

## Interview: Adam and Eve Magazine

By Tracey Woods

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TRACEY: Tell me a little bit about what you are working on right now...

TOM: Currently I'm working on the subject of how surfaces can become inflected by lines or patterns. It is a kind of push and pull of surface, like if I take a rubber sheet and begin to push things up through it and they are not quite legible. It's that moment where you can't tell if something is doing structural or other work, or if it is ornamental. I like this very much because it is both interesting as an aesthetic but also interesting in terms of the discipline of architecture, in terms of the potentially loose relation between features and behaviors.

TRACEY: You're inspired by natural structures, like plants and insects. How are you working this into buildings?

TOM: Many of the things that inspire my work now are linked to biology. A certain kind of biology though, a messy biology. The biology of excess and not efficiency. It is infuriating how often I hear about the perfection of biology and how things that are in nature are the „best of all possible“ solutions to problems. That idea leaves out the very things that create difference: mutation, randomness, evolutionary dead-ends, and so on. Nature is exceedingly beautiful and I am in awe of how organic features build up and become obfuscated, fuse, embed, and become co-opted for behaviors which they did not originally support. An ecology is surprisingly resilient, but not clean or optimal. Ecologies work based on redundancies and overlaps.

On an architectural level, I think it is very difficult to be thinking about efficiency and do anything of value. Engineer-architects always have this problem, it is a killer. I very much support however the idea that architecture can pick up cues from materials, systems of construction, building systems, and so on. But that can't be the end of the story. I never believe people who imply that their work automatically arises from a particular technological innovation. I think that there is a complex feedback between a historical time and a sensibility that one has... sometimes the sensibility precedes the ability to realize the thing in the world. That probably means you are pushing limits...

TRACEY: What do you think of this term 'Star Architect' or 'Starchitect'?

TOM: That's a really good question because some of it-- the scene-- is really unbecoming, but on the other end of it, if you look at fashion, it's totally accepted. It's funny because people have a distaste for Star Architects but at the same time revere fashion designers and car designers and of course artists. We rarely see an architect who is as famous as a Damien Hirst or a Radiohead, ever. The most famous architect, Frank Gehry, is still probably not as famous as those guys... well he probably doesn't have a trail of paparazzi trailing behind him anyway.

TRACEY: Perhaps, but there's a degree of exposure for architects and architecture has reached a point where it's fashionable and noticed. People want to know who the best architects are and are more aware of their surroundings and improving those surroundings.

TOM: Which is great, I have to say as an architect that it's really nice to see. Finally, people are more interested. The thing that I always worry about is that it's such a small group of people who are accepted by the cultural elite. If you look at the Venice Biennale, which is coming up again, I'm not sure exactly who's exhibiting there, but I think it's a list of the top 10 or 15 architects of the world, the accepted list. What happens is that the younger generation who are experimenting and taking more design risks are not necessarily getting out there as much or being given opportunities. I don't think that's the way to go over the long term. But in terms of the profession, this 'Star Architect' thing is good, it lifts us all up, it is a good thing.

TRACEY: It took Zaha 30 years to gain this notoriety. You have been in *Vogue* and *Surface*-- that's a lot of publicity for a young practice. That wouldn't have happened 10 or 20 years ago.

TOM: That's true. The internet has changed everything. It is voracious. Everything we do in the office gets posted, published, then re-posted, and consumed so fast that it's actually hard to keep up with. It's empowering in terms of getting your name out, compared to architects a generation up from me, who waited years to do a single book or publish a single image in a magazine. But the ugly back-end of all this is that there is little or no editing or curating involved in publishing right now, things are floating out there with no context, and it's hard to tell the good stuff from the junk if you are not an expert. Also, I think that the number of young „offices“ out there is exploding to the point that there are maybe too many. An office is not a Facebook page. It is a life's work....

TRACEY: Are young architects now able to take more risks?

TOM: At the end of the day there are really only a few people getting away with extreme work, and making some kind of living. I'm really just starting my practice, it's not even at a mid point, it's just starting. There are really two ways to take it, you can start working your way up small, take on small projects like a porch, a shower curtain or a house so that you can work your way up, which is maybe how somebody like John Lautner did it. He was a fabulous architect, although he never broke out of the house scale. Then there is the other direction, where you're going to skip the small stuff and go right to super-size projects, which is a big risk, but it has a big payoff.

TRACEY: What's your plan?

TOM: Well, I'm doing-- attempting to do-- the latter one. I'm doing competitions now, one every two months for big public works projects like operas, museums and that sort of stuff. Still, I always question what I'm doing, it's very, very difficult to break in. But it is exciting.

