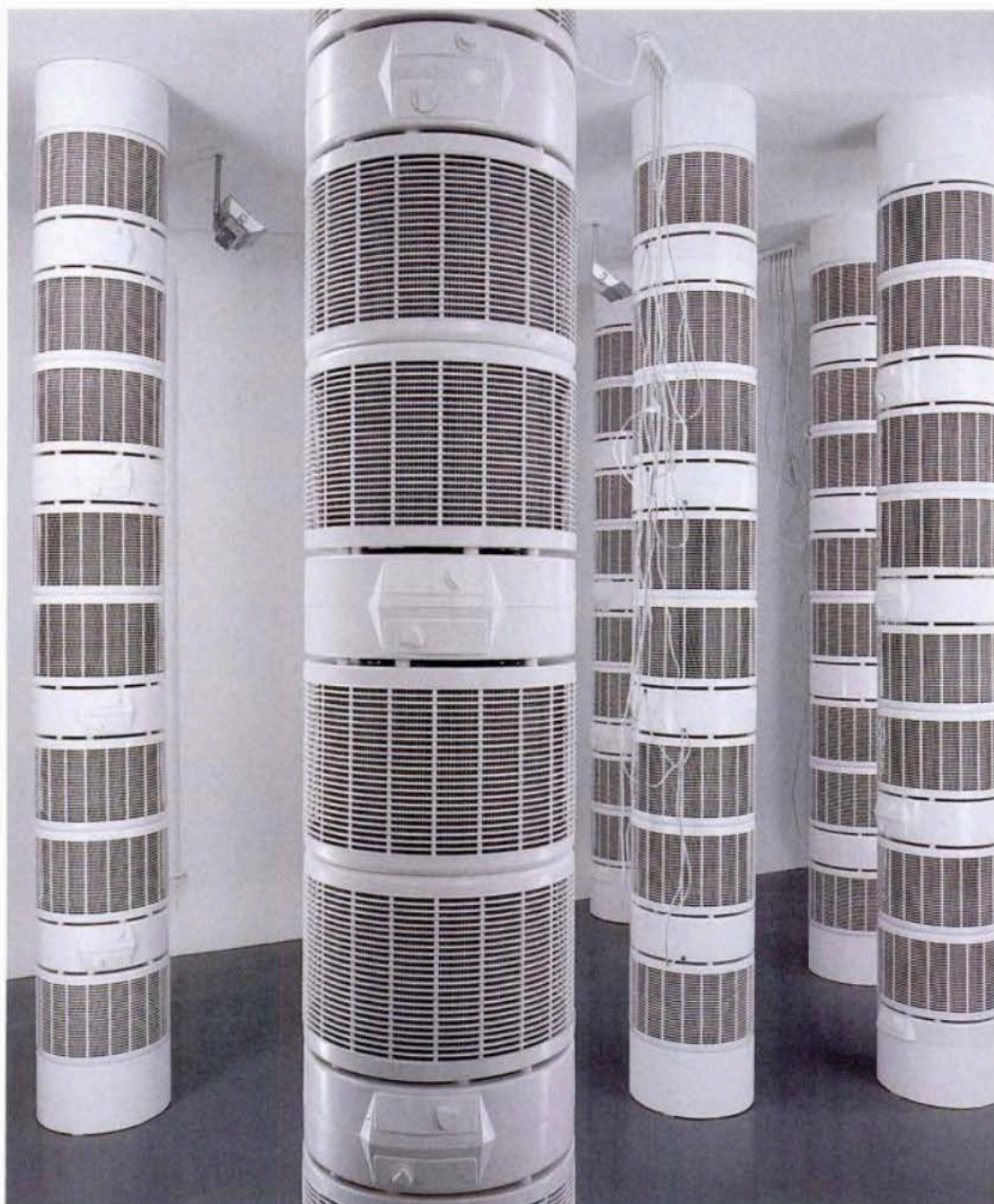
One promising example is Olafur Eliasson's Ice Car—also called "Your mobile expectations"—which we're going to be presenting pretty soon. This is a project that he's doing with BMW, one of their so-called "art cars."

Here's an artist who is effectively creating a sculpture by working with an advanced piece of automotive design. A sculpture where the meaning can be understood by examining the future of car design.

Another example comes from architects who work in an installation mode, something that I've been interested in for a long time. What architects are able to do in a gallery or an exhibition space is present work at a one-to-one scale, as a fully realized work of design rather than a representation or an image of another work.

