Evolving Synergy: OCEAN Currents, Current OCEANs and Why Networks Must Displace Themselves

Founded in the early 1990s, OCEAN was one of the first collaborative geographically distributed practices to realise the potential of telecommunication and digital design technologies. Here Michael Hensel recounts the various mutations and fluid transformations of the experimental groupings that came to form OCEAN net. Accordingly, Hensel's account is more akin to a band biography than a staid sociology of a professional office. Moreover, he explores how the molecular model of distributed authorship presents difficulties, either by confounding external expectations of a singular identity or signature behind the various design processes, or internally as a stable whole of identities attempting to re-emerge and fix its collaborative mixings into a rigid hierarchy. As OCEAN's biography attests, true collaboration is inherently flat, distributed and transformative, situating architecture as more than just a service profession and transforming it into an intensive practice of living. Collective intelligence in these terms is embedded in the distributed evolutionary processes of the practice as a design project in itself.

The OCEAN displaces itself alongside with its shoreline.
Orphan Drift

OCEAN surfaced and claimed its ground as the first collaborative design network of its kind in 1994, the same year Kevin Kelly's iconic book *Out of Control* was launched.[1] Pattern recognition will show us not only that both network and book start with the letter O, significant though this may be, but also, in time, that the title of the book actually and suitably describes OCEAN's distinctive and happily crazy brand of network collaboration. OCEAN's ongoing transformation started with the group becoming a geographically dispersed network of collaborators, with backgrounds in architecture, urban design, and industrial, interior, furniture, glass and ceramics design as well as agricultural sciences. This network has for most of its existence since 1994 undergone permanent changes and remained as an organisation largely elusive even to its members, while becoming renowned for its design output. In other words: while OCEAN's work has become widely known, it has itself remained a mirage that cannot quite be discerned even with eyes squinted like a snake. It is this article's monumental task to map OCEAN's currents, current OCEAN's and their place in architectural hysteria. Here is the result.

Prologue: 1992 ANYONE around?
The beginning of time: 1992. Vast, blank, pointing, incongruent and intensively coherent folded and striated black stuff (see Greg Lynn, *AD Folding in Architecture*, 1993) made up the ingredients of a postgraduate primordial soup cooked up by Jeffrey Kipnis at the AA.[2] From this emerged a few startled postgraduate organisms. Among those were Chul Kong, Nopadol Limwatanakul, Johan Bettum and I, all shaped from utter filth through Kipnesque Deformation. Thus we entered a world of architecture full of new wonders but rather void of ANY fitting architectural niches. And so, in utter trepidation, I slipped back into the fold of the AA to teach with Jeffrey Kipnis and Bahram Shirdel.

1994 Life in the OCEANs (David Attenborough ho!)
In contrast to this Chul Kong reached escape velocity and changed from the AA's primordial to the Korean Space Soup, where he wrote a series of articles on emerging practices for *Space* magazine. He extended an invitation to me to publish

**Beholder, drifting by your eye is work
by OCEAN net, OCEAN Oslo, OCEAN Helsinki, OCEAN UV,
OCEAN NORTH, OCEAN UK, OCEAN US and OCEAN D,
and all the other OCEANs that may yet be
or what in them might lurk.**

some work. Since I didn't have any work I teamed up with Tom Verebes, Bostjan Vuga, Ulrich Königs, second-generation Kipnesque organisms, who also didn't have any, to form a group which we put together under the name OCEAN. And so this became the dedicated expression of the will to extend the group into a network of collaborating designers. Instantly, due to a well-studied reflex, OCEAN undertook a series of design competitions, until the end of 1994, when Bostjan Vuga and Ulrich Königs decided to move back home. Up to this point the work of OCEAN had taken place in London. How would our group continue to exist upon geographic dispersal? But then we might well become a geographically distributed design collective consisting of local groups if we could manage to communicate productively across long distances.

