PIN–UP

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Featuring THOM MAYNE, JOHNSTON MARKLEE, GREG LYNN, RETNA, and HEDI SLIMANE

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Plus FIVE PIN–UP CASE STUDY HOUSES

INTERVIEW BY
FELIX BURRICHTER

GREG LYNN

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Sometime in the mid 90s, Greg Lynn coined the term "blob." It was an attempt to define a new kind of process in the making of biomorphous architecture, the kind one could only envision with the help of 3D technology. While in theory Lynn remained the uncrowned king of the blobosphere, other firms had caught up with his ideas and actually went ahead and built them, making Lynn one of the best-known architects of the noughties with almost no buildings to his credit. But to say that others carried out what Lynn was only able to talk about is a misconception: in fact, while many picked up on the formal aspect of Lynn's theories, they realized them with conventional building methods — something that has never interested Lynn. What he strives for is not just formal innovation, but also new ways of building. It is therefore unsurprising that in recent years he has looked to industries that have been quick to integrate new technology — car manufacture and, more importantly, naval architecture — to see how their innovations might be used in the construction industry. Technological ingenuity is present in all his recent work, which includes an apartment building in Valencia, Spain with an anodized aluminum façade, computer-generated designs for furniture made out of robot-cut recycled children's toys, and an actual boat commission for a client in Abu Dhabi. Indeed, Lynn is a passionate sailor, known for spending every free minute on his own boat, the* Kraken*, which is berthed in Marina del Rey, not far from his office in Venice Beach. PIN–UP met up with Lynn at 8:00 a.m. on a Tuesday morning after a long weekend of sailing to talk about his passion for races, Los Angeles, the house he and his wife will never build, and why it might be time to move south of the border.

FELIX BURRICHTER

So did you win the regatta last weekend?

Congratulations! So who goes on the boat when you participate in a race like that?

What is it with architects and sailing?

Have you raced Frank Gehry, who's also an avid sailor?

GREG LYNN

The race? [Laughs] You know, there are three kinds of races. First, there's the America's Cup, where you design your own boat, but it has to be designed to fit a certain rule. It is the most expensive, but that's also where all the cool materials, shapes, and technologies are generated. Then there's design racing, where one manufacturer builds, let's say, 400 boats around the world, and you're not allowed to change anything on them, so it's a level field — and then you all race against each other. And then there's handicap racing, which is what we did last weekend. All the boats are different, and what they do is measure every single one — how much it weighs, how big it is, how much sail area, water line — and then they put it into a matrix and assign you a number. For example, my boat has number 84. Another boat might have another number, let's say 60. So for every mile we race, they owe me 24 seconds. So what we did last weekend was a handicap race. And we were the fastest boat anywhere near our size.

Well, I've been sailing all my life, but I only bought my own boat a few years ago. So in the beginning, it was always just friends and colleagues, like Kivi Sotamaa, Casey Reas, Heather Roberge, Jason Payne — mostly architects.

Well, other than Kivi and Casey, most people just came onboard for the social aspect of it, not so much for the sailing. But as we got more competitive, I started to bring in more competitive sailors, and most of them are naval architects or sail designers, so I guess there's still a very design-heavy component. But it's becoming less about the fun, and more competitive.

I would never race Frank. But he's become one of my best friends, actually, because of sailing. If we're both in town, we

A model for the multicolor anodized aluminum façade of an apartment building Lynn designed for *Sociopolis* (2004), a housing development in Valencia, Spain. © Greg Lynn FORM

Carbon Crystal Sails, presented for the first time during Design Miami 2009, is an installation made of 3DL carbon sails and thousands of Swarovski crystals. © Greg Lynn FORM

Computer rendering of a catamaran commissioned by a private client in Abu Dhabi. © Greg Lynn FORM

It seems sailing is also rubbing off on your recent work. Last fall you designed those giant crystal sails for Swarovski, and now you're designing a boat for a client in Abu Dhabi. Have you found your true calling in naval architecture?

always make sure to go out for a few hours once a week. But we mostly talk about work… [Laughs] Also, he doesn't really enjoy racing, he just likes being on the water.

