Mobile Signals

Two moving structures by Matthew Butcher draw on the character of changing places

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It is inherently strange and arresting when we see an object the size of a building — or one that resembles a building, with doors, windows and walls — in motion. Whether it is a prefabricated unit being craned into position, or houses being driven down the motorway, the action goes against our learnt knowledge that buildings are static and stable. It unsettles and excites our expectations of what is normal.

The drama and potential of buildings in motion, a mobile architecture, was exploited to inform some of the most important architectural developments of the last 100 years. In particular it was at the heart of the avant garde agenda in the 1960s, when the work of Buckminster Fuller, Archigram and Ant Farm explored the technological and philosophical implications of mobile structures. More recently these ideas have resurfaced and been utilised by practices such as Raumlab and in the work of artist Theo Jansen, whose beautiful many-legged 'strandbeest' machines walk along the beach, powered only by the wind.

Often the portability of mobile architecture is linked to utopian agendas, as in much of the work of the 1960s. Projects present us with the idea that if our architecture can roam free from foundations, perhaps we can also be liberated. But within this beautiful dream, real places are often regarded almost with disdain, as a tabula rasa or blank background to be lifted from a dull existence by the buildings that temporarily inhabit them. This process also tends to turn the focus of architecture to the object, whose technology and materials take centre stage.

This spring I have built two projects that seek to work against this trend. Instead of the architectural object being the focus of discussion, the placement of the mobile buildings is intended to address a series of urban, suburban and rural contexts. The relationship between architecture and the sites in which it exists, as well as the journey between the different locations, raises questions about the physical, conceptual or political connection of architecture to place.
‘Flood House’ is both a practical and poetic investigation into the living conditions of a seasonally flooded Essex landscape. Moored at various sites in the Thames Estuary during April and May, it functions both as a prototype future dwelling and a practical laboratory, monitoring the very particular weather conditions of the place.

Its design refers to the estuary’s vernacular architecture — fishing sheds, pillboxes and Maunsell sea forts. Clad in weatherboard, it floats on three steel pontoons. Its hybrid architecture is neither of the land nor the sea; the object is both familiar and strange, and seeks to ask what — if any — building types we can expect in a future flooded Thames Estuary.

The floating structure was towed between locations where any projected occupation will be affected by the tides. As nomadic architecture, the project resonates with its 1960s forebears. It questions the idea of architecture as a fixed entity but also acts as a provocation to suggest that architecture needs to develop a more responsive relationship to environmental conditions and in particular to the dramatic shifts in sea levels that this climate change will bring to the Estuary.

‘The Mansio’, a space for writers and poets commissioned by the Hexham Book Festival, will tour a series of locations in the north-west and north-east of England during the summer, hosting readings and talks.

Again, its design seeks to resonate in some way with the locations in which it is sited, and its form and material draw from a vernacular — in this case the aggregate works and steel-plant cooling towers dotting the industrial and post-industrial landscape.

Made from a semi-translucent white polycarbonate, the structure is conceived as a kind of ‘ghost ship’, something that is both present and absent, alluding not only its own actual transience, but also to the continued shift away from traditional industries in many parts of the country.

Both the Flood House and the Mansio are mobile structures that present an architecture resonating with another time, whether that is the past or the future.