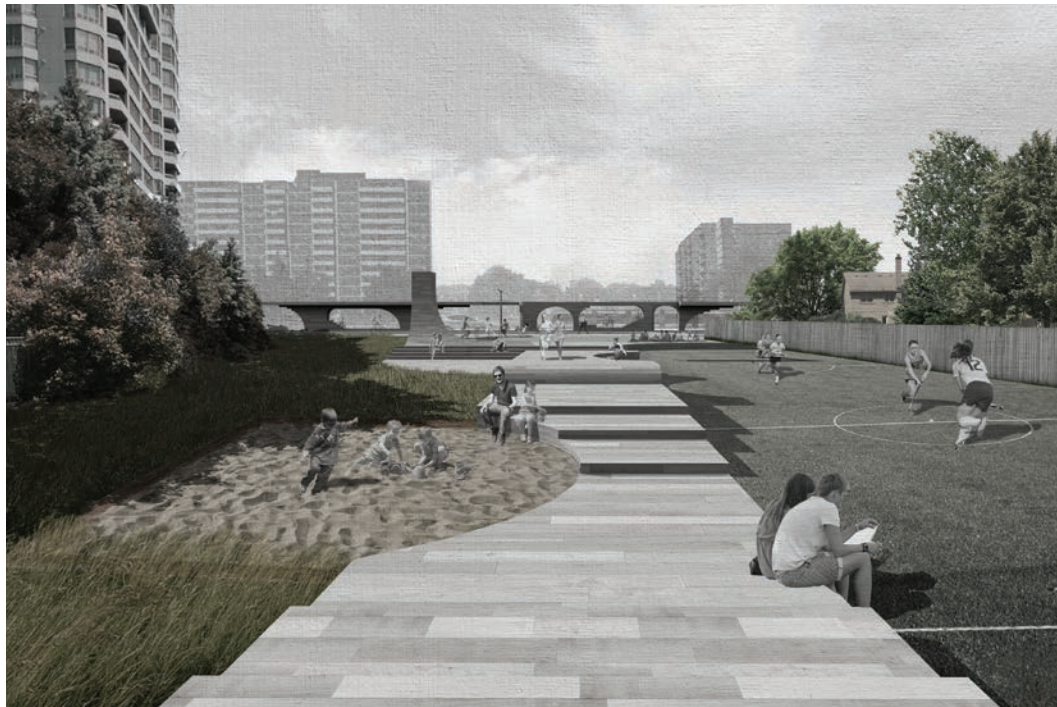




The Open Workshop, *Dredgescaping*, 2014-15. Toledo, Ohio. Courtesy The Open Workshop.



The Open Workshop, *The Right of Way is the Right to the City*, 2015. Toronto, Canada. In collaboration with SurfaceDesignInc. Courtesy The Open Workshop.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### OPENING NIGHT RECEPTION

FRIDAY, MARCH 9, 2018, 6-9 PM  
SCREENING ROOM & YOUTH ARTS LOUNGE  
Free w/ gallery admission

Celebrate the opening of *The Open Workshop: New Investigations in Collective Form*. Join us at 6PM for a presentation on The Open Workshop with studio principal Neeraj Bhatia, followed by a conversation with Lucía Sanromán, Director of Visual Arts.

### ENVIRONMENT AS POLITICS: A DRAWING WORKSHOP WITH THE OPEN WORKSHOP

TUESDAY, APRIL 3, 2018, 4-6 PM  
THE ANNEX & GRAND LOBBY  
Free

Using a scroll from their exhibition as a base, members of The Open Workshop invite the public to draw the spaces of collectivity that they have experienced in their own lives.

### ARCHITECTURE, THE CITY, AND THE OPEN WORK: A TALK WITH FLORIAN IDENBURG AND NEERAJ BHATIA

THURSDAY, JULY 12, 6-8 PM  
SCREENING ROOM  
\$10

Join Neeraj Bhatia of The Open Workshop and Florian Idenburg of the firm SO-IL for a presentation on Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*, an influential text for both firms.

Cover image:  
Courtesy The Open Workshop.

*The Open Workshop: New Investigations in Collective Form* is part of *The City Initiative*, a series of case studies by architects, designers, planners, and artists creating provocative work in the urban environment. It is organized by Martin Strickland, Exhibitions Associate, and Lucía Sanromán, Director of Visual Arts.

YBCA Exhibitions are made possible, in part, by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Panta Rhea Foundation, American Council of Learned Societies Public Fellows Program, and Meridee Moore and Kevin King. YBCA Programs are made possible, in part, by The James Irvine Foundation, with additional funding by National Endowment for the Arts, Grosvenor, and members of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts is grateful to the City of San Francisco for its ongoing support.