No, no, no! But there is something that I've been drawn to ever since I saw these big 3DL sails (3DL technology was developed by the company North Sails in the early 90s: 3DL sails are thermo-molded as a unitary membrane on a full-sized three-dimensional mold) in a Prada ad about ten years ago. They had an America's Cup campaign, and that was the first time they were using the "load-path" sail technology. So I called the people at North Sails and went up to visit their factory, and it got me thinking about how technology like that could be used for furniture, or an interior-design project. And the more I looked into it, I started to realize that the square footage on a super-high-performance boat cost the same amount as a super-low-performance building or a house. So I was interested in getting into that world and figuring out how they do that. But in the process, my passion for sailing also got reinvigorated. And now we're doing these boats for a client in Abu Dhabi, and I'm working on them with these great naval architects in Long Beach, Tim Kernan and Frederick Courouble. They're kind of the best young American naval architects and boat designers. So I like talking to them, seeing how they model, seeing how they test materials, seeing how they build, seeing the materials they're interested in…that's the part I really like. In the end, designing the actual boats, at least formally, might not be that different than designing a building. And they take about as long as a building — sometimes production can take up to five years. It's kind of a slow burn. First you have to design them, then marketing is a big deal, you know, tooling is really expensive, so they gotta make sure it's going to do all the things they want it to do before they invest in all the tools.

Besides the Swarovski Sails project, what material aspects of the sailing and boat world have you been able to apply to your architectural practice?

Lynn's first built building — the Korean Presbyterian Church of New York, finished in 2000 — stands on top of a factory in Sunnyside, Queens. © Ari Marcopoulos

Well, there's a basic principle. Let's start with a very simple idea. There was a paradigm of construction where parts and pieces were put together mechanically. Whether it was dowels and pegs, welds, bolts, whatever, you would assemble parts, find where the edge is, and where things would align, and then mechanically attach them. What's happened with aerospace, automobiles, and boats is that they have acknowledged conceptually that glue, or what you would call a matrix, like resin, is the way to put things together. But it has big aesthetic, spatial, and formal consequences, and the building industry is still about glue, double-stick tape, and laminates. Whereas in the other industries, they recognize that there's a shift in paradigm. For example, in the boat world you use aluminum and titanium, with carbon fiber and dynamo fiber. You make a mold, you put it in a bag, they vacuum pump resin through it, or heat it up in an oven. So everything's just cooked in a bag and held together with glue and resin. No bolts, no screws, interfacing surfaces. And that lets you put things together and take them apart differently, lets you transport differently. It also gives you a sense of lightness. For example, in the Bloom House (Venice Beach, 2009) a lot of stuff is molded and formed with heat and pressure, like the bathroom and kitchen which are made of Corian, or the lantern, which is also made of resin. But it's not a process that is germane to boat construction, nor to airplanes — they're all made of glue-laminated composites. So that's really what I'm interested in for architecture.

So your interest in building is rather different from the traditional brick-and-mortar approach. Is that why, as an architect who is so widely recognized, you've built so little?

Well, how can I answer this without it coming out the wrong way… You see, very early in my career I got to do a very big building that was very unconventional in its brief: a Korean church on top of a factory (Seokwang Korean Presbyterian Church of New York, 1999). There was no precedent for it, so you couldn't just go to the last one and make it better, you know? [Laughs] But the way it was built, and its expression in materials was super conventional…just mass-produced elements, mass-produced construction systems, and all that.

How did you solve that dilemma when building the Bloom House?