TRACEY: So you don't do small projects?

TOM: I might if there was something right in front of my face, but honestly I'm trying to avoid it because I think those things can be a huge distraction. Architects don't realize it at first but

they sometimes wake up after a kind of slumber for three years where all they did was noodle around with doorknobs and rain gutters...

TRACEY: But when you look at David Adjaye who apparently did an interior for someone and was noticed and picked up by celebrities...

TOM: Well absolutely, it can work both ways, I totally agree. It always helps to have people who support the work and who value it. And you have to interface with the world. I always say this to my students. Academia is fine, but we need to get out and interface and make a difference. So many architects are hermits and only have architect friends....Terrible! But I understand it.

TRACEY: You're rubbing shoulders with stars in L.A.

TOM: Well, yeah, but it always sounds better than it actually is. There is money there and an understanding and fetishization of the extreme and the extravagant. But I wish there was more support for the arts. Entertainment *seems* so close to architecture but it's really not that simple... or that close. I have done design consulting on a few movies, and it's not all glory and fabulousness, there is a very conservative agenda behind a lot of what goes down in Hollywood because of the amount of money at stake.

TRACEY: Will we soon see a Tom Wiscombe Louis Vuitton bag like the Richard Prince edition?

TOM: I wouldn't hate that... But honestly, I take expertise very seriously, and respect designers' territories. A lot of very good architects have done a lot of very bad chairs, right? I'm not saying you can't cross over, but I am saying that what looks easy is often incredibly difficult to pull off well.

TRACEY: Were you a bit of a science nerd as a kid?

TOM: No. Well maybe... My father was at NASA and I worked at NASA as an intern a long time ago. And I was Darth Vader for halloween one year, with all home-made electrical harnesses and lighting. So is that a yes? (laughs)

TRACEY: I can see a fair bit of Deleuzian theory in your work. Is this correct?

TOM: Of course, I was weaned on that in the 1990s. Building systems are one of my biggest interests, in terms of how you can get beyond the categorical towards a model based on multiplicity. Hybrids of surface, structure, and lighting systems, not one or the other. And of course I am interested in transformations, like surface to line, and avoiding the categorical there as well. All of that comes directly from Deleuze who frames the world in terms of becomings.

TRACEY: What do you do when you're not at work, or are you at work all of the time?

TOM: Um, yes, pretty much. The thing about it, is that I'm also a full-time teacher. I try to be full-time in my office and I have pet projects that include doing a monograph right now. So, two careers, and then doing the lecture circuit and also keeping up with all of the social events and that sort of stuff. It's all part of the way of life, you need to be involved in all of it.

TRACEY: Hey, if you're enjoying it! The monograph, is it A.D.?

TOM: No, it's a Chinese publisher – a series with Greg Lynn, François Roche, Hernan Diaz Alonso, a sort of younger generation. It's a big book and for me it's almost too early to do a monograph, I almost laughed when they asked me to do it because I've had an actual office space for two years, so come on? But I'm trying to do it and it is a big learning experience for me. If nothing else, it is a trial run...

TRACEY: Who did you study under?

TOM: Well at [University of California] Berkeley I did a quick architectural degree, it wasn't very serious, but I did my graduate work at UCLA with Sylvia Lavin and Greg Lynn. They had just come to the West Coast to revamp the program and so I basically followed them out there to study with them and they were amazing. For me grad school is about being with precisely the right people, never go for location, I always tell my students that. You zero in on the people that you can relate to at a given moment and go there, no matter what.

TRACEY: When you're teaching, if you look at a student's work, can you immediately tell who's going places?

TOM: That's a good question. It is so easy that it kind of freaks me out. I wish it wasn't true. On the first day of class I can usually tell the students that will do the best in class and project out further to being good architects in the future. I don't know if I'm right or wrong but when I walk into a room with my students and spend an hour with them I usually have a sense of it.

TRACEY: Is it talent or dedication?

TOM: It's not natural talent, I don't believe in genius or natural talent, I really don't. I believe it's hard work. You can tell the ones that are really hungry and they are the ones who will be the best. Look at Michael Jackson- he started performing at three years old! Of course there was a perfect storm of things there, but the main factor is that he started practicing really early.

TRACEY: Someone told me horror stories of presenting to major architects such as Zaha in London and her sitting smoking in a lounge chair and either tearing the work off the wall or walking out without speaking! What is your attitude like?

