

# The wheel project



The Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art

## A new landscape

### Philip Beesley, The Designer

Making an exhibit space at the Gardiner Museum for *The Wheel Project* was like building part of a city. Each wheel carries a different story. The task of organizing such a complex and unruly crowd into a coherent design was fraught – different forms of organization speak of different cultures with very different politics. What is the space that 400 stories make?

Groups of wheels emerge, speaking of a spectrum of relationships. These range from simple tribes to organized parades of members to complex, related associations of independent individuals. Some of the wheels seem to enjoy regimentation, wearing club badges and sharing slogans with fellow makers with obvious pride. Others evoke a poignant solitude that speaks of life on the margins, outside norms.

Particular kinds of space correspond to these relationships. The space of clubs and regiments evokes order and focus, with distinct boundaries defining the limits and territory of each different group. Such boundaries tend to dissolve, on the other hand, in working with the marginal and experimental works seen in other parts of this exhibition.

The exhibit design weaves these disparate attitudes into a general form that connects existing areas within the Gardiner. By flowing through stairwells and lobbies, the



project overlaps with the permanent collections and creates vivid new relationships. Beyond the front door, the exhibition reaches down the steps and out into the city.

These aspirations might remind us of Georges Seurat's monumental *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, which shows a whole society lounging in parklands in the heart of Paris, basking underneath trees, utterly free, early in the last century. People cluster together in a relaxed sprawl in that benign vision of public life. If the kind of carefree optimism that made the vision of Seurat's painting possible has faded, what kind of public life might emerge today?

The works in this exhibition may not speak of carefree optimism, but they do speak of the vitality that makes a city. The writhing snake-dance that results is a multiple, complex accretion. On first impulse, it might be tempting to call the exhibition an unholy mess, an impossible tangle of hundreds of disparate things. But the shape of a crowd is complex. Only since the emergence of the science of complexity and of fluid dynamics have crowd dynamics become comprehensible. As with the subtle patterns that emerge in turbulent water, we now see that these groups are far from chaotic. Vortices and cross-currents appear, leaving quiet eddies behind them. Centres of gravity emerge that gather groups of wheels into constellations, creating clusters and interwoven strings. Close-packed, crystalline formations emerge in the most dense areas, while, at the edges, individual wheels drift outward, straying into isolated, disarticulated space.



These clusters are supported by a landscape of synthetic islands – a series of folded, stretched earth forms. In contrast to the warm presence of hands evident in each clay wheel, the computer-controlled technique that created this landscape evokes a curious, mechanical silence. In rolling shapes, the earth forms imply a massive landscape, but they weigh almost nothing. Like hungry ghosts, they are hollow, still in the state of becoming. This landscape is a contemporary archipelago, a new land in the stages of being born. It acts as part of a new city, one that comes from gathering together 400 clay wheels by 400 makers at the Gardiner Museum. It is a space for a contemporary society.

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Philip Beesley practices art and architecture in Toronto and Waterloo, Ontario, and was the 1995-6 recipient of the Prix de Rome in Architecture for Canada. He is an assistant professor at the School of Architecture, University of Waterloo, where he is co-director of a new facility combining computing, visualization, and rapid-prototyping machinery.

His current projects include *On Growth and Form: the Engineering of Nature*, a conference and exhibition curated in collaboration with the Textile Museum of Canada, and *Noosphere Tectonics*, an installation at the University of Manitoba.