After that project I decided I didn't want to do that anymore. Because for me, whether it's a boat, a building, or whatever, it's only fun if there's some level of innovation in how it gets built, and in the materials, the finishes. I try to do that with all of my projects, whether it's product design, like the Alessi collection that was made of titanium, or the Ravioli Chair for Vitra, with its one-piece 3D knitted cover. I always try to find a way to think about the materials, the construction, and the design in some way that it all synthesizes and does something new. I actually think the building industry is very much ready for that kind of thing, but the way that contracts, timelines, and budgets are set up, it's very tough — it takes a long time.

It was very bespoke, I guess. The design for the site was literally taking the maximum envelope in every dimension and blowing up a balloon inside it. Massing and shape, and also cladding, were maybe not so much of an interest. It was more inside out. I wanted to take some of the stuff we've done for exhibitions, or our industrial-product projects, and bring it into the scale of a house. So we had to work with Dupont to figure out how to formalize the Corian, and that took about a year and a half just for research and development. And then for all the construction of curved walls, we had to prototype them. So the whole thing took a lot longer than usual. We couldn't possibly have done the Dupont research and development ourselves, but we were very involved in the construction and fabrication. We didn't just do drawings and give them to somebody to figure out how to build them — we had to bring Dupont and all these people into the process, including Bill Kreysler of Kreysler and Associates in Sonoma County, who made the lantern. The contractor didn't really do anything — we just gave those people 3D files and prototypes, the pieces were made, and when they arrived on site the contractor just had to install them. Nothing was built on site.

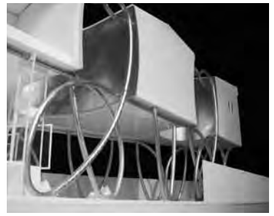
In 2007 Vitra and Lynn introduced the *Ravioli Chair,* a lounge chair with matching ottoman upholstered with a continuous 3D-knitted cover. © Greg Lynn FORM

I suppose to operate that way you really need a client who is not breathing down your neck?

Oh no, the reverse, actually. You need a client who is super involved and understands it all, and who is also interested in those things. One of the owners, Jackie Bloom, actually worked for me for over twelve years. And her husband, Jason, was probably at the fabricators and the factories more than I was. So I think it takes an investment, an interest, and passion on the client's part, or else this kind of project doesn't work.

And what happens when you're your own client?

Yeah, I tried that and it didn't go well. [Laughs]



A model for the *Slavin House*, a private residence Lynn designed in 2005 for his wife, Sylvia Lavin, and their two children. © Greg Lynn FORM

I assume you're talking about the Slavin House, the house you've been planning for you and your family since 2005. What's happening with that?

Well, my wife (Sylvia Lavin, p. 18) and I share a lot of ideas and interests, and on some levels we work really well together. And we were very, very close to starting construction. But then we both realized it was going to be a recipe for disaster. Sylvia is too much of a closeted designer to have me design our primary residence! [Laughs] So it's going to remain a hypothetical project. But there's also something nice about not having to live in my own showroom, living in a house I designed, sailing on a boat I designed… I remember when I was 17 and I went to Paris to see all this Corbusier stuff. I was outside of Jacques Lipchitz's house (Villas Lipchitz-Mietschaninoff, Boulogne-Billancourt, 1923–25), taking pictures, and then this woman comes out, who I assumed was Mrs. Lipchitz, and she asked me whether I wanted to see the interior of the house. So I went in thinking it would have Lipchitz sculptures everywhere, and Corbusier paintings and what not, but it was all Biedermeier furniture, Indian carpets, all kinds of weird art, just a mishmash of everything. But it was a super-cool environment, and it really impressed me.

In 2008, Lynn won the Golden Lion at the 11th Architecture Biennale in Venice for his *Toy Furniture*. Like the *Duck Table* above, each piece is made of robot-cut recycled children's toys. © Greg Lynn FORM

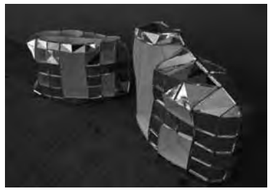
What does the house you live in now look like?

