

PROFILE ALEX HAW

ALEX HAW FOUNDED HIS MULTIDISCIPLINE STUDIO ATMOS IN 2006 VIA THE BARTLETT, PRINCETON AND A COLLECTION OF TOP-DRAWER ARCHITECTURE PRACTICES IN AUSTRALIA, THE USA AND ENGLAND. HERBERT WRIGHT LOOKS AT THE UNIQUE ATMOS PORTFOLIO AND TALKS TO HAW ABOUT HIS WORK AND HIS FASCINATION WITH MOVEMENT AND PERFORMANCE

Alex Haw, head of idiosyncratic design practice atmos, once played the lead psycho in a seminal low-budget thriller. With the same intensity in his eyes, he now talks about architecture's 'need to reclaim the poignancy of human emotion', how contemporary space is 'psychologically shocking and banal, and we can do better', and of his fascination with human movement and performance. His desire to 'celebrate' the human informs an acclaimed suite of projects for small domestic spaces and installations that span (in the case of his *Worldscape* table, literally) the world.

The atmos premises in a converted leather stockroom off London's Brick Lane doesn't necessarily celebrate the human. You could hardly swing a cat among the hanging bicycles, shelves heaving with files and models stacked to the ceiling, and kit grounded around the floor. Unshaven and in jeans, Haw embodies engaged Shoreditch cool in this cluttered creative nest, just as he does talking over coffee in one of the hip bean boutiques nearby. As a speaker, he's wowed audiences from Berlin to Princeton.

If it was anywhere that shaped Haw's vision, it was Princeton rather than Bartlett where he first trained. 'It's a much higher game at a much higher level', he says. 'Everyone works very hard, [in] the way they study. You don't quite have that culture here. Everyone's madly trying to go to every

[Slavoj] Žižek lecture that they can.'

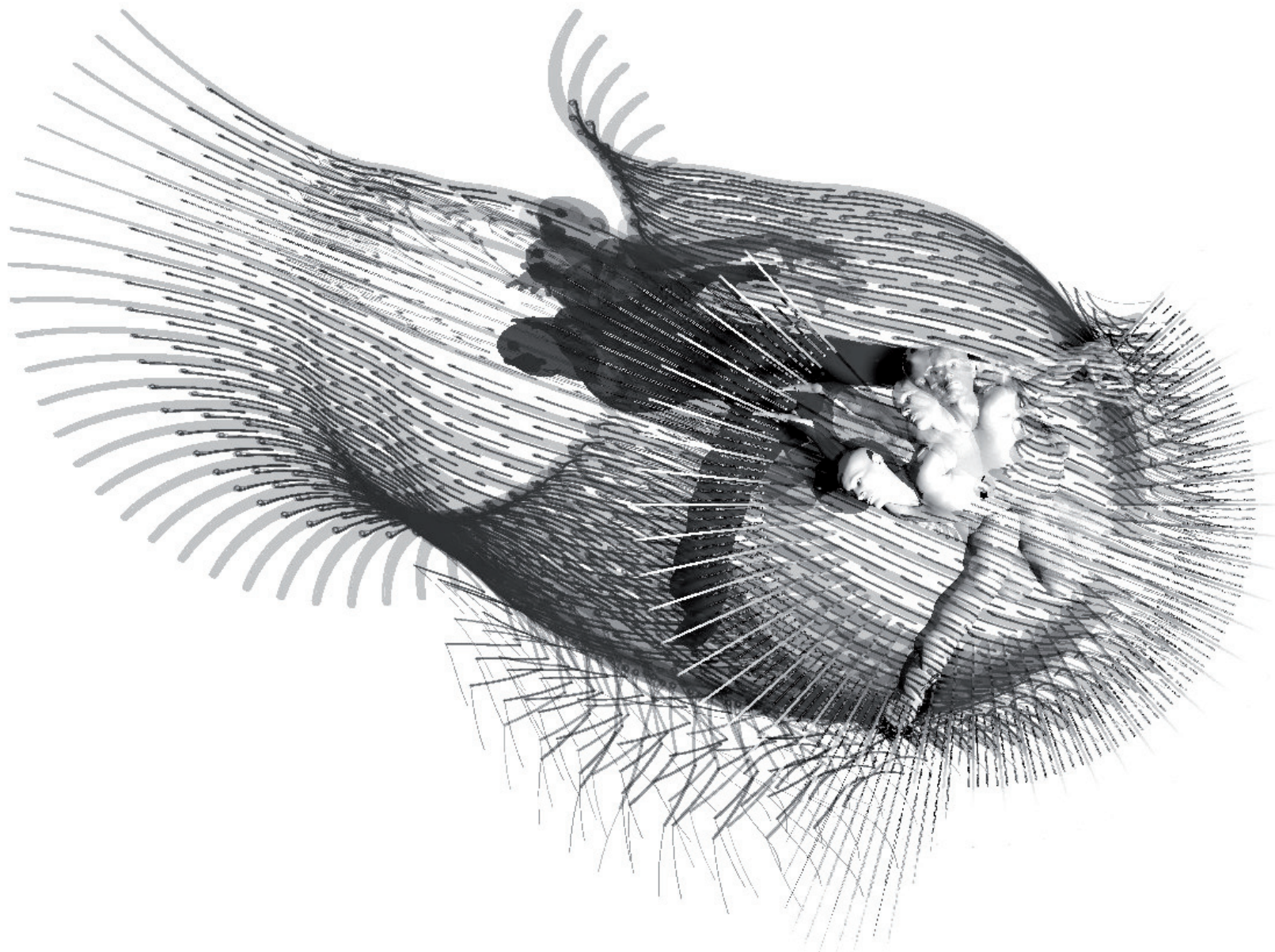
In his first term there on a Fullbright scholarship, he learned about performance art, something that has stayed with him. 'It was politicised, humanist, expressive, performative space that I was interested in as an art thing, then wondering how an architect may incorporate that to celebrate the human', he says. He also took a video course, and 'it was then that I started to feel architecture might be the equivalent of spatial video'. Video may be merely two-dimensional, but crucially it has the fourth dimension – time – and for Haw that made it offer 'a new mode of representation'. Look at the atmos website, and every project is represented by maddeningly busy animation-cycled windows.

