

Dylan J. Beck



# Environment, Design and Sustainability

*Article by Glen R Brown*

**A**BOVE A TERRACOTTA CORBEL – OF which the foliate ornament and warm earthen hue allude to a distant nature and a remote past in which that nature was not quite so distant – an array of three identical porcelain bars, vertical, sleek and anonymous, creates a visual and conceptual counterpoint. As streamlined and efficient as the external fuel tanks on a spacecraft, these bars orient themselves to the atmosphere in obvious distinction



from the corbel, which labors under the restriction of an earthly weight. In contrast to the silent and stable corbel, the white forms – like a set of gleaming organ pipes or a trio of high-tech seraphim – seem to vibrate with sound, an exhilarating chorus of energy waves expanding invisibly outward. Though curiously seductive, these porcelain bars bear no trace of nature and seemingly possess no memory of the geological material

*The Air Must Be Thick With Words. 2008. Porcelain, terracotta, paint, steel and rubber.  
50 x 32 x 8 in.*



Left: *How Many Bars Do You Have?* 2009. Porcelain, steel, rubber and paint. 32 x 60 x 8 in.  
 Right: *How Many Bars Do You Have?* (Detail).

from which they are made. They transcend the corbel's obvious terrestrialness. Only slowly, and through a process of deliberate reflection, does one begin to recognize why this should be troubling.

Dylan Beck's *The Air Must be Thick With Words* is not an obvious protest piece, though it pointedly contrasts a traditional, even vaguely classical architectural ornament with a representation of three cellphone signal repeaters. Inspired by the skyline of Philadelphia, which Beck had occasion to observe daily while a graduate student at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, the sculpture addresses the proliferation of communications technology as a physical presence in the urban environment. More alien to 19th century brownstones than the Phoenix Mars Lander was to its host planet, cellphone repeaters tend to be impositions on existing environments, not logical outgrowths of them. In the urban environment, the visual traits of architecture have ideally been designed to relate in harmonious (or sometimes strategically incongruous) manner with previous architecture. Signal repeaters, in contrast, can be the equivalent of an architectural invasive species, indiscriminately undermining the aesthetic ecosystem of urban design.

As with any alterations made to communal environments, the placement of communications technology equipment in urban locations raises issues of political power. The sculpture *Can You Hear Me Now?* – a row of four painted-porcelain cellphone signal repeaters aligned on two horizontal sections of unistrut – subtly reflects on such issues through reference to a specific site. Painted over the surfaces of the repeater forms in glossy gray silhouette against a hazy backdrop of beige is a skyline array of billboards and signal repeaters on Broad Street in Philadelphia, four miles north of Center City. "The building on the left is being renovated," Beck observes. "In a few years the area will become thoroughly gentrified but at the moment it is a rough place. I wonder about the kinds of design decisions that are made by corporations or people with money and influence and how these affect neighbourhoods that are home to people

without money and influence."

The vague effect of camouflage produced by the painted silhouettes in *Can You Hear Me Now?* and a subsequent sculpture, *How Many Bars Do You Have?*, is not accidental. Beck responds with a mixture of incredulity and humour to the often-ludicrous attempts that have been made to disguise cellphone signal repeater towers, the most extreme of which involve the manufacture of plastic trees. In a synthesized landscape painted on *How Many Bars Do You Have?* Beck introduces one of these bizarre structures to a wooded hillside in Manhattan, Kansas, where he is a professor of ceramics at Kansas State University. The image is revealing in two respects. First, it compares, in the unifying medium of silhouette, the ridiculously unnatural tree-shaped cell tower to the equally unnatural gas station. Secondly, it suggests that the issue of cellphone signal repeaters and their impact on the visual environment is, in Beck's work, primarily a metaphor for effects of human activity on a larger and more consequential stage.

Like many members of the newest generation of ceramic sculptors, Beck employs his work as a medium for reflection on the anthropogenic origins of ecological problems, especially the enhanced greenhouse effect and its daunting potential consequences in the phenomenon of global warming. This subject, which promises to be a defining issue of the 21st century, is so intimately related to manufacturing, consumption of goods, transportation, communication, agriculture, energy production – in short, nearly all aspects of human activity – that it will become increasingly difficult to avoid in any art that proposes to engage the contemporary world in significant ways. Like most artists, Beck recognizes the complexity of human interaction with and influence over the natural environment and he acknowledges the difficulty of reconciling desire for the advantages of a certain energy-dependent lifestyle with the need to make sacrifices for the future of the planet. Consequently, his sculptures are conflicted rather than dogmatic: characterized by contradictory



*Can You Hear Me Now? (Detail).*

impulses of fascination and trepidation, attraction and scepticism toward the way in which humans shape the world.