TOM: There is something to the strategy of storming out of the room-- it certainly works. I tend to try not to manipulate but to be brutally honest. I believe universities should mirror the professional world. When I say something to a student it's like something I would say to a colleague or someone in my office. I guess that can appear harsh at times, at first students are offended or terrified, but a year later they come back and are usually like, yeah, you were right on back then. Everyone has their own style though, as it should be.

TRACEY: With your interest in nature, do you trek around, spend a lot of time out in the elements? What else inspires you other than nature – music, arts?

TOM: I think film has always been super, super important and I have quirky tastes. I'm obsessed with science fiction. I've seen everything. That's why when I talk about science, there is always a fiction part to the science. I never pretend to be an actual scientist so I always understand science and cultural production as interrelated. I'm obsessed with all of those dystopic films from the 70s like Logan's Run and Planet of the Apes. My wife and I love Battlestar Gallactica, the new series.

TRACEY: How do you go about branding your practice, or branding Tom Wiscombe?

TOM: I always hope that the work is doing that for me, that I'm developing a kind of signature I guess. I wouldn't have said that 10 years ago, I would have said that I hate signature architecture, but I'm hopefully more mature now...

TRACEY: It is a necessity to have a signature style?

TOM: It is absolutely critical that you have that-- if not a style then an analytical process, something you are following to an end ruthlessly. So, my hope is that the work itself will stand out and is unique enough so that it is understood as a body of work not just taking stabs at a subject or making pretty images. So, that is my branding, there is no outside marketing or anything else, it's just me showing the work whenever I can and in whatever context I can, like publications, but more importantly lectures. Public lectures are really important to me to get out there and talk openly about the work. I like to be very accessible and talk to a broad audience. It's not an aloof critical approach. I talked about sports cars the other day. A lot of people in the 90s were talking about things that were really erudite, really inaccessible, and so I like to get out there and talk about my obsessions and get people involved.

TRACEY: What cars do you covet?

TOM: Oh, don't even get me going! My new favorite car is the Mazda Furai concept car. It is so beautiful, it's supposedly performance based, but it's got these amazing lines and pleats on it supposedly for aerodynamics, but I know as a designer that it is totally baroque. It's about articulating moments of tension that appear and disappear, features that go way beyond any relationship to aerodynamic or structure.

TRACEY: It isn't performative at all.

TOM: No, well let's say maybe..but that of course assumes you are defining performance as efficiency which is maybe problematic. So do you know the new Lamborghini Reventon? An absolutely precise understanding of edges, curvature, and surface-to-pleat geometry. A lot of architecture these days is going super soft, you know, and I'm not interested in that, I'm interested in hybrids – multiple, formal regimes together to make complex forms. That Lamborghini is so sophisticated, in terms of curvature vs. edges and then also in terms of organizational systems, like the way that the seams between the panels run not along the formal inflections but according to an independent logic. That secondary pattern logic runs across the forms to break it down and add another layer of intricacy.

TRACEY: I thought my favorite was the Aston Martin, but now I'm thinking, from the way you've just intimately described the Lamborghini, that I'm not really looking at them closely enough.

TOM: I go over car designs with a microscope. I look at every edge and cornering. I can usually identify any make and model from about 100 meters away in the dark. It's like hunting.

TRACEY: What do you drive?

TOM: I have a BMW 740 Sport, the Dinan M series. It's not the car I would love to have but it's a beast. It's one part supercar, one part grandpa, just like I like it.

TRACEY: Where in L.A. are you [based]?

TOM: Well, sitting here in Australia, you might as well say I live in Hollywood. Although the reality is I live in Koreatown.

TRACEY: Do you get tired of the beautiful people – the Hollywood aesthetic, the blonde, super-fit, plastic enhanced people?

TOM: The weird thing is they don't look fit, they look monstrous to me, these engineered bodies. There is such a mania going on now with junior high school girls getting boob jobs and they are very scary looking as they start to age. The women that have the work done too early, ten to twenty years later they begin to look malformed. I don't like to moralize about it though, it is not a moral issue. It is an issue for our time, and fine artists who are dealing with bodyform engineering and genetic hybridization are very interesting to me. But out on the street it can get pretty disturbing.

TRACEY: Perhaps it's getting close to a point where it's developing a new race of people.

TOM: Yes, there is something about L.A. that brings form to an extreme, to a kind of mania. I don't like to call anything unnatural that is, in fact, quite natural. You just have to look at male peacocks, how they have evolved with these ridiculous colors and feathers that make no sense, except to attract females among other myriad things. It even reduces their ability to survive in the wild because they can't fly, they're so heavy, there is so much weight that tigers can just bat them out of the air. So much for efficiency and perfection.