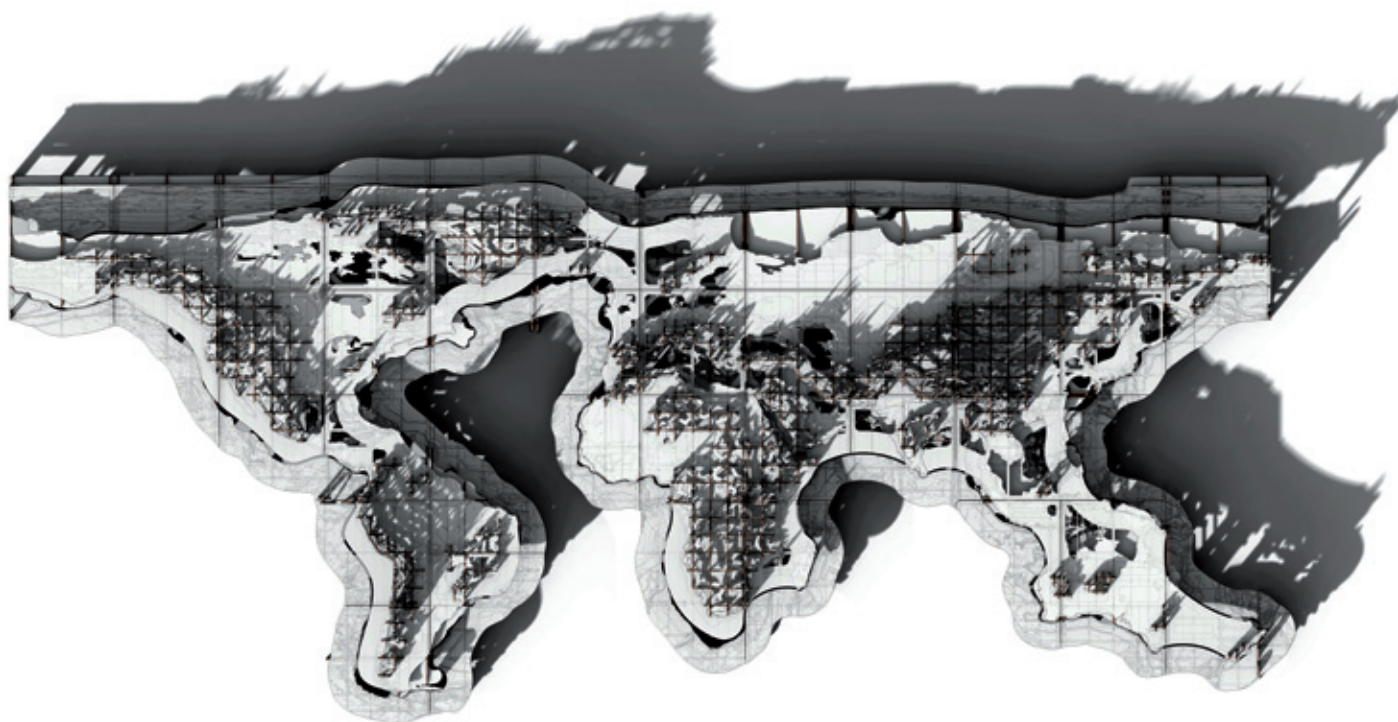
Even before Princeton, Haw had had an extraordinary architectural apprenticeship. His first job was working for actress, interior designer and hotelier Anouska Hempel ('an interesting, fiery lady who would come and serve you fried locusts', he comments). A stint at Grimshaw followed. He was actually considering being an actor, and it was then that he played the psycho in the film the low-budget *Following* (1998), directed by Chris Nolan. Nolan went on to turn the Batman franchise into a global blockbuster.