We quickly focused all our creative attention on renaming: OCEAN became OCEAN net with local nodes in different places. In consequence we listened to a lot of drum-'n'-bass and also decided that the European continent was the first to be settled upon. Bostjan Vuga and Juri Sadar founded Sadar in Vuga Arhitekti in Ljubljana. Tom and I stayed in London. In 1995 we invited Johan Bettum to join and he settled in Oslo and started a group there. With the new key members Birger Sevaldson, Bonsak Schieldrop and Kim Bauman Larsen they got some work done indeed. The latter three brought a brand-new digital sensibility and tool-set to the network and through Birger Sevaldson's contacts it became possible to collaborate with Steiner Killi, who, in turn, made it possible to tap into Rapid Prototyping technologies: the dawn of the oceanoidal dust-monkey! The outcome was the Synthetic Landscape Phase 01-03 (1995–8) and the Synthetic Landscape Pavilion (1997–8). Tom and I continued to claim further landmass for OCEAN. In result of a workshop at the University of Art in Design in Helsinki, Kivi Sotamaa and Markus Holmstén were invited to join and formed a group in Helsinki. This group was subsequently joined by Toni Kauppila, Lasse Wager and Tuuli Sotamaa.

In the short time between mid-1995 and the beginning of 1996 the OCEAN net had expanded into four local groups with a rapidly growing portfolio, which we could show in an exhibition at the AA in 1996. Bostjan and Juri had won the competition for the Slovenian Chamber of Commerce, and the OCEAN net entry for the Nordic Countries Embassies had received an honourable mention. OCEAN Oslo and Helsinki collaborated on competition entries for the Finnish Embassy in Canberra (1996), the Töölö Open Arena (1997) and the first phase of the Jyväskylä Music and Art Centre (1997). A lot of work did not survive studio parties held on Friday nights in Curtain Road and Merritullin Katu, and what remained was

later thoroughly chewed by Kivi's dog, culminating into what became the world's largest model cemetery.

Birger Sevaldson, Professor of Industrial Design, Markus Holmstén, a spatial and furniture designer, and Tuuli Sotamaa, a glass and ceramics designer by training, introduced a strong industrial-design approach and sensibility. OCEAN Oslo's introduction of a cutting-edge composite material approach and computer-aided design and manufacturing expanded the network's scope of skills and work.

1997 OCEAN's divide

Soon we started exhibiting in different places and to grow our profile, to the effect that upon the event of our second exhibition at the Hennie Onstad Art Center in Oslo in 1997 our egos had become so large that we didn't fit into one space any more.

The point of conflict was marked by the question whether to assume a vertical structure or remain a horizontal organisation. And so the nodes that had become offices remained offices and the nodes that remained nodes continued to remain nodes, but now separate from one another.

Bostjan Vuga and Juri Sadar continued their very successful office and Tom Verebes continued OCEAN UK, with Laura

During the golden summer of the year 2000 Jeff Turko came up with an idea to form a larger network concerned with cultural production, named the do-group, that would take on some of the promising aspects of the network characteristics of the early OCEAN net, while being at the same time much more multidisciplinary.

Gimenez, Alex Thompson, Felix Robbins and Yan Gao joining the collaboration. By 1998, Tom Verebes and Robert Elfer had joined with Wade Stevens to undertake their first collaborative project together, working between Boston and New York. Rob and Wade formed OCEAN US and were later joined by Kevin Cespedes and Erik Hanson. Ocean D was formed in 2001 as the consolidation of OCEAN UK and OCEAN US into a new network of practices in London, New York and Boston.

We then thought: well hey! In result of this realisation OCEAN Oslo, Helsinki and Cologne joined forces.

