

# SURFACE

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## Michelle LaFoe and Isaac Campbell of OFFICE 52 Architecture

Working with a variety of building materials as a medium for exploring spatial ideas provides for us opportunity to create intuitively poetic spatial experiences.

INTERVIEW BY LAINEY SIDELL

PORTRAIT BY CHRISTIAN COLOMBRES

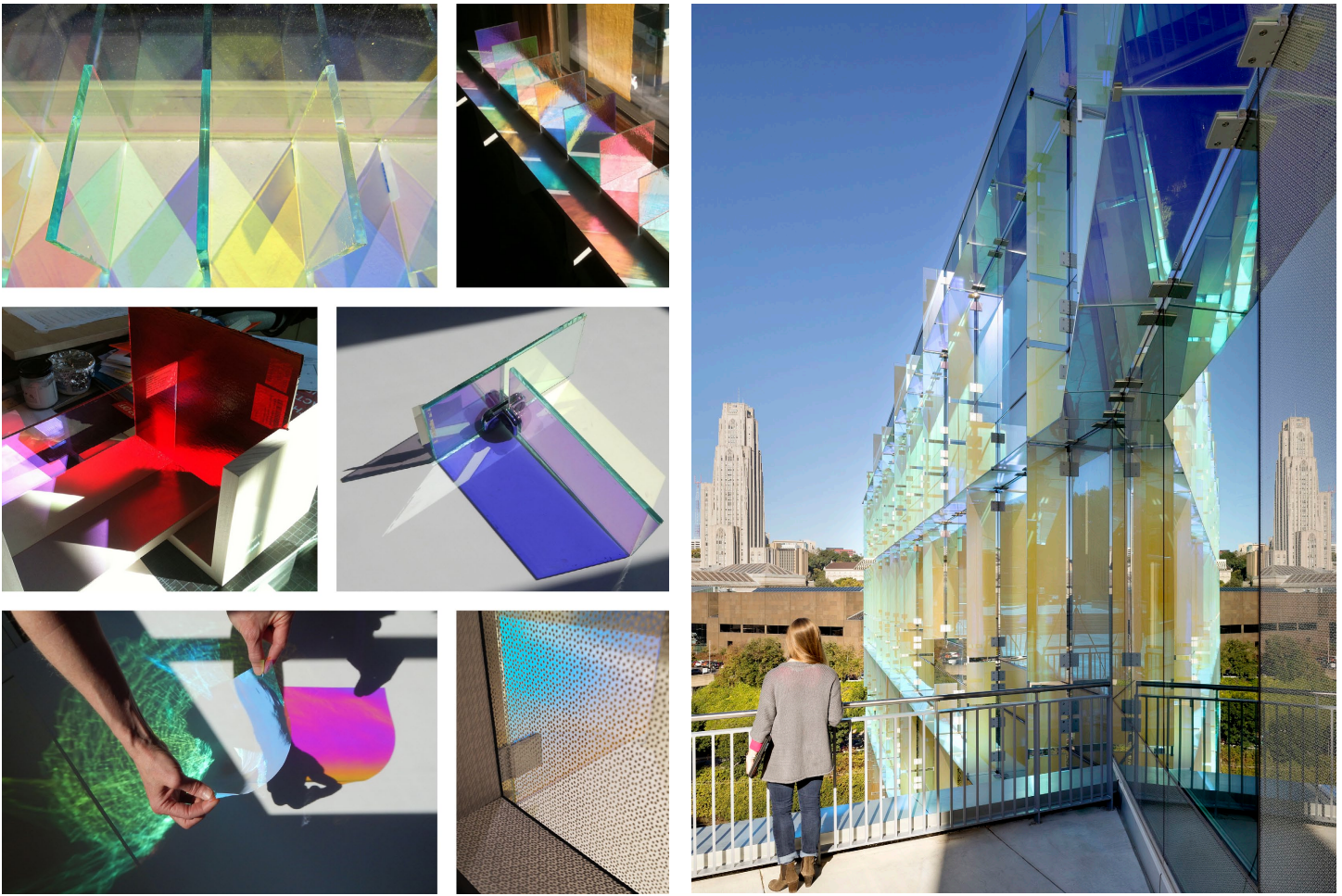
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Through the direction of founding principals Michelle LaFoe and Isaac Campbell, OFFICE 52 Architecture is, quite literally, letting the sun shine in. And through the thoughtfully detailed structures they design, OFFICE 52 is creating mesmeric, light-filled spaces in the process.