Haw recalls slyly: 'It was a delicious opportunity to express my inner sadism.' But he stuck with architecture, working in ►

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Below: Outreach, an installation for French digital arts network RAN, will use cameras to map the body in three dimensions and amplify movements through an array of articulated arm elements





Top: Roominaroom used sculpted wood to create a new bedroom, and revealed the hitherto inaccessible Thames view from the existing building

Above: Worldscape, the 20m-long dining table of CNC-carved wood that has now been installed in Lime Wharf, in plan, with shadow rendition to illustrate vertical elements

Australia for Tonkin Zulaikha Greer, then returning to Grimshaw, where he was allocated to the Eden Project and competitions.

After Princeton, he worked at Diller Scofidio + Renfro on the Blur pavilion for Swiss EXPO 2002, which looked like a cloud on the water and was the largest tensegrity structure in Europe. 'I felt that they weren't architects, I felt they were simply artists', he recalls. 'They always struggled with "How are we going to do a building?"; they were always sampling'. A classic moment was when they were grappling with Swiss fire regulations that demanded a sprinkler system. The discussion went: 'It is a fucking sprinkler, Jesus Christ!'

Back in the UK, he worked with the Richard Rogers Partnership on Heathrow T5. 'There's some real glory to the main terminal building,' he comments, 'a certain structural fuss going on that's a bit mad,' but he thinks Rogers' Madrid-Barajas Terminal is 'much more celebratory and successful'. He continues: 'A lot of public spaces are not easy surfaces for emotions to cling to, they're not meant to be'. He contrasts that with the 'huge psychological impregnation inside residential spaces that I'm quite attracted to', and it was such a space that gave atmos, which he established in 2006, its first project.

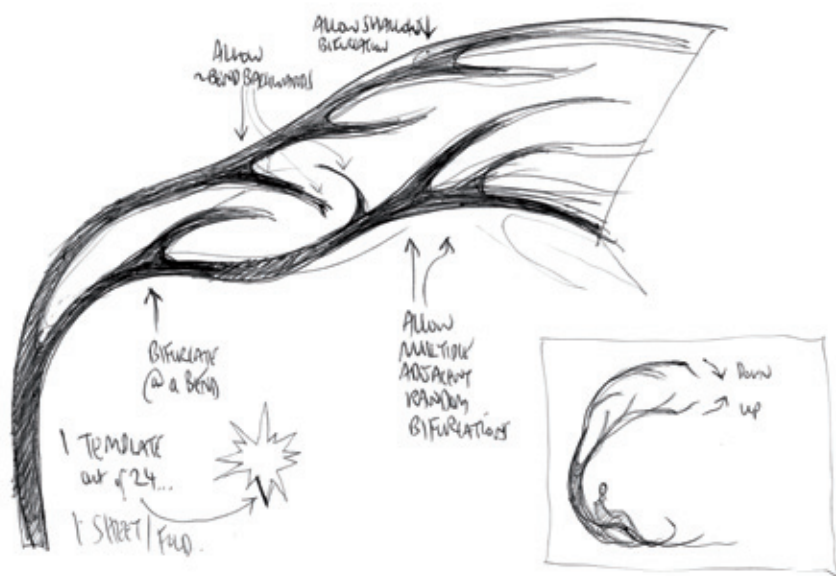
Called Woven Nest, it was an extension to a musician's London house where

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planning constraints excluded building an extra storey. Nevertheless, that is exactly what Haw did, hiding it in a Georgian parapet. A strand of wood unifies the project, framing stairs to the new bathroom, bedroom and study, where the wood widens and forms fixtures, and light floods in from a faceted skylight and roof terrace. It's about the journey of daily life, and as Haw says, 'there's a poetic spatial choreographic intention...a much tighter functional ergonomic utility-driven dimension'.

Further extraordinary explorations of domestic space followed, including Sensuascaping, a project that dissolved the gap between a house interior and its garden with gorgeous flowing white curves. More recently, Roominaroom delivered exactly what its name says, organically swelling out of its host space and even opening up a Thames view for the children ('the ultimate spatial inquisitors', says Haw) it was built for.