We quickly focused all our creative attention on renaming: OCEAN Oslo, Helsinki and Cologne became OCEAN NORTH with local studios in different places. OCEAN NORTH might well become a geographically distributed design collective consisting of local studios if we'd all learn how to travel by air and use email. And so this time became incredibly fruitful, for our network, various northern European airlines and duty-free shops, due to the intensive travelling of members who collaborated on the projects of that time: the Chamberworks installation (1997), a_Drift Time Capsules (1998); the third phase of the Synthetic Landscape Research and the scheme for the Sandefjord Museum (1999). This was a time of great intensity. It was possible, for example, to run several weeks of workshops in parallel at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki and the Technical University in Vaasa involving four groups of students from three countries, with OCEAN NORTH members travelling back and forth, while running a design charette on the Sandefjord Hotel and other projects in the Helsinki studio, organising and coordinating a series of public lectures, and late-night sauna, whisky and cigar sessions at Hvittrask, the studio of Eliel Saarinen, Lindgren and Giselius out in the sticks in Finland. Ask Ben. Rockband style: burning it fast. Thinking back I am still exhausted. Some others burned out too and left henceforth the net out of their work: Johan Bettum and Kim Bauman Larsen left the group in Oslo and Markus Holmstén, Toni Kaupplia and Lasse Wager left the group in Helsinki. And then there were only four: Kivi and Tuuli Sotamaa in Helsinki, Birger Sevaldson in Oslo and myself, by choice now mainly located in Helsinki. And here the story ends.

No it doesn't. Stay here!

2000 Fresh Waters
During the golden summer of the year 2000 Jeff Turko came up with an idea to form a larger network concerned with cultural production, named the do-group, that would take on some of the promising aspects of the network characteristics of the early OCEAN net, while being at the same time much more multidisciplinary. A mission statement and a five-year programme was drafted together with Christopher Hight, and members were invited including servo. All members of OCEAN NORTH joined and formed, together with Jeff Turko and Christopher Hight, the motor of the do-group for the next two years. The first year of the do-group in 2000 brought 30 members from Europe, North and South America and the Near, Middle and Far East together in London for two workshop sessions entitled 'Space of Information'. In 2001 a smaller group gathered in Helsinki for a session, entitled 'Space of Extremes', that led to the publication under the same name. However, since work makes work the do-group imploded without trace but with a ghastly sound in 2002. Anticipating this collapse OCEAN NORTH organised the d-Fusion seminar and exhibition, in Aalto's Finlandia Hall and around the archipelago of Helsinki in the midst of summer 2001, which turned into a continuous white-night

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Projects include: Lasipalatsi Media Square by OCEAN UK (1996); Habitare Furniture Exhibition by OCEAN Helsinki (Helsinki, 1997); Jyväskylä Music and Art Centre Phase 01 by OCEAN Helsinki and OCEAN Oslo (1997); Chamberworks installation by OCEAN NORTH (Oslo, 1998); Intensities installation by OCEAN NORTH (Helsinki, 2000); Landsc(r)aper Urban Ring Bridge by OCEAN NORTH (2000); Agora sound-active installation by Natasha Barrett and OCEAN NORTH (Oslo, 2001–03), received the Edward Prize in 2004; Jyväskylä Music and Art Centre Phase 02 and 03 by OCEAN NORTH (2004–06), exhibited at the Venice Architectural Biennale 2004

party with many of the do-group members and new cultural activists joining in: seminars, cultural events, exhibitions, lectures, boat trips, island hopping, sauna and BBQ sessions, and some minor drinking excesses with renowned activists from the Baltic region. That was the fun part and then it was back to work with network hangovers better than the best cantilever! Ever!

And work it was: the Landsc[r]aper Urban Ring Bridge produced for the 'Living Bridges' exhibition (2000), the exhibition design for ARS 01 at Kiasma (2001), the Agora sound-active installations (2001). With Achim Menges joining OCEAN NORTH fresh vigour ensued and more work got done: the World Centre for Human Concerns for the Max Protetch exhibition 'A New World Trade Centre' (2001) and the Venice Architectural Biennale 2002, Formations at the Trussardi Foundation in Milan (2002), and the reworking of the Jyväskylä Music and Art Centre for the Venice Architectural Biennale 2004. The bridge and the World Centre projects were done in collaboration with Jeff Turko's Nekton. After burning bright and fast, finally, in early 2006, Tuuli and Kivi Sotamaa left the group in order to pursue their work more steadily as a design practice under the name of Sotamaa Design.