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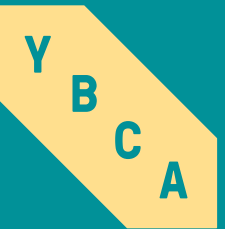
# NEW INVESTIGATIONS IN COLLECTIVE FORM

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## NEERAJ BHATIA AND LUCÍA SANROMÁN IN CONVERSATION

*This interview was conducted on February 5, 2017 between Neeraj Bhatia of The Open Workshop and Lucía Sanromán, Director of Visual Arts at YBCA.*

**LUCÍA SANROMÁN:** What is The Open Workshop? How was it founded? What role do you play in it?

**NEERAJ BAHATIA:** The Open Workshop is an architecture and urbanism office I founded in 2013, in my hometown of Toronto. Later that same year, when I moved to the Bay Area to join the Architecture faculty at California College of the Arts and codirect their urbanism research lab, I reestablished the office locally. While I’m the founder, the office is highly collaborative and an incubator space for people to explore ideas that interest them around contemporary urbanism.

The questions that drive the practice span from issues arising from climate change, to inequality, to how to live together in a pluralistic society. We are interested in how the discipline of architecture can play a guiding role in these systemic challenges, recasting them not solely as technological issues but also as cultural questions. Our projects address this at a variety of scales—some may be small and modest designs with an intended impact that’s larger than their physical footprint; in other cases we’re designing and thinking through research projects that are territorial in scale and require more systems-based thinking. In each of these, we investigate where and how design can engage pressing questions.

Broadly speaking, The Open Workshop looks for how to negotiate the relationship between the individual and a pluralistic collective. How can we design a frame for a collective conversation within a pluralistic and sometimes conflictive society? This balance can be tricky to negotiate. If there’s too much assimilation in creating a collective in a very top-down way, people’s individual ideas and thoughts may be repressed. On the other hand, if there’s too much distinction or diversity, we question

what makes our cities more than a grouping of people who live close together. There needs to be something that draws and holds us together as inhabitants of a city and makes us more than the sum of us.

**LS:** Would you consider the office more theory based, or do you work more actively in the built environment?

**NB:** I think right now we’re interested in framing the questions we would like to address, clarifying approaches for how to do so, and rethinking how a model of practice could be conceived to support this. These are theoretical questions that form the foundation for the practice. The hope is to find a balance between these two worlds. We want to somehow find a bridge between things we’re researching and discussing speculatively, and how those can have an impact, in very concrete ways, and change people’s lives. There has been a rift in architectural discourse in the last fifty years between practices that build and those that speculate. We are attempting to produce visionary ideas for cities that are also implementable, and hopefully erode this false distinction.

**LS:** At YBCA you are creating an exhibition. What role does this project play in your work as an architect and designer?

**NB:** This exhibition marks a threshold moment for the office. We are reflecting on the last five years of projects and have identified recurring themes that emerge from the work itself. In addition, in this exhibition we make centrally important understanding how visitors at YBCA can become more than passive observers—how they could be actively engaged with the objects, and themselves become an integral part of the experience. How can our design involve them in the experience and interpretation of the work?

A key work in the exhibition is an interactive field where people can lift or pull down various modules, to get closer or farther away from them, to engage with content that’s above or below them. And, importantly, to see the reciprocity between an action they, as an individual, make and a reaction in a larger collective system. It serves as a metaphor to remind them that they have agency in the world

and that their actions do have ripple effects in other larger systems around them. In this moment it is easy to forget the agency we have when we feel that the government and corporations are quite distant from our actions on the ground. For us, the exhibition becomes a metaphor for how our voices can somehow impact larger systems.

**LS:** What sorts of larger systems?

**NB:** I would say that there are two: the natural environment, and distinct sets of individuals who inhabit the environment. These are subjects that architecture has typically attempted to control—the physical environment and social habits. This interactive field has both elements to it. The installation invites people to engage with the field by customizing the way they interact with the actual content. There’s a nuanced interaction that can relate to their physical body. Then there’s also nature, which is represented through a series of plants selected for the show. The idea is that the dynamic properties of natural systems also can, and should, have a role in our design. So, as these plants are watered and grow over the course of the exhibition, their weight will also adjust the field’s conditions. That’s something more passive that we’ll see gradually, as opposed to people who are more actively engaging in a shorter time period.

**LS:** Why is the exhibition titled *New Investigations in Collective Form*?

**NB:** Part of it is an homage to a text by Fumihiko Maki, *Investigations in Collective Form*, that has been influential for our office. We couldn’t resist, because YBCA’s Gallery and Forum building was designed by Maki. In the text, which was written in the 1960s, Maki faced many similar issues that we’re facing right now. How do we deal with cities that are becoming more pluralistic and heterogeneous? How do we deal with new technologies? Where do we locate a collective ethos today?

He isolated three approaches that architects have used to do this. These techniques are still being employed in some way, but we felt that, given that it has been more than fifty years since the original text, there are more strategies and ways to define collectivity today, and we wanted

to open up that conversation while also linking back to it.

