Editorial

With *Versatility and Vicissitude*, guest-editors Michael Hensel and Achim Menges have given us a curiously Jane Austen-like title for an issue of *AD*. Like *Sense and Sensibility* or *Pride and Prejudice*, alliteration is combined with two differing if not entirely opposing characteristics. By pairing up two words that, at least initially, sound alike, we are forced to decode what is being communicated to us. There is nothing obvious or self-evident about the notion of versatility or vicissitude in an architectural context. The title invites enquiry. It begs us to do a double take, think again, if not rush to the dictionary for a definition.

The approach of the title is analogous to Hensel's and Menges' approach to architecture. It requires a level of serious engagement. There is no all-encompassing soundbite to sum it up. It is founded on the notion that it can only be realised through a long-term investment in design research that draws on the knowledge of a broad range of experts, whether it is material scientists, structural engineers or manufacturers. (Both Hensel and Menges are directors with Michael Weinstock of the Emergent Technologies in Design MSc/MArch programme at the Architecture Association, where they draw on the regular expertise of the design engineer Nikolaos Stathopoulos from Buro Happold and Professor George Jeronimidis of the Centre for Biomimetics at Reading, in addition to visiting specialists from other disciplines.)

In the first paragraph of their introduction, Hensel and Menges outline their aim to seek out an alternative approach to sustainable design. This might sound like the holy grail of many other contemporary architects, but to them it is one that can only be realised through a radical new way of thinking about design. Steering away from such words as ‘green’, ‘ecological’ or ‘sustainable’, they make us think about the word ‘ecology’ from afresh, as ‘the relationship between an organism and its environment’ (p 7). This emphasis on the subject and its environment underlines the importance of a dynamic relationship between people and the built environment, which realised through new technologies can more easily be likened to the natural world with its own dynamic processes in place.

*Versatility and Vicissitude* is both a sequel and a one-off publication. It is the third publication that these two guest-editors have worked on together; the previous two were compiled with the collaboration of Michael Weinstock. As a sequel, we can perceive a development of ideas: the first issue *Emergence: Morphogenetic Design Strategies* (*AD*, No 3, Vol 74, 2004) advocated emergence as a new model of thinking and design in architecture (emergence being, in the sciences, system theory and philosophy, the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions); the second, *Techniques and Technologies in Morphogenetic Design* (*AD*, No 2, Vol 76, 2006) started to play with how these might come about. Here, the new emphasis on performance in a dynamic architectural context casts architecture not only potentially as part of a greater natural ecology, but starts to suggest what this might offer the end user in terms of ‘intensified spatial experiences’ and ‘microclimatic conditions’. Architecture is as much about human habitat as new technologies.

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Defne Sunguroğlu, Complex Brick Assemblies, London, 2006
Airflow analysis of a porous double-curved brick assembly.

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