The ground was prepared for the ‘field conditions’ idea in debates and discussions around the advanced design studios at Columbia University during the early years of Bernard Tschumi’s deanship, sometime between 1990 and 1995. Tschumi had assembled a group of ambitious young architects (Greg Lynn, Hani Rashid, Jesse Reiser, and myself, among others), and encouraged us to use the design studio as a laboratory: a place to test ideas and work out new concepts in collaboration with students. No one had a lot of work, and in an atmosphere of friendly competition, we threw ourselves into teaching, writing, and design competitions, feeding off the interplay between teaching and practice. Not coincidentally, this was also the time at which computers were first introduced into the design studios at Columbia.

As a consequence, the idea arose at once from an intuition about urban context—the city as a dynamic field, mapped and understood on site—but also from an intuition about harnessing the power of the computer as an abstract calculating machine. Without any real specialist knowledge, it seemed clear to me that the operative logic of the computer was serial and abstract. And so while Greg Lynn repurposed animation software to create complex biomorphic objects, this early exposure to computation led me to an idea of the city as a field of forces, and the aggregation of small, self-similar parts to create local difference while maintaining overall coherence. Not individual bodies but herds, swarms, and flocks. Beyond the technological imperative, I was also looking for a cultural context. Donald Judd’s famous description of Frank Stella’s work resonated here: “The order is not rationalistic and underlying but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another.” From the beginning, my models were drawn as much from music and art as from biology or complexity theory.
Despite the range of these references, the field conditions idea was also firmly situated in architectural debates and references; I was fascinated by Le Corbusier’s Venice Hospital and Rafael Moneo’s analysis of the Mosque at Cordoba. In the early 1990s the post-modern contextualism of the 1970s and ’80s was not so distant, and these non-figural responses to context offered a promising alternative. In more immediate terms, I was looking for a pathway beyond the theories and design strategies associated with deconstructivism, which were still very much in the air in the early 1990s. Jeff Kipnis had argued persuasively that the legacy of collage, from Michael Graves to Colin Rowe, shared with deconstructivism a tendency toward fragmentation and discontinuity. While Rowe saw the collage-like composition of contrasting elements in the city as the architectural analog to the competing claims of a democratic society held in a fragile equilibrium, Peter Eisenman and Daniel Libeskind pushed those compositions to the point of instability, which they in turn saw as the analog to the collapse of classical western thought.

For my generation there were two problems with this account. In the first place, it was entirely dependent on language and metaphor; Eisenman and Libeskind did not in fact make buildings that were collapsing, they made carefully calibrated—and perfectly stable—representations of instability. Field conditions, as well as some of the early theorizations of the computer, shared in a shift away from the theories of language that had dominated architectural discourse for twenty years to theories of matter and performance. For all his embrace of undecidability and infinitely deferred meaning, Jacques Derrida, whose writings undergirded deconstructivism in architecture, was still a philosopher of language. In that sense, deconstructivism was an endpoint: the culminating legacy of theories of architecture as language dating back to the late 1960s.

By contrast, it was the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari that captured our imagination, and suggested a productive way forward. Deleuze and Guattari proposed a concept of matter that was at once lodged in concrete, material exemplars, (which appealed to us as architects) and was at the same time vibrant and changeable, which appealed to us for its progressive, optimistic character. “An abstract machine” they wrote, “is not physical or corporeal, any more than it is semiotic; it is diagrammatic... It operates by matter, not by substance; by function, not by form.”

Hence a shift from meaning to performance, and the construction of new realities: “The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality.” Perhaps more importantly, philosophy was no longer held up as a model for architects to emulate but rather, as Deleuze had shown in his books on cinema, the vector was reversed: creative practices, precisely through the exercise of that which is specific to their own way of working on the world, are capable of producing philosophical concepts.
The other issue was a suspicion of the politics of disjunction. As a critical strategy, disjunction sought to “lay bare the devices” by means of startling juxtaposition ("beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella" in the famous formulation by the Comte de Lautréamont). But the problem with disjunction is that it can only escalate. And at a time when the contemporary city, popular culture and society itself produced ever more violent disjunctions, architectural discontinuity had had to become more extreme and more violent in order to function as an effective critical instrument. This could only lead to alienation, and to an architecture whose ability to work in and on the world was limited to critique or commentary. An alienated architecture as the mirror of an alienated society was simply not something that interested me. A more productive alternative project was that of continuity and connectivity, looking for alternative social and political arrangements within the existing flux of global capital.