**That's what was special about your gallery, and the nature of the work you chose to exhibit. What was it in your background that led you to that point?**

I felt I could do more for the present and future of architecture in our culture, not by following an academic route [Urbach has two master's degrees, one in architecture from Columbia, the other in the history and ▶



An Te Liu  
Condition, 2001  
Installation view



LOT-EK  
SURF-A-BED, 1997  
Installation view

theory of architecture from Princeton], but rather by trying something I had no background or preparation for, just a strong determination. The idea was to see if I could help promote experimental architecture by borrowing the model of a commercial art gallery. The idea is that the gallery would have a cultural role, but would also serve to promote and give value to work that is often overlooked and hardly known outside of the field, and so it was really meant as a kind of platform to bring experimental architecture to a broader public.

**That sounds good on paper, but how did you actually go about it?**

The first show I did was at the Gramercy Art Fair in May 1997. Basically they took over a few floors of the hotel and each gallery got a room to present work in for four days. Most exhibitors treated the hotel room as an imperfect gallery—the walls weren't white enough, the spaces weren't big enough—and made do. I saw the opportunity to engage

the hotel room as a site, so I invited works by nine designers that each co-opted certain aspects of the hotel room: the bathroom, the television, the postcards. A lot of people that came into the room thought that they had walked into the wrong place, because it actually did look like a hotel room. But then once you got into it deeper you realized everything had been transformed and re-thought. It was a very different approach.

**It seems at the moment that people are still hungry for that kind of work. Everywhere you look there are more examples of big-name designers executing limited editions. What do you make of it?**

Well, there's no escaping capitalism. We're in a very intense moment right now. Consumerism is a serious feature of our culture, and it has all kinds of effects on art and design. This is a very interesting, and maybe risky, moment too because design is coming to be seen as the next frontier for the contemporary

art market. Lately there have been a lot of efforts to pitch design as a collectible, and one that is relatively affordable by comparison with contemporary art—which is great insofar as people are starting to pay attention to design, which they really haven't before. It's also dangerous because when designers work, they should be engaging large social issues, either in direct or oblique ways, and one hopes that the leading designers of our time aren't drawn into an inauthentic production for the sake of a collector's market, but rather can find a way to take advantage of this surge in interest to collectively push design forward.

**So when you're creating a curatorial calendar you must have similar concerns and goals.**

Curating is kind of like organizing a dinner party over a period of time. You think a lot about the mix of people, or the mix of shows, and how they talk to each other—both in a single moment and also over the course of ▶



Lebbeus Woods and Kiki Smith  
*Firmament*, 2004  
Installation view



envelopeA+D  
*California College of the Arts at 100: Innovation by Design*  
Installation view

some years. There are a number of priorities. One is to present shows that simply awaken people, shows that will stop people in their tracks and make them say “Wow” or “That’s really interesting” or “I want to know more about that.” And so let’s say visual immediacy is very important, but that’s only good as long as there’s a deeper strata beneath that, one which engages the conceptual challenge that a show can present. We can use exhibitions to help people understand that design is by no means neutral, it’s connected to larger social, political, economic, and material phenomena. So often in mainstream culture it’s deployed in the service of maintaining norms. Basically I really want shows that not only open people’s eyes but also expand their minds and really provoke thought.

**If you are developing these mind-expanding experiences for the exhibitions, what then is the modus operandi for developing the permanent collection?**

We are trying to be very clear and strategic in our collecting strategy. We have to recognize where our strengths are, and how we can develop them. I think for us to recapture the canon of iconic modernism isn’t necessarily the most productive thing to do. The MoMA in New York does that beautifully, so instead we have a tradition here—one that I’m very interested in building on—of looking at innovative practices. I’m looking for conceptual depth, as well as visual immediacy, as well as the design excellence of a piece, and when those all line up we’ve got a treasure.

I’m also trying to address certain gaps in our history. We just bought a fantastic model from 1961 by Eliot Noyes which was designed for Westinghouse’s Pavilion for the 1964 New York World’s Fair. It was an early model and it’s an amazing object, not because it’s among the most familiar works of that period, but because Noyes was so advanced in terms of the integration of architecture, corporate branding, and

graphic design. It’s a work which expresses modernism’s deep and ongoing concern with utopian thinking, and helps explain other things that have come since.

**Have you found a way to address sustainability in the design collection or with an exhibit without pandering to trend?**

Clearly, environmental issues in design are of enormous importance, but I do feel somewhat suspicious about the way it’s become this year’s thing, like sculptural attitudes in design were last year’s thing, and so it’s the same problem. You want to be able to capture people’s interest and attention, but I wouldn’t necessarily separate out environmental responsibility from all the other aspects of good design—including social responsibility, or formal and technical inventiveness. For me, design is research and you may establish certain priorities in that research, but ultimately it’s got to be integrated and pretty broad to be meaningful. ■