This artistic bent—informed and arrived at through rigorous research and ambitious experimentation—is informed by LaFoe’s own experience as an accomplished artist and Campbell’s experience designing complex building projects. Perhaps the fullest expression of OFFICE 52’s abilities, both ideological and tactical, is its award-winning Scott Hall structure at Carnegie Mellon University, itself the inspiration for LaFoe and Campbell’s recent book called *Form and Dichroic Light*.

*Surface* caught up with LaFoe and Campbell to learn about how they established OFFICE 52, arrived at their unique architectural perspective, and more.



Left: The studio's light and glass maquettes and technology research; Right: North Wing, Scott Hall at Carnegie Mellon, Photo J. Bittermann.

### How did your upbringings influence the way you experience, create, or think about design?

**Michelle LaFoe:** As early as 5 years old during summers when growing up I visited my grandparents and sketched with my grandfather William Garver at various industrial sites, train yards, and in his studio in Tulsa, Oklahoma. We would take our folding stools, sketchbooks, and pencils and watercolor and oil paints and had great fun. He was an artist and also worked with Bethlehem Steel as a production illustrator and now his artwork is in the Philbrook Art Museum. When he visited us in Houston, we would sketch silos and other industrial landscapes and the ship channel area. He taught me how to look and see the world around me.

**Isaac Campbell:** As a young child, my family spent a year in France where my father, who is a history professor, was researching a book. For the last few months of our time there we lived in Paris close to Notre Dame. From our apartment I could see the nave of the cathedral, and I spent many days after school with my painter-mother at this iconic monument. Even at my young age, it showed me the everlasting power of architecture. And yes, our firm has already begun to formulate our approach for the redesign of the roof and spire. It's quite emotional for me.

### How did you get your start in the industry?

**ML:** Our careers began with projects that fell somewhere between architecture, technology and art, and architecture in and of itself is an interdisciplinary practice. We are constantly working on multiple professional and creative agendas, and there are a lot of things that interest us and numerous ways to express them with endless possibilities to create and build. A native of Houston, Texas, my design attitude is the result of a combination of educational experiences at Rice University, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, independent research at Yale University, and as a Fulbright Scholar in Italy. I have degrees in architecture, fine art, and the history and theory of art and architecture. The boundaries of what one chooses to perceive and pursue are fluid, and as such I combine the qualities of each discipline in our studio work with client-based projects, research and independent series.





Oil Painting Vignettes on BFK paper, 10"x12" each, by Michelle LaFoe, 2018, part of a research series of regional landscape tones for custom terra cotta glaze colors for UO Tykeson Hall facade.

Architecture school was really compelling to me because there were a lot of interesting thinkers and critical intellectual debate within a structured academic professional-degree environment, and in art school it was liberating yet quite unstructured - and you had to talk about your ideas by contextualizing them in a very different way. This was good experience for real world situations and led to a richer understanding of the cultural cross-connections between various creative disciplines for a studio practice that is focused on playful interdisciplinary design with social and cultural relevancy – and how to look at something in a new way.

Isaac hails from Alfred, NY and attended the School of Liberal Arts at Alfred University before embarking on study at Rice University, which is where we met. Later we both worked with AIA Gold Medal winner Cesar Pelli, FAIA, at Cesar Pelli & Associates (now Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects), where I was a designer on compelling projects such as the below-grade National Museum of Contemporary Art and its above-grade sculptural stainless steel entry pavilion in Osaka, Japan. Isaac worked there for ten years and became a design team leader for major projects including the Chubu Teiju Museum and Cultural Center in Kurayoshi, Japan, the New York Times Headquarters Competition in New York City, and the Art/Architectural Enhancement Program for the Washington D.C. National Airport where he worked with internationally acclaimed artists such as Al Held, Nancy Graves and Jennifer Bartlett.

What was amazing about the Pelli studio was the breadth of creativity and experience across project types and the continuation of the Saarinen tradition of critically exploring design problems and forms in three dimensional models while working with innovative building techniques and materials. Our studio practice is an extension of the same philosophy, combined with advanced digital technology and profound attention to climate change and how we use our resources.





Left: Construction image terra cotta cladding in shade, UO Tykeson Hall; Right: West facade of North Wing, Scott Hall at Carnegie Mellon.