The field conditions work was also a way of thinking about institutional programs outside the hierarchical models of classical architecture and typology. I was less interested in an ideological critique of the institution than I was in the possibility of producing a more open, accessible idea of the institution, drawing upon organizational models from a wide range of sources—from Xenix Xenakis’ distributed musical compositions, to post-minimalist art, to diagrams of flocking and swarm theory. What was common to all of these examples was an idea of difference produced locally, out of part-to-part relationships, while maintaining an overall coherence. I was interested in the potential of building a differentiated whole from a series of relatively small, self-similar parts. The political analogy would be a free space to express individual identity at a local level while maintaining a commitment to a larger collective whole.

Field conditions is fundamentally an urban concept; it emerged out of a desire to pay close attention to the intricacy of the contemporary city, and to respect the capacity of the city—and its citizens—to produce complexity and difference on their own terms. My focus was urbanistic, and I believed that the task of stitching new construction into the fabric of the existing city was still relevant. It was a matter of recognizing that the city is no longer a coherent, stable field, but is itself marked by social, political, and technological change. The city is produced by multiple agents, working over time, and can never be controlled as a totality. Michel Foucault has written that while there are constraining architectures, there are no liberating architectures as such. Freedom needs a field, he states, and through the provision of a loose fit between space and event, architecture can make a place for difference and dissent. Although it was not an explicit reference at the time, these ideas also resonated with Alison Smithson’s formulation of the mat-building, 6 which I later re-worked as the “thick 2D.” For Smithson, the proposition of mat-building specifically recognizes the limits to architectural intervention in the city. She proposed a loose scaffolding based on the systematic organization of the parts: “Mat-building can be said to epitomize the anonymous collective; where the functions come to enrich the fabric, and the individual gains new freedom of action through a new and shuffled order, based on interconnection, close knit patterns of association, and possibilities for growth, diminution and change.” Building on this idea, field conditions implied the design of systems and assemblages, paying close attention to intervals and the space between things, to create a free space of association—a zone of “directed indeterminacy” as we liked to say at the time.

These organizational models in turn provoked a rethinking of urbanism as a strategy, and specifically pointed to the agency of infrastructure. In other words, it is naive from a practical point of view, and suspect from a political point of view to imagine that a single architect might design a large expanse of the city, how can architects still intervene in the city without simply writing themselves out of the game? The available alternatives—sensitive and carefully designed micro-interventions, or a return to community-based statistical planning—while perhaps politically more palatable, turn their back on architecture and its instrumental potential. They create neither interesting architecture nor effective change in the urban fabric. The ideas formulated in 1997 as “Infrastructural Urbanism,” (shortly after the first version of the Field Conditions article had been published in 1996), suggested instead that architects might learn from engineering practice, and design the platform or the systems upon which and within which the dynamism of urban life plays itself out, independent of the architect’s control. Like an engineering work, these systems could be—in fact needed to be—designed to a high level of specificity, yet they left open the specifics of use and program over time, and allowed the intervention of multiple agents over the life of the city.

Despite its rather obvious connection, Field Conditions was not at the time associated with ideas...
of landscape. Put it down to my own lack of awareness, but that came later, as did the ideas about artificial ecology and my interest in the writings of Gregory Bateson. My path led from these early intuitions about the city to questions of infrastructure, to mat-building and ecology and finally to landscape. I came to landscape via infrastructure and ecology, and not the other way around. This led to productive interdisciplinary work, and large-scale urban design continues to be an important part of our practice. However, with the benefit of twenty years of hindsight, I am convinced that the force of the argument is architectural as much as it is urbanistic, or specifically related to landscape.

Notes
1. Publication History of the Field Conditions text:


5. Alison Smithson, “How to Recognize and Read Mat-Building: Mainstream Architecture as It Has Developed Towards the Mat-Building,” Architectural Design 1974, no. 9, September, 573-590.