Maki’s three approaches are “Compositional Form,” “Megastructure,” and “Group-Form.” “Compositional Form” consists of individual buildings arranged on a two-dimensional plane. This approach has had a large influence on modernist architects. Rockefeller Center in New York, or the city of Brasília, would be examples. “Megastructures” are large frames that host a diverse series of functions and uses. Maki’s text has become popular because it was one of the first to define this term. It was such an important invention because it was extremely collective and top-down on one hand—the frame, which was typically a large truss—while on the other hand, it was extremely open-ended and bottom-up. Finally, by “Group Form” Maki referred to developments that were sequential in nature—pieces that are part of a whole, so to speak. In this manner, the unit of the house generated the village and vice versa. To complement Maki’s approaches, we have been exploring five others—“Soft Frameworks,” “Articulated Surfaces,” “Living Archives,” “Re-Wiring States,” and “Commoning.” These approaches are form based, time based, and program based.

**LS:** As people move through the exhibition, what do you want them to hold on to?

**NB:** This exhibition is about understanding how to empower people and the natural environment to have more agency in the space around them. As designers, we’re trying to create a vehicle for that and give space for people to take action—to orchestrate and negotiate, to play the role of a choreographer, rather than telling people what to do. The reason we put people and nature together on the same level is to recognize that when we speak about collectivity, our biggest looming collective project that needs to be addressed is climate change. Our inability to fathom, digest, and in some cases even believe in climate change points to the crisis of creating collectivity, or the crisis of creating the glue to hold these various viewpoints together.

## BIOGRAPHY

The Open Workshop is an architectural urbanism practice that focuses on the relationship between form and territory. Specifically, the firm is interested in the agency of form to impact political, economic, and ecological systems. Using a transcalar approach to design research, the office straddles the complex line between permanence and ephemerality, control and choice, legibility and illegibility, the individual and collective, determinacy and indeterminacy, the figure and the field. The office name, The Open Workshop, is in reference to Umberto Eco’s 1962 treatise, *The Open Work*. The office is dedicated to evolving Eco’s concept into architecture by expanding the subject to include the pluralistic public realm and transforming environmental context. In 2016, The Open Workshop was awarded the Architectural League Young Architects Prize as well as the Emerging Leaders Award from Design Intelligence.

Neeraj Bhatia is a licensed architect and urban designer from Toronto, and the founder of The Open Workshop. His work resides at the intersection of politics, infrastructure, and urbanism. He is an assistant professor at California College of the Arts, where he also codirects the urbanism research lab The Urban Works Agency. Prior to CCA, Bhatia held teaching positions at Cornell University, Rice University, and the University of Toronto. Select distinctions include the Emerging Leaders Award from Design Intelligence, Graham Foundation Grants, the Lawrence B. Anderson Award, Shell Center for Sustainability Grant, Odebrecht first prize Award for Sustainability, ACSA Faculty Design Award, and the Fulbright Fellowship. He is the coeditor of the books *Bracket [Takes Action]*, *The Petropolis of Tomorrow*, *Bracket [Goes Soft]*, *Arium: Weather + Architecture*, and coauthor of *Pamphlet Architecture 30: Coupling – Strategies for Infrastructural Opportunism*. He has a master’s degree in architecture and urbanism from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a bachelor’s degree in environmental studies and bachelor of architecture from the University of Waterloo.

## THE OPEN WORKSHOP EXHIBITION TEAM

Project leads: Neeraj Bhatia, Jared Clifton (project manager), Cesar Lopez (representation)  
Project team: Hayfa Al-Gwaiz, Ignacio G. Galán, Clare Hačko, Shawn Komlos, Blake Stevenson, Laura Williams

*The Open Workshop: New Investigations in Collective Form* features collaborations with Christoph Hesse Architects, Ignacio G. Galán / igg - office for architecture, RICA\* Studio-Lorena del Rio & Iñaqui Carnicero, and SurfaceDesign Inc. The Open Workshop would like to thank the following institutions and organizations for their support in the production of this work: California College of the Arts, Cornell University, Rice University, The Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Storefront for Art and Architecture, the Architecture League of New York, Lawrence B. Anderson Award/MIT, SPUR, Our City Oakland, StoreFrontLab, and the University of Toronto. The Open Workshop team between 2013 and 2018 included Neeraj Bhatia, Haifa Al-Gwaiz, Rafael Berges, Tracy Bremer, Mary Casper, Jared Clifton, Carly Dean, Zack Glennon, Clare Hačko, Alicia Hergenroeder, Anesta Iwan, Jeremy Jacinth, Shawn Komlos, Brian Lee, Mikaela Leo, Liz Lessig, Cesar Lopez, Bella Mang, Shirin Monshipouri, Jonathan Negron, David Ornvold, Sonia Ramundi, Mauricio Soto (structural engineer), Blake Stevenson, Kurt Stubbins, Laura Williams, De Peter Yi, and Wei Zhao.