



Architects' passion for wood makes gallery debut

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In 2012, the small Toronto research and design office of Williamson Chong (WC) won the Canada Council's prestigious \$50,000 Professional Prix de Rome in Architecture with an engaging and very Canadian proposal.

Their project: to study the new things that European and Asian architects, engineers, building technologists and craftsfolk are doing with forest products. WC principals Shane Williamson, Betsy Williamson and Donald Chong wanted to see first-hand, for example, how builders elsewhere are using cheap, renewable wood to handle the job of heavy structural lifting that's been done, so far, almost exclusively by stone, steel and concrete. They wanted to look into the future of wood, a sustainable resource that Canada has, of course, in magnificent abundance.

To celebrate the end of WC's two-year harvesting of ideas and practical strategies, Toronto gallerist Jane Corkin last week opened Living Wood, a show of the studio's works that fans of both architecture and high-tech art will appreciate.

Don't expect to see images or examples of the super-strong wooden girders the team spent much of their time inspecting. The structural muscle of wood, and the buildings now being designed with wood's strengths in mind, would certainly be interesting topics for an exhibition – but they are not what this one is about. Instead, WC's installation of sculpted forms and prints – “gallery art,” as opposed to models or plans, “totally on the subjective side,” Ms. Williamson says – is a tribute to wood's beauty and malleability, and to the expressive lyricism that wood, trees and forests have inspired in poetry, art and architecture since antiquity.

The centrepiece in Ms. Corkin's Distillery District space, for example, is a 200-square-foot mural composed of 288 tiles of warm Ontario white maple, and titled *Tracings*,

Serere 1-41 (2014). Each square was hollowed out by a computer-driven router that left a little circular, stepped depression resembling, more than anything else I can think of, a terraced Greek amphitheatre. (The incisions are meant by the architects to recall tree rings.) No two wooden tiles are exactly alike.

Viewed from a short distance away, as a similarly grand-sized painting should be seen, the composition resolves itself into a glowing expanse of subtly shifting lights and shadows, like a dappled forest floor. *Tracings* is something architecture can be, and should be more often than it is: a demonstration of advanced cybernetic gadgetry at the service of quietly personal (but not heroically individual) imagination and image-making. Like *Tracings*, the group of four handsome ink-jet prints on archival paper called *Origins: Sheer, Gently, Upland, Graded* (2014) is a result of the closely collaborative thinking about wood and technology that has gone on in the WC office over the past couple of years.

To make each, WC first laid out a computer-generated, two-dimensional grid of tiny circles (incidentally, the basic symbols for trees in architectural plans) in virtual space, then subjected this surface to various foldings, distortions and compressions. These hand-made stresses and “tunings” of the grid, made visible in the prints, have produced abstract patterns or traces much like those of wood-grain – strongly rhythmic in one instance, delicate as sheer fabric in another, as rugged as a landscape of eroded hills and gullies in yet another.

Framing and complementing WC’s *Living Wood* is a second exhibition in the Corkin Gallery, this one called *On Architecture and Structure*. While this title strikes the ear as academic and stuffy, the actual work Ms. Corkin has put into it is anything but.

The photos, paintings and works on paper by 11 artists featured here hail from the borderline where ordinary objects, human and natural, become symbolic, charged with remarkable meaning. The forest trees beautifully photographed in black and white by Thaddeus Holownia, for instance, grow in the vicinity of Walden Pond, a Massachusetts puddle made famous by the philosopher and social critic Henry David Thoreau, who lived there for two years. Mr. Holownia’s images portray the living witnesses of Mr. Thoreau’s visit 150 years ago, and serve as modest monuments to the author’s idealistic, durably influential experiment in simple living beyond the city’s edge.

Green nature makes another, very different appearance – this time as a force in active conflict with urban civilization – in American artist Chad Gerth’s aerial photos of Chicago’s vacant lots. These places have been bulldozed, worn down to dirt by the sneakers of playing kids and by short-cutters, used as garbage dumps, abandoned. Despite neglect and abuse, however, Mr. Gerth’s empty spaces are surprisingly green. Living nature, we city folk are reminded, is persistent, ready to retake whatever ground becomes available, be it ever so forsaken from a human point of view.

Living Wood and On Architecture and Structure continue at the Corkin Gallery, 7 Tank House Lane in the Distillery District, through Dec. 30.