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Fall 2023

Observations on
architecture and the
contemporary city

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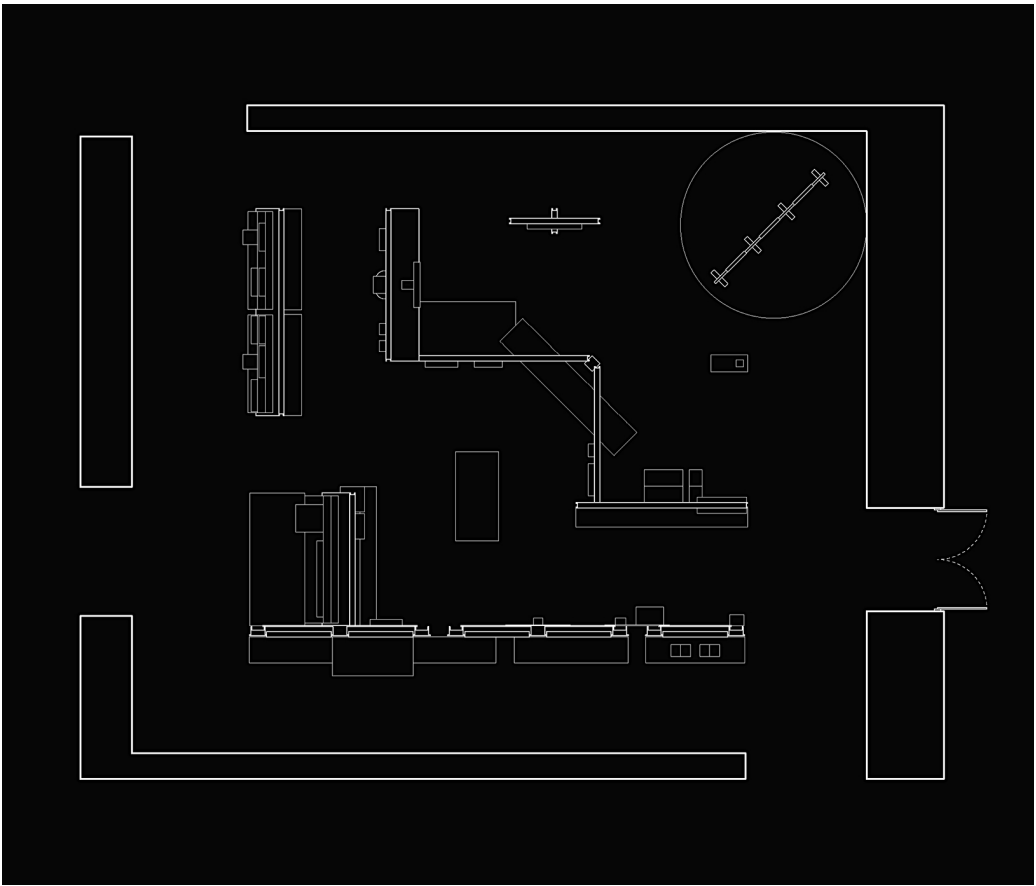


Stone on Stone

It takes time to adjust your eyes to the darkness, especially in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) campus feels particularly exposed, with large expanses of grass and sky encompassing the grounds. Outside, brightness and contrast attack our senses. Michael Heizer's granite rock hovers over a concrete ditch. Renzo Piano's travertine grid reflects the harsh sun. Peter Zumthor's construction site rings with a high pitch. The air smells of the tar that permeates the fossil-rich ground. Everyone arrives wearing sunglasses.

But inside one of the Resnick Pavilion galleries, the architects of The Los Angeles Design Group (The LADG), Andrew Holder and Benjamin Freyinger, blacked out the skylights and dimmed the lights. They packed the room with veneered plywood panels that effectively dampen the sound. And they reduced the atmosphere to a kind of off-black that recedes into the background, extending the compact gallery with deep pockets of seemingly infinite space. The muted ambience of the "Eternal Medium" exhibition relaxes our senses and gives us a break from LA's harsh atmosphere. The reset is necessary to appreciate the delicate pattern, tone, and texture on display. Only in this dark air can our pupils dilate and color correct to see both the stones and deep into the stones at once.

The subtitle of the exhibition, "Seeing the World in Stone," brings awareness to the process of seeing the ephemeral worlds that surround and inhabit this seemingly hard material. In a famous story that now resembles a myth, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe envisaged an entire pavilion trapped inside the symmetry of an onyx slab. But for a few contemporary exceptions, like Young & Ayata's "hot stone objects," architects have forgotten how to see the things of this world – modern pavilions, mystical landscapes, inkblot clouds, spotted animals – petrified in rock. For our generation – a generation that has traded medium specificity for immaterial platitude – this exhibition is a lesson in remembering. We recalled that stone is hard and heavy, that it contains veins and grain, that it is quarried and traded with great difficulty, that it emits images and mediates phantoms, that it is really beautiful and beautifully real.



The Los Angeles Design Group, plan for "Eternal Medium: Seeing the World in Stone," Resnick Pavilion, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, August 20, 2023 – February 11, 2024. Drawing courtesy the architects.