**OFFICE 52 was established in 2010. What was that process like? How has the practice changed since then?**

**ML:** It's like Apple in the garage story: our house has two entries thus we used one side as a studio office when we launched the practice, and that's the etymological source of our firm name, which is the address location. We were busy in 2010, yet in 2011 we were suddenly sprinting when we won a national competition for the commission to design Scott Hall at Carnegie Mellon University (for a new 109,000-square-foot nano-bio-energy technologies building that creates a new LEED Gold center for the College of Engineering and houses the Wilton E. Scott Institute for Energy Innovation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). Within less than two weeks of winning, we had to find larger industrial office space to accommodate more employees and additional model-building capabilities.

During that time we also designed a winery master plan for a private client in Oregon and two residential projects, and soon thereafter we completed a study for a new Innovation and Academic Learning Center at UCSD and a design study for Carnegie Mellon's Ansys Simulation Building and Undergraduate Maker Center while also entering two competitions, one in Copenhagen, Denmark and the other Salt Lake City, Utah. Our latest project currently under construction is Tykeson Hall, the new 64,000 square foot academic building for the interdisciplinary College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oregon.

Our versatility of having worked in a variety of building materials (glass, terra cotta, brick, wood, pre-cast, concrete, stone, various metals and steel) as a medium for exploring spatial ideas provides opportunity for us to create intuitively poetic spatial experiences. We now express ideas not just in compelling large-scale building projects but also in smaller more playful projects like a gallery installations that draw inspiration from saturated color and natural light.





Construction Image of UO Tykeson Hall, detail of terra cotta, custom brick pattern, and curtain wall glass, Photo M. LaFoe, 2019.

### **What project of OFFICE 52's are you most proud of?**

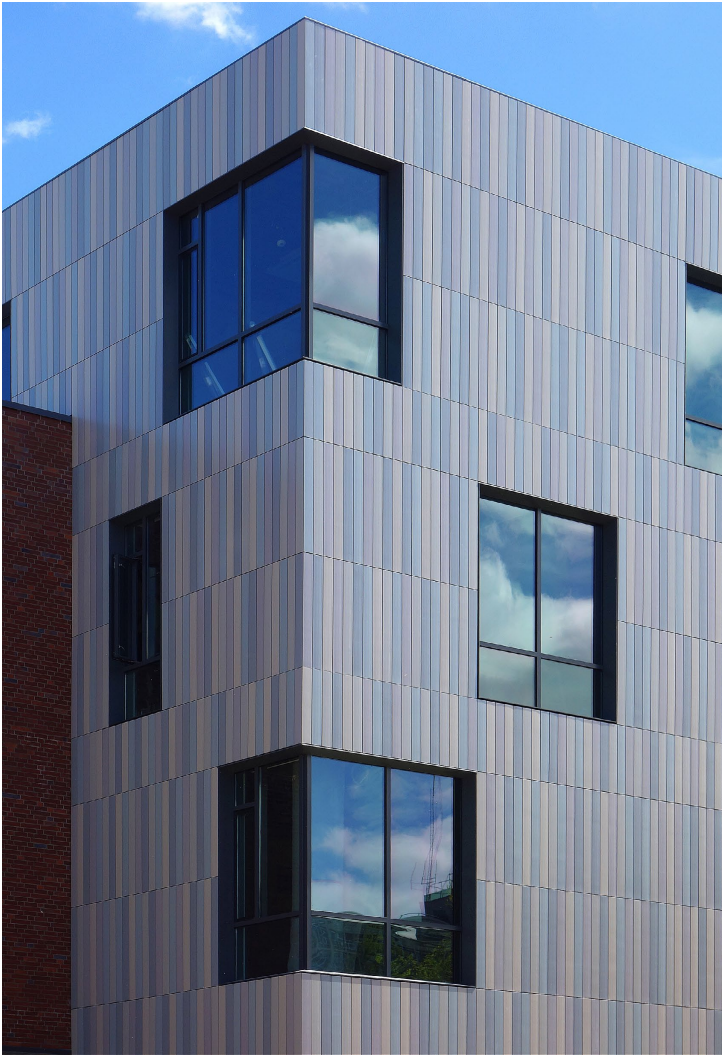
**IC:** There are two projects really: Scott Hall and Tykeson Hall, and each presented a distinct set of design challenges. For us architecture is the overlap of building and art. This is the heart of our work. Architecture must creatively solve the functional requirements of a project and meet its prospective needs of budget, schedule and constructability. However it is the rigorous application of concept, narrative and metaphor expressed in materiality and spatial composition that provides cultural meaning and evokes personal connection. This is the difference between building and architecture, and how one negotiates the challenges presented for a creative solution is part of the design process.

