

## Sotoak Pavilion

All work courtesy of the architect.

Text by the editors of Project.

Neil Denari compares the Sotoak pavilion to an iPhone resting on the corner of a table.<sup>1</sup> The simile suggests three ways to read the project: through the formal and material qualities that prompt the comparison, through the choice of a technological object as an illustrative example, and through the choice of metaphor to describe the project in the first place.

The Sotoak Pavilion is a rooftop addition, projected over the parapet of an unremarkable brick office building in El Paso. Its cantilevered east facade is set forward of the interior volume of the project to create a shaded loggia that hangs over the street below. That facade is composed of a series of perforated panels that suggest the letterforms of an unreadable but familiar alphabet (like those you might find on the hull of a starship or on its glassy touchscreens). A shell of magenta, orange, and red extends from the filleted profile of that facade, and is progressively stepped back until it comes to rest on the building below. This shell is cut along its north side, leaving a residual frame of color around a balcony and an anodyne facade of glass and grey metal panels. Similar, if more straightforward, manipulations occur on the south and west facades. The continual oscillation of surface and volume produces both complex graphic effects and a thick layer of shading devices and occupiable outdoor spaces that wrap the building, extending the interior and protecting it in the desert climate. The form and finishes of the shell (as well as the interior core) are defined in terms of both aesthetic and environmental performance. Consistent with Denari's oeuvre, the whole is unified through a reductive geometrical and material language—flat, radial, and conical metal panels, unadorned, perforated, or in shocks of pure color. The distribution of thicknesses, seams, and ruled surfaces appears not as a post-facto rationalization of a digitally-generated form, but as integral to the architectural object, in which digital modeling processes such as extrusion or Boolean subtraction are legible, but not exhaustive of its appearance. Though there is no mystery to how the parts of the pavilion come together, its aesthetic effects are complex. In pursuit of this type of clarity, Denari has honed his working methods in such a way that he is able to advance architectural ideas even in commissions for highly constrained commercial buildings.

While the material expression of the Sotoak Pavilion suggests affinities with figures like Jean Prouvé or Richard Rogers, the conceptual premises shaping it run closer to the synthesis of building and image in the work of Le Corbusier or Venturi and Scott Brown.<sup>2</sup> The project is both sophisticated form and billboard, advancing the more singular logics of seminal projects such as the Interrupted Projections installation—cut and bent surface—or the New Keelung Terminal—cut and bent volume. If the both/and was once a rhetorical game, a chance to display architectural

erudition while upsetting functionalist convention, it here appears more direct, the product of three decades of work on a coherent set of problems that have become richer as they have been more precisely circumscribed. At a moment that Venturi and others are continuously quoted by young architects, Denari's commitment to the continual refinement of a highly constrained architectural language suggests an alternative to the often facile and contradictory appropriation of images and styles—or architecture as a Pinterest board. At its best, his work is graphic but not cartoonish, formally articulated but not overwrought, immersed in various cultural contexts without being derivative of any of them.

A series of influential architectural propositions—over-articulated machines, glossy continual surfaces, graphic play with structure and panelization—tie Denari into a long history of architectural fascination with technology, both its pragmatic capabilities and its aesthetic promise. While the relationship of technology to Denari's current work may appear minimal in comparison to earlier projects, it is also the case that technological products are increasingly engaged through their surfaces. Like the relatively conventional commercial interiors of much of Denari's recent work, the interiors of these machines are conceptually, and at times materially, blank; they are containers of pure program, with minimally articulated internal parts. The interior of an iPhone is inaccessible, inscrutable, and irrelevant to the aesthetic experience of the object; the engine of a Tesla has no cylinders. Denari's projects continually evolve in relation to their technological epoch, though they never quite look like any other machine of the time. (For what it's worth, the Apple product closest in literal appearance to the Sotoak Pavilion might be something like the subtle interplay of black glass and black anodized aluminum on a late model iPhone crossbred with the extruded and candy-coated metallic shells of the iPod Minis and Nanos of the early aughts.)

Like others of his generation, Denari has transferred the energies once associated with his drawings to the refinement of buildings. First well known for rendering his work in flat Pantone fills and heavy black shadow, the bright colors and complex projections have progressively worked their way off of the page and into the architectural objects themselves. Today Denari shows conventional photoreal renderings, orthogonal drawings, and axonometric diagrams, representations no doubt necessary to convey the plausibility of the projects to prospective clients with conventional programs, but also revealing that any need to substantiate the material reality of the architectural proposition through verbal or representational affectations has faded. The Sotoak Pavilion does not appear weighted with the anxieties of the avant-garde. It is simply projected into the world (and off of the roof of the building below), as matter-of-factly as an iPhone resting on the corner of a table, sufficient in itself as an original aesthetic object serving an otherwise unremarkable function. It is so precisely, internally ordered that it appears both inimitable and effortless. A rendering and a metaphor are all that are necessary to convince us. In this, it is a fittingly laconic expression by a native Texan working in his home state.

1. Neil Denari, "Outrageous Discipline," (Lecture, SCI-Arc, Los Angeles, 15 March 2017). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxcbsDSYXZo>.

2. For more on this subject, and others, see our interview with Neil Denari in *Project* Issue 3 (Spring 2014).