The ambiguous ground between the natural and the artificial frequently supplies a conceptual basis for Beck's work. In *Corrugated Topographic Oriented Strand Board*, for example, this ambiguity is twofold, inhering both in the representation of an abstract landscape and in the reference to a commonly employed building material called OSB (oriented strand board), a particleboard in which layers of wood strips are compressed together with a heated mixture of wax and resin. "The product epitomizes the process of shredding nature and 'Chicken McNuggeting' it into whatever shape you need for a viable building material," Beck explains. "In the sculpture I added the corrugation not just for technical reasons, but because I wanted to stress the processed nature of the wood – and cardboard is the prime example of an über-processed wood. OSB is artificial but at the same time I think that it can be beautiful. I wanted to draw attention to that potential beauty by reducing the form to pure white porcelain."

Through Beck's sculpture, the associations of cardboard with recycling prompt reflection on OSB as a product that, at least in its North American context, depends on the renewable resource of young, fast-growing trees from sustainable forests rather than exploitation of old-growth timber. Beck invokes the



*Can You Hear Me Now? 2008. Porcelain, paint, steel and rubber. 32 x 42 x 8 in.*

idea of recycling through another strategy as well. The horizontal planar composition of *Corrugated Topographic Oriented Strand Board* clearly mimics the shapes of shelf fungi, parasitic organisms that rot the wood of standing trees. The allusion is particularly relevant for its ambiguity. Though the shelf fungus's infection of its host can lead to breakage in the tree stem, certain fungi may provide a key to reducing the negative impact of humans on the environment. So-called 'white rot' fungi, for example, possess the rare ability to break down lignin (a renewable carbon source and a resource for paper products). Consequently these organisms represent a significant potential for the biofuel and biopulping industries. White rot fungi have also proved effective in remediation of soil that has been contaminated by pesticides such as DDT; hydrocarbon solvents (CAHs); the hydrocarbon byproducts of burning fuel (PAHs) and other harmful substances.

In addition to its fungal allusions, *Corrugated Topographic Oriented Strand Board* conjures an abstract relief map or an artificially terraced landscape. The sculpture was in fact inspired by the fate of a specific natural site adjoining a mall in Beck's hometown of Athens, Ohio, US. "The whole side of the hill is gone now," he explains. "They were building a large retail store in the floodplain of the river. They needed to fill that in, so they took the dirt away from the hill and relocated it across the street. They removed the earth in a stair-step fashion to prevent erosion." Reflecting on the shelf-fungus shape of the excavated hillside, topographic maps as a "regurgitations" of landscape and OSB as a 'regurgitation' of wood, and a vague sense of parasitic influence over the process of breaking down and recreating substances, Beck produced *Corrugated Topographic Oriented Strand Board* not as a lamentation over the loss of a particular natural site but rather as commentary on the degree to which we are accustomed to constant human transformation of both natural and artificial environments.

In a related work, titled *Deep Cut*, Beck employs multiple terracotta corbels that are ornamented with grape and leaf forms implying fecundity



Top: *Corrugated Topographic Oriented Strand Board*. 2009. Porcelain. 6 x 18 x 18 in.

Above: *Corrugated Topographic Oriented Strand Board (Detail)*.

and that vary in thickness to produce a convex, elongated configuration suggestive of a low hill. Inspired by development occurring along East State Street in Athens, Ohio, the piece refers specifically to the destruction of a historic farmhouse, the excavation of a hillside to create a flat, rectangular pad and the construction of a shopping mall within that neatly right-angled, excavated space. The stark white modular form is curiously attractive, but its displacement of four of the corbels – now hollow and truncated – alters the curvaceous symmetry of the implied terrain. The corbels, with their aesthetic elements drawn from organic and geological nature, seem distinctly archaic, even nostalgic, in contrast to the invasive geometry of the building, ensconced in its niche in the environment like an artificial implant within a living body.