For Scott Hall, the layout of the building program was as challenging as was the steep, interstitial site. As such we developed a new vision for the organization of the building's program elements and suggested the inclusion of an adjacent parcel of underutilized land for an innovative and efficient design solution. This idea won the competition for us and resulted in a more functional and sustainable design that was composed of two inverted architectural forms: one above-grade on a composition on sculptural steel columns, and the other below-grade with a state-of-the-art green roof.

The Tykeson Hall site is prominent, thus for the building we originally proposed an all terra cotta-clad structure. Thereafter we soon discovered that although one client group wanted an iconic terra cotta building, another strongly preferred the aesthetic of brick. Solving this became an opportunity to create architectural forms with both materials: modern performative terra cotta cladding and locally sourced brick with which we designed a new contemporary pattern. Another innovative feature of this project is the programming concept and unique interior spatial adjacencies.

And we are very excited about our new book, *Form and Dichroic Light*, with a Foreword by Cesar Pelli, FAIA, an Introduction by Michael J. Crosbie, FAIA, and published by Leete's Island Books with Peter Neill at the helm. We designed the book, which includes essays of our own about the competition-win, the design and fabrication process for the project, and images of the finished building at Carnegie Mellon.





Three projects - Left: Construction image, terra cotta cladding UO Tykeson Hall; Top right: Bertucci Nanotechnology Entry Pavilion, Scott Hall at Carnegie Mellon, Photo J. Bittermann; Bottom right: Model, study for ANSYS Simulation Building and Maker Center at Carnegie Mellon.

### What advice do you have for young professionals in the field?

**ML:** Travel and learn to ‘see’ - look at all around you and understand that design applies to all scales - museums, urban planning, exhibits, products – done to one’s utmost ability with a sense of craftsmanship, detail and the idea that anything is possible.

When you travel you see the good and the not-so-good examples and are able to understand firsthand the scale, materials, cultural tradition, pastoral and urban landscapes and spaces and thus why architecture and design have real value and importance, a kind of mindfulness within each nation and regional tradition.

Seeing all this in two-dimensional media photography does not have the lasting impact the personal encounter provides - a timeless sense of architecture’s continuity. Travel and living in other countries has informed our design and studio work as we aim to combine simplicity with transformative ideas.

### How, if at all, does the Pacific Northwest influence manifest in your designs?

**ML:** The innate beauty of the Pacific Northwest and the Oregon landscape in particular continually astound us - an incredible quality of light, color and landscape forms that are unlike anywhere else in the world. Wherever we work we try to capture that sense of place. Our studio is also in Portland, Oregon, a city long-famed for its environmentally friendly culture that supports energy-efficient ideas and projects, ecological credentials that have always been an integral part of our firm’s work.



Scale model in the studio: a sectional study of natural daylight, circulation and open spaces (UO Tykeson Hall) by OFFICE 52.

There is also a sense of freedom on the West Coast that is palpable - a pioneering spirit you might say – which embraces and reinforces our mode of working. The culture of outside-the-box thinking, entrepreneurship and creativity has had a profound impact on our thoughts about what is possible. This is reflected in our current design work, as well as a series of large-scale projects Isaac planned and designed at Stanford University, namely their new Science and Engineering Quad and Buildings and the LEED Platinum Knight Management Center for the Graduate School of Business, just after we moved from the East to the West Coast.

### **New projects we should know about?**

**ML:** This month we just started an interesting development project in Oregon for what we call the compact “Tesla of houses.” This is something different and necessary in a country that seems to embrace the freestanding single family structure, one of the most inefficient building typologies today.