As part of an international collaboration, the exhibition's polymath curator, Rosie Mills, The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Associate Curator of Decorative Arts and Design at LACMA, developed this transhistorical exhibition across departments and time periods, with knowledge and specimens gathered from LACMA, the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Collection, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. She organized 125 objects into nine categories of display, across which, at different scales and in diverse forms, stone is everywhere present, and it also represents. And despite the singular word *medium* in the title of the exhibition, there are many media grouped to communicate with one another to develop the idea of stone's capacity to mediate. There are animals formed of rock, paints made of minerals, stones marked with pigment, pictures clad in stone, landscapes pictured in gems, stones depicted with paint. The artifacts range in measure from a cubic centimeter to feet in length; in weight, from paper to marble slab; in format, from flat to volumetric; in value, from minimal to maximum security glass.



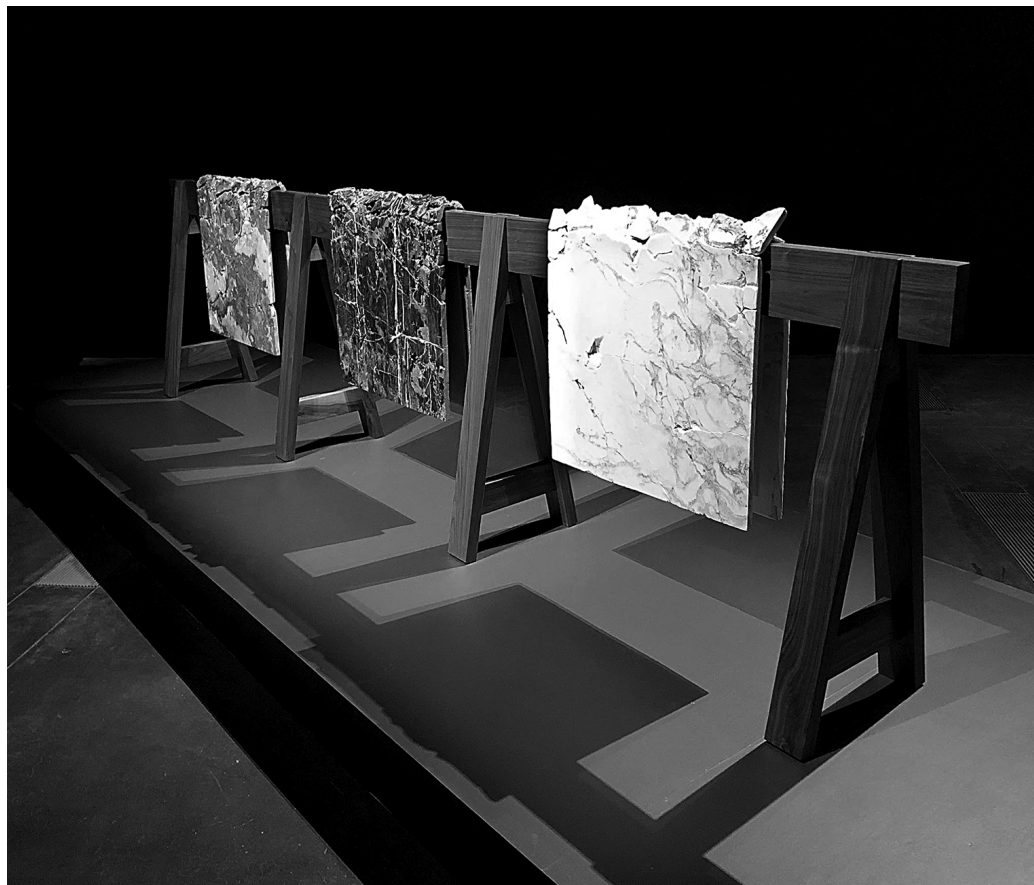
The LADG's partitions, pedestals, and tables for "Eternal Medium." Photo © Marten Elder. Courtesy the architects. See a color photo of the installation on page 134.

Mills directed The LADG to pull it all together without "bleaching" the objects. Thus they faced the old-school problem of the *nine-square*: how to squeeze nine thematic groupings into a single rectangular space with a high degree of scalar looseness and local differentiation. But the result is not the formal nine-square of John Hejduk. Its corners are blunt, its edges lean, it has gaps. The substructure of the nine-square grid is set up only to be unpacked and undermined. There are normal panels that support leaning platforms that support cantilevering pedestals that support extruded plinths that support the glass panes that support the wedged plates that support the vinyl text. This pile of supporting material is painted black, Dunn-Edwards Black Bay, to be specific. And, of course, it is the opposite of the white box gallery. But as eyes adjust to the dark, it becomes apparent that this black is also not quite the black of a black box theater. It's softer and grayer than its more dramatic black box counterpart. Just as the nine-square grid establishes an organizational foil to slowly be eroded, Black Bay establishes an obvious binary to also be adjusted, blurred, transgressed, and ultimately destroyed.