Spaces defined by curved ribs are entering mainstream architectural language, from the roof garden of Viñoly's Walkie-Talkie skyscraper to RMJM's designs for metro stations in Hyderabad, but the atmos approach is clearly different. It is about turning the 'poverty' of lack of space into an opportunity to explore 'packing and compaction and density' to generate intimate, human scale with a 'softness of emotion'. His London domestic projects may »



Top left: Conceptual sketches develop the arboreal theme of the Moving Orchard, a stage of sheet metal for the City of London Festival 2013 that will be initially deployed by St Paul's Cathedral

Above left: Initially a collaborative proposal for the London Olympics viewing platform, *The Cloud* invites cyclists as well as pedestrians to climb into an arial array of spheres, some habitable

Top right: Hong Kong teenagers occupy *WorkSpacePlyTime*, a pavilion of 200 hinged panels in a matrix of 20 planes within a cube

Above right: The garden extension at Lime Wharf will feature weaving layers of plant-potted shelving in a lattice of sculptural structural members

run the risk of pigeon-holing Haw as a god of small spaces, although Roominaroom has led to a far larger residential project in Guilin, Guangxi Province, south-west China, where the buildings are 250m long. Moreover, domestic is just one aspect of the atmos output. It has also found extraordinary success in public installations on the global stage.

That started with *WorkSpacePlyTime*, a habitable frame made of 20 computer-cut, perforated plywood planes and hinged elements within a cube of 5m sides. It travelled from London Design Week 2007 to Hong Kong for the Hong Kong & Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture 2008. With a capacity of 81 people, it challenged anything there for urban density, and local youth even managing to accommodate 24 people on just one of its faces. This matrix of nooks and crannies is for leisure but many spaces offered workstation potential. Work ergonomics has long informed Haw's work, and he cites as an influence Frank Duffy, who brought the concepts of Bürolandschaft (deformalised open-plan offices with plants) to the UK and USA.

More recently, the London Olympics generated Haw's most ambitious vision yet, *The Cloud*, in collaboration with an international array of engineers, technologists and designers including Arup and Carlo Ratti, the Italian director of MIT's

SENSEable City Laboratory, which pursues smart city ideas. Anish Kapoor's *Orbit* trumped it and was built, but if Lakshmi Mittal hadn't offered Boris Johnson some free steel London could well have been graced with a vast viewing structure in which helical ramps rise into a cloud of Tomas Saraceno's transparent spheres, some inhabitable (blueprint March). That project may yet be realised somewhere in the world, but another Olympics project is very real, and takes the world itself as its form.

Worldscape is a dining table that is a 20m-long world map, including mountains that rise as high as 2.5m. Another virtuoso execution of digital planar wood cutting, it was first used in Stratford for the Global Feast dining project. Because it lay on the Greenwich Meridian, Haw even designed geographical compositions in Willow pattern fashion for the crockery. *Worldscape* has since gone to Lime Wharf, a gallery-cum-'cultural laboratory' in Hackney, where Haw has also designed a 'growing space' canalside extension.

In March, Lime Wharf hosted *Kitchen Feast* – evenings of music, art and conversation programmed by curator Thomas Ermacora, with contemporary world cuisine by Anna Hansen of Modern Kitchen. When *Blueprint* visited, sitting at the coast of Brazil and serenaded by a quartet from London Contemporary Orchestra, diners were plied

with astonishing delights such as monkfish liver with fish-skin crisps and Cornish crab rarebit on einkorn toast. Haw is a foodie and founder in 2009 of the location-shifting *Latitudinal Cuisine* cooking community. He notes that 'architecture and food are so similar – pleasurable experiences originally wrought from the earth, but supported by intricate artificial networks infrastructures'.

This June will see atmos deliver a stage for the City of London Festival, called *Mobile Orchard*, and an interactive screen installation wrapping Camden's Round House stage that will respond to music and audience movement for a contemporary classical music festival, curated by Imogen Heap. Another mediated project that draws on Haw's fascination with data feed is *Outreach*, a collaboration with programmer/artist Mauritius 'dr mo' Seegler for the French digital arts network RAN. Essentially a walk-in cage installation, cameras map your movements and amplify them in real time with articulated arm elements.

Haw says that 'from the minute tactile aesthetics and utilities of our culinary prosthetics, to the ergonomic relations that the architecture provokes, to the ambient qualities of the spaces – everything is an emotional trigger'.

Constantly finding that trigger has made him simultaneously a cult niche designer and a provocateur playing to a world stage. ■