

## Liquid Threshold

Atelier One, Distributed by Actar,  
2009, 332 pp.

Historians and critics are irresistibly inclined to categorize. Engineers do this. Architects do that. And artists do *that*. It makes for a much sexier story if there is some kind of dialectical tension needing resolution. But the operation of generating a distinction in order to break it down—a sort of architecture/engineering/construction straw man—has created a misguided and unseemly perception of an arms race among the disciplines that has warranted a demilitarized zone to separate the critical discourse of architecture and engineering. *Liquid Threshold*, the new monograph documenting the English structural-engineering firm Atelier One, intends to occupy that demilitarized zone and reclaim it as the most productive and creative terrain in the building industry.

Founded twenty years ago by Neil Thomas and Aran Chadwick, Atelier One—which works with a broad array of architects (Will Alsop, for one) and artists (including Anish Kapoor and Rachel Whitehead)—has assembled an impressive and diverse portfolio of built work. The blurred zone between engineering, architecture, and art (if there even is a “between” anymore) is the “liquid threshold” they intend to examine. They pulled the term from Kevin Kelly, who in *Out of Control* refers to “something in persistent disequilibrium, a continuous state of surfing forever on the edge between never stopping, but never falling. Homing in on that liquid threshold is still the mysterious Holy Grail of creation and a quest for all amateur gods.” This

collaborative energy is the focus of recent investigation, including Nina Rappaport’s compelling book *Support and Resist* (Monacelli Press, 2007).

Atelier One’s work—art museums, pop-music stage sets, office buildings, and art installations—testifies to this state of “forever surfing.” And the difficulties presented by the commissions—tight sites, structural challenges, and environmental concerns—speak to the firm’s rigorous approach.

Analogous to Atelier One’s approach to practice, the monograph is highly liquid. Opening with a foreword by Peter Cook, the book’s contents are divided into two main parts, “Place” and “Process.” In the first, photographer Peter Marlow presents an extensive photo essay that artfully captures the firm’s projects in black-and-white. Importantly, he treats them not as autonomous objects to be documented but rather as part of a context for an urban or landscape environment. In “Process,” the editors present a survey of built work. The book, meant to be self-navigated, abandons traditional categories; instead, the editors choose to highlight certain projects and key collaborators.

One of the “liquid thresholds” into which the book timidly dips its toes is the concept of the monograph as a genre. While it provides a substantive survey of built work, it manages to skirt the personal, the nostalgic, and the profession as a whole. Thomas and Chadwick present the projects in a casual tone, sometimes referring to the personal relationships and events that inspired a design. At times the text takes on the tone of someone dusting off a box of memorabilia, love letters and all.

In a letter included in the book, Neil Thomas writes to Patrick Bellew, director of Atelier Ten, “You are a true genius. I worry about how hard you work, but most of all I love you.” Or there is Alan Brookes, English academic and Atelier Ten collaborator, who recalls day-to-day memories of working with Thomas and Chadwick (“I remember drinking in the pub after work”) or the misadventures of traveling with them (“Had disastrous journey from Gdansk to Berlin with Aran in a mini bus,” p. 153). Though these moments begin to convey the immediately personal nature of these professional collaborations—engineering explored over a pint or in a mini bus, the editors also aim to define some of the profession’s parameters, giving the firm a context within the legacies of structural engineering.

As part of this effort they include “The Language of Engineers: A Glossary of Technical Terms” as both an index and a small pamphlet inset. This gesture accomplishes two objectives: to broaden the discourse beyond the firm and into the profession and to articulate the liquid threshold. By providing the glossary, the book reminds readers that structural engineering is its own distinct discipline with its own distinct lexicon. But in the same breath, in the act of providing definitions, it resolves the distinction and breaks down the barrier.

Beyond the projects and terminologies, the monograph reveals design knowledge as the shared territory. Structural engineering and architecture are patently interdisciplinary. The industry itself is a liquid threshold, a rhizomatic network of relationships and specializations. Many of the finest moments in design history come when given ideas of structure are challenged and then paradigmatically changed. These are the moments that occupy the pages of *Liquid Threshold*.

—John Gendall  
*Glendall is a New York-based writer and teaches critical studies and design theory at Pratt Institute and Parsons School of Constructed Environments.*