2006 Chasing the Distant Horizons

Well, my friend, the seven seas ain't for the fainthearted. And so, watch out Captain Ahab! We, the three remaining buccaneers, will hoist the Jolly Roger and take to the vast sea once more and no siren will ever again lure us ashore ...

Epilogue: 2006 MANYONE around?

The *modus operandi* of network collaboration emerged during the mid-1990s when OCEAN was formed. Many architects and designers followed in the footsteps of OCEAN; however, they soon disintegrated or settled back into common corporate or franchise operations. It is negotiating multiple egos with time- and project-specific group interests that requires a dynamic structure of task- or interest-based regrouping. This condition is always both precarious and normal, as one can see from the constant change of members joining and leaving. When the balance can no longer be struck the network either dissolves or changes into a hierarchy dominated by one or few individuals. Due to this difficulty, design culture remains dominated by iconic individuals or mighty corporate structures.

The fact that networks change all the time is not a bad thing, though. In fact, what gives the network its productive edge is the mutual learning, exchange of knowledge and skills, and the very particular design work, that results from changing interactions and collaboration. Network collaboration is therefore about co-evolving towards individual and collective self-development to facilitate novel design production.

Over the 12 years of the existence of the OCEAN network collaboration many transformations occurred due to group-external events, individual life changes and group-internal changes, or the experience of working together on a particular project. Regrouping and retooling became thus entwined and yielded new synergy in productivity and innovative potential.

However, the perceived need to create an image of the network for the outside is in fundamental conflict with the dynamic nature of collaborative networks. Once there is an increasing tendency of members to value the external image for the sake of membership recognition, and therefore as predominantly a means of launching individual careers, there also evolves an inclination to view internal change as detrimental to the external image. This oftentimes results in the view that the portfolio should reflect valued expectations, and thus the range of projects and design experimentation begins to narrow down.

The latter reduces the need for retooling, other than for the purpose of problem solving, and, in turn, reduces the need for regrouping. These tendencies deliver the work back to normative practice: individuals begin to acquire fixed roles and duties. Hierarchies emerge and inequality disillusions members who find themselves lower in the hierarchy, as well as the emerging leaders who begin to wonder, strangely enough, about the fact that they have to shoulder more responsibilities.

While OCEAN NORTH is renowned for its design work, the structure of the group has remained a source of curiosity for outsiders, and also for the members of the group. Is OCEAN NORTH still a collaborative network? What is the minimum operational size of a network that is capable of synthesising individual differences into a functioning collective endeavour that can yield operative synergy and novel design output? Whatever the next manifestation of OCEAN NORTH may be, it will likely not be its final one if it is to remain a network. For that to be possible, differences need to be reincorporated and cultivated through inviting many new members into the network.

We did not focus quickly all our creative attention on renaming: OCEAN NORTH remained OCEAN NORTH. After all, life in the OCEAN might well be more productive and interesting if we learn how to let it become so. Perpetually! PS ... we have just been joined by Steinar Killi. Rock'n'roll baby! ᗄ

Notes
1. Kevin Kelly, *Out of Control: The Rise of Neo-Biological Civilisation*, Fourth Estate (London), 1994. Kelly describes the characteristics of distributed networks, which seem to largely coincide with the characteristics of OCEAN throughout its numerous yet transitory manifestations.
2. Jeffrey Kipnis established a formal graduate design programme at the Architectural Association during the academic year 1992–3. During this year he and Don Bates taught the graduate design course combined with Diploma Unit 4. In the following year, 1993–4, the graduate design programme, now dubbed the Architectural Association Graduate Design Group (AAGDG), was taught by Jeffrey Kipnis and Bahram Shirdel assisted by the author. Jeffrey Kipnis and Bahram Shirdel continued to teach AAGDG together until 1995. From 1995 to 1996 the programme was taught by Bahram Shirdel and the author. From 1996 onwards the programme was directed by Brett Steele and Patrick Schumacher, now redubbed the Design Research Laboratory (DRL).