Lebbeus Woods’ summation of Zaha Hadid’s approach as ‘wringing the extraordinary out of the mundane’ is one that could be applied to many of the designers in this issue: whether it is Theo Jansen playing God and creating fantastic beasts out of hundreds of metres of electric cabling; Niall McLaughlin inserting commonplace found objects into screens; or the Koshirakura Landscape Workshop incorporating its readings and reflections on the bucolic Japanese landscape into its constructed projects.

For in focusing on prototyping – whether the three-dimensional or the two-dimensional, the handmade or the digital – this issue focuses on the transformative powers of materials aside from the realisation of a built work. It emphasises the importance of investing in and playfully experimenting with generative design, whether that is prototyping as a part of the design process prior to realisation or as with a practice such as Smout Allen where the drawings and models are the project in themselves. No better argument could be put forward for the power of the prototype than Zaha Hadid.

The opportunity to build may have eluded her for a couple of decades of her career, but her time could not have been better spent than on her drawings and paintings – so much being spatially and geometrically explored in two dimensions.

In a sense this issue distils much of what Architectural Design has stood for over time as an advocate of the primacy of the generative, literally the importance of design in architecture. It highlights the significance of play, experiment, research and evolution, even allowing space for the random and accidental, for ideas to emerge and develop in a not particularly linear way. It is to Bob Sheil’s credit that in guest-editing this issue, which takes in digital and analogue prototypes, that he does not pitch one mode or media against each other. It is very apparent that all the featured architects have distinct preferences and preoccupations. Mark West, for instance, is strident in his use of physical models and hand-drafted drawings but does not hesitate to recognise the usefulness of CAM for calculating structures with complex curves. Mette Ramsgard Thomsen in ‘Robotic Membranes’ reconciles the automated, electronic world of digital data with the tactile sensuality of textiles. The modus operandi is thus one of assimilation, hybridisation and shifts over time. Woods, for example, describes Hadid’s changing preoccupations paralleled with her move from hand drawing and painting to the computer. Rather than presenting a picture of media exclusivity or that of binary opposites, Sheil uses the issue to demonstrate how the digital has led to a proliferation of types of work that all invest and rejoice in the prototype.

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sixteen*(makers), Kielder Probes, Kielder Forest, Northumbria, 2007

Prototypes for passively activated and adaptable architecture by sixteen*(makers), Kielder Forest, Northumbria. Acting as architects in residence within the territory of Kielder Forest, sixteen*(makers) have designed and installed a series of experimental assemblies that respond to immediate micro-environmental conditions. The ‘Probes’, as they are called, are continually monitored by an array of photogrammic instruments that map actual behaviour of the real upon predicted behaviour of the ideal. Seeking a greater understanding of site, the work has developed as a tool for informing and determining architectures that are unique to location [see page 11].