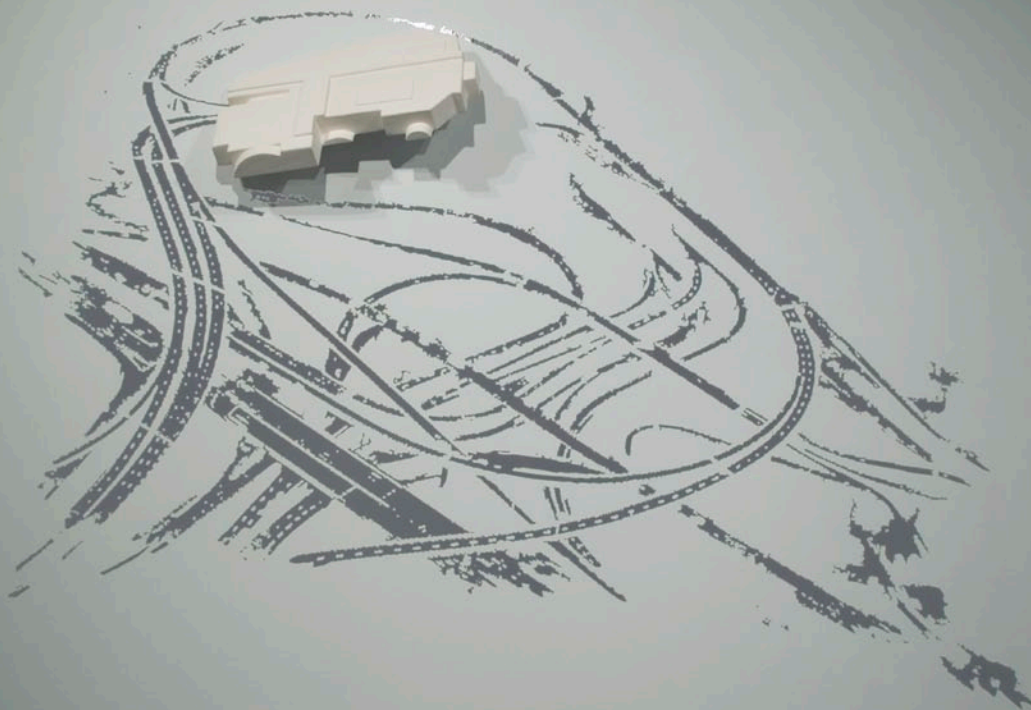
Beck is not obviously opposed to all instances of such transformation and in fact seems to find aspects of it intriguing. He is, however, a strong advocate of careful planning of urban spaces and serious consideration of efficiency, adaptability and sustainability.



Top: *Deep Cut*. 2009. Terracotta and bisque porcelain. 8 x 96 x 36 in.

Above: *Deep Cut (Detail)*.

Such issues are raised by the work *Cardiac*, which consists of a blocky, wall-mounted bisque-porcelain form suggesting an aerial view of a building. Encircling this form is a complicated network of roadways represented in a gray vinyl decal. The modular building, a duplicate of the cast-porcelain piece in *Deep Cut*, reproduces in solid form the negative space defined by the protective Styrofoam liner of a shipping container: an allusion to the transportation of goods and the support structures that this necessitates. The embedding of the packing-material form (and its associations with the manufacture, distribution and consumption of goods) in the network of a highway system, reflects principles of modular



*Cardiac*. 2009. Bisque porcelain and vinyl.  
56 x 72 x 3 in.

design: the construction of larger systems from a combination of subsystems.

In addition, the allusions made by the title *Cardiac* to a biological circulatory system are, of course, intentional and reflect Beck's characteristic ambiguity toward large-scale projects of human design. Finding beauty in the complexity and expressing admiration for the ingenuity that infrastructural designs can exhibit, he is also clearly troubled by assumptions made about the continued availability of particular resources, most importantly fossil fuels. "I'm thinking about how the highway system is essential to our economy and the movement of goods," he explains. "I'm also thinking about the incorporation of the box-store architecture that has become the centre of our economic system. *Cardiac* – it brings to mind the heart of a circulatory system but also the possibility of cardiac arrest, the potential for a system failure. To make so much contingent on a vehicle that depends on a finite fuel supply seems shortsighted."

If Beck's works implicitly raise such issues, in general they remain more observational than condemnatory or proselytizing. Although, for various reasons a significant resistance persists to addressing issues of negative human impact on the natural environment, Beck avoids invoking the confrontational,

propagandistic practices common to the majority of activist imagery. Instead, he employs his art as a contemplative medium in which fascination with the concept of progress confronts the reality of unwanted consequences of development; enthusiasm for urban design and construction is tempered by lament for the loss of natural form; and, most importantly, desire for the conveniences of an energy-dependent lifestyle must grapple with a persistent sense of guilt. In these conflicting attitudes many will no doubt recognize aspects of their own experiences in this period of unprecedented concern for the health of the living world and will, by extrapolation, find Dylan Beck's works indicative of an increasing unrest in the conscience of contemporary humanity.

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All photos by Dylan Beck.