Well, the house we were going to tear down to build the Slavin is actually a great house. It's a Sears Roebuck house from 1904 — and it was ordered by telegraph, and specifications were sent in the mail to Chicago, and then the whole house was built in a factory, put on a train, taken to Venice Beach,

and popped up in probably less than a week. So what everybody says is the future of architecture actually already happened over 100 years ago. And as a factory-made thing, it makes it a very cool house to live in, because that's what I believe in. So it's full of history, and of toy-furniture prototypes, and of my family — it's a nice mix, and I get very inspired by it.

Speaking of history, I was surprised to read in an article that you're also something of an art historian?

What? No, no, no, no! [Laughs] In fact, I'm always embarrassed by how little I know about architectural history. I have a philosophy degree, but beyond that it's always been design and architecture. The little architecture history I know is because I pick it up from people like Sylvia. What's always amazing to me is the depth of knowledge of architectural history of the mentors I've had in my life, the people I respect the most, like Peter Eisenman, Bob Stern, or Frank Gehry. And when I look at people of my generation or younger, I'm just so embarrassed about how little they know. They'll know Corbusier, and Mies, but they won't know in any depth anything about who, say, Giulio Romano is. I actually think it's a little problematic. So when I teach I really try to start with a kind of historical precedent. For the last year we've been working on Ledoux, and before that we worked on Bernini. And 99% of the students have never heard about either of them — and this is at Yale University! So, sadly, history in architecture doesn't have a lot of traction right now.



Models for the pavilions Lynn designed for the 2010 Index Awards in Copenhagen, Denmark. © Greg Lynn FORM

Let's talk about your own history. How long have you been in L.A. now?

Almost 13 years. I came here from Hoboken, New Jersey, actually, where I was renting a four-story brownstone that I got for very little money. I was just out of graduate school, and Hoboken was this super cool place with this bar, Maxwell's, and I was right across the street from there. I was also working for Peter (Eisenman) for a while, and teaching at Columbia. So it was a great setup. But at some point, I felt like the gravity was moving west. What was happening out here was so inventive and innovative, and there was a great creative climate out here. All the magazines and galleries and schools were still back east, but there was a lot going on out here. But ironically, I was just saying the other day that we need to come up with a five-year plan to get out of L.A. because it's turning into New York. The indicator for that is when you get around two or more architects together and you listen to what the conversations are: it's become very banal shoptalk, about patronage, work — it's been a while since I've heard someone with a really good, new idea. L.A. has been an alternative, interesting place for the past 20 years, and now it's starting to stultify and turn into something more official. So Sylvia and I are looking for where the center of gravity is going to move next.

In the summer of 2010, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles unveiled a Lynn-designed fountain in its outdoor courtyard. It is made of multiple layers of digitally re-assembled children's toys. © Brian Forrest

Will Greg Lynn FORM be operating out of Mexico City in the future?

It's funny you should say Mexico City because Sylvia and I were just talking about the fact that it's time to look south. Europe is also going to get interesting. This recession is actually great for design culture in general, and the world of ideas. Especially when it hits Europe, it's gonna get rid of a lot of the fat. It's going to destroy a lot of big corporate firms, and it's going to make young people…instead of trying to emulate Norman Foster, or whomever the young people are trying to emulate, it'll make them emulate a young Rem or a young Zaha. There is a mid-generation there all over the world that is pretty boring. And it's because everything has been so easy.

So you're seriously considering moving your office south of the border?

Well, you know, all the architects are talking about getting into Brazil now, because the economy is really good, and there's a lot of building going on in Brazil over the next few years. I know all the big corporate firms are opening offices down there, like KPF (Kohn Pederson Fox Associates), SOM (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP). And all the developers like Hines or Tishman Speyer, are going. And they're bringing their architects down with them. But Brazil might be a little too far south for me, though. And Mexico City doesn't have an ocean, so I guess we'll have to think it over again. [Laughs]