Dresden Snuffbox in the Shape of a Dog, circa 1740–1750. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA.

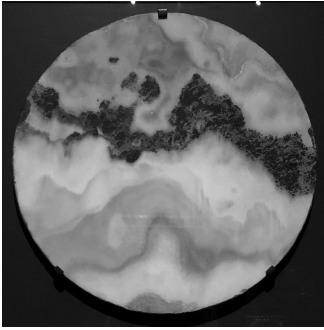


Many things here feel intentional. There is almost no neutrality, not in the box, not in the paint, and definitely not in walking into the nine-square grid. And there are many corner problems, too. For the most part, corners, like the nine-square, are either butted or eroded. To assist the visitor in comparative viewing, the architects cut window boxes out of the walls. They stretched tables diagonally across the corners and loaded them with delicacies of rock. Two seemingly distinct sections, “Hard” Stones and Fooling the Eye, become entwined by one such projecting surface that holds up glass boxes that hold the artifacts that hold our gaze from multiple perspectives at once. The museum staff will even offer a loupe to zoom in on the revealing details. A 17th-century Indian Dagger of Emperor Aurangzeb flaunts a white horse head handle whose tinged nephrite veins follow the wavy nature of the mare’s mane. An 18th-century Dresden Snuffbox in the Shape of a Dog emerges from a moss agate whose dark inclusions uncannily capture the hound’s spots. A Yunnan 19th-century Marble Slab disk suggests an ink-like landscape whose crystalline bands weave a mountain range along a horizon. These miniature objects mediate microcosmic details. Imaging shapes in stone expands the term *medium* to encompass its mystical meaning. Medium means middle – *in medias res* – it is the site of transmission. With some imagination, stone can fluctuate between its materiality as an obdurate fact and its textuality as a prolix oracle.



Analía Sabán, *Draped Marble* (Carrara, St. Laurent, Brown Onyx), 2016.
© Analía Sabán. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA.

The section titled Seeing Images in Stone focuses on what Mills calls “the stone’s pictorial potential,” developing the public’s visual imaginary through the concept of pareidolia. The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains that the term stems from the prefix that is “analogous to but separate from” the root that is defined as “an insubstantial manifestation or an apparition.” Several other sections, Manipulating Multicolored Stones, Flora and Fauna, Heaven and Earth, and Fooling the Eye, build on the curator’s idea to train our imaginary capacity for “pareidolic vision” by focusing on natural phenomena, treelike textures, and trompe l’oeil effects of stone’s mineral variations. Other sections are more down to earth. Sourcing Specimens traces stone from around the globe extracted from quarries or spoliated from ancient monuments. One gridded game table features polychromatic stones gathered from disparate origins. The section “Hard” Stones plays with our expectations of stone’s solidity, mass, and weight by showcasing bloodstone, nephrite jade, porphyry, and marble that have been carved, cracked, and lathed to appear effervescent, light, and sinuous.



Marble Slab from Yunnan, China, circa 1800–1872. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA.

In a theatrical staging, artist Analia Saban hangs three slabs of stone like laundry over a sawhorse in her *Draped Marble* installation. The stone cracks into a calcified aggregate of loose rock, seemingly made plastic by gravity. The section *Transcending Stone* depicts materials such as porcelain posing for the hard stones that they are not, while *Stone for Stone* explores ways in which stone can reflexively represent itself. In one pictorial urban mosaic, a building's shadow falling onto the stone-clad plaza is depicted with a slightly darker shade of the sourced mineral. This reminded us of Viollet-le-Duc's Alpine house called *La Vedette*, where the painted mural of the craggy rock-scape spills out of its frame as wainscoting of a cabinet clad in thin slabs of broken stone.

On our mission to review the exhibition design, we intended to look past the objects, to focus on the background. But we couldn't take our eyes off the astonishing array of artifacts. Small and precious amethysts converse with large oil paintings. Peter and Jesus – literally the rocks of the Christian faith – mix with secular snuffboxes and petrified landscapes. Ancient craftsmen are brought into dialog with contemporary artists. Thematic and visual affinities curate the madness of genres, sizes, and materials. To use Holder and Freyinger's term, it is an irreverent "gathering" of things. The curator and the architects clearly took pleasure in the absurd amount of labor that went into making these objects as they thoughtfully staged stone on stone in physical and referential proximity. There is no one order or proper sequence for viewing the work. Instead, piles, lists, labels, groupings, relations, sightlines, proximities, and multiple points of entry produce something of a peep show, a proffer of stone against a series of props, seducing in the quiet dark.

Anna Neimark and Andrew Atwood are cofounding principals of First Office. Anna teaches at SCI-Arc; Andrew teaches at UC Berkeley.



The Los Angeles Design Group, installation design of "Eternal Medium: Seeing the World in Stone," Resnick Pavilion, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, August 20, 2023 – February 11, 2024. The partitions, pedestals, and tables are painted Dunn-Edwards Black Bay, a subtle off-black. Photo © Marten Elder. Courtesy the architects. Read Anna Neimark and Andrew Atwood's review, "Stone on Stone," pages 41–46.