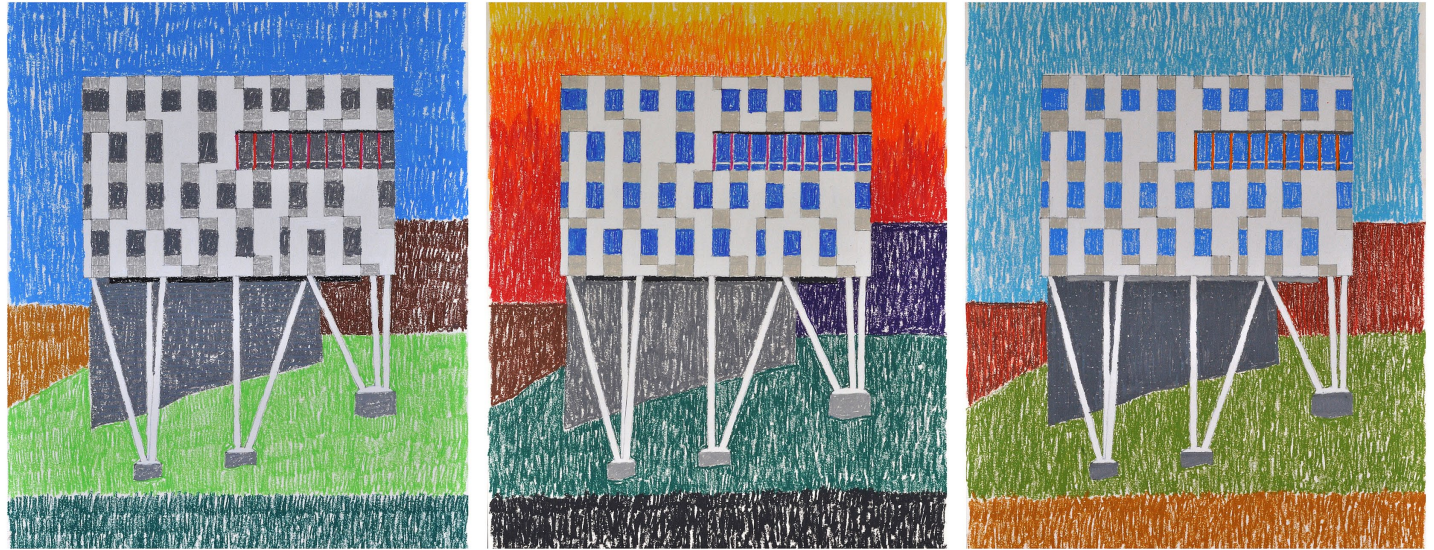
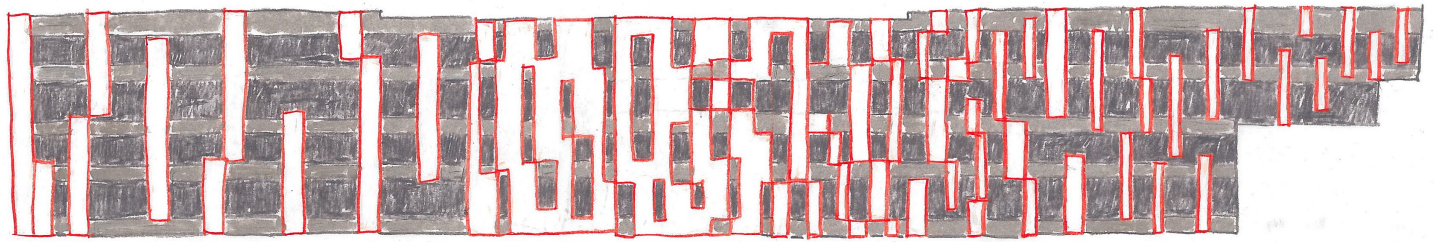
Other new projects include a materials upcycling research and design project and a new commission to create ‘Light Boxes’ for which we will look at naturally beautiful indirect light and color, much like what you want for museums, galleries and private art spaces, with a quietude that is inspirational yet tranquil and to which you really want to go to. I am completing a series of architectural installations right now (with Isaac as collaborator) to rethink scale and spatial relationships and juxtapose forms we know in the world around us so as to animate them and activate the public imagination. We have so many ideas of our own, in addition to commissioned projects, that we decided to open up this research and architectural installation side of our practice.

(Article photos: courtesy OFFICE 52 Architecture)

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*<https://www.surfacemag.com/articles/need-to-know-michelle-lafoe-isaac-campbell-office-52-architecture/>*





Oil Pastel Triptych on BFK paper, 19" x 23" each, Michelle LaFoe, 2017, Above-grade North Wing of Scott Hall at Carnegie Mellon University.

*Surface Magazine - an interview with and profile of OFFICE 52 Architecture - a studio practice located in Portland, Oregon and founded by Isaac Campbell, AIA and Michelle LaFoe, AIA, who have been in professional partnership since 2010. Their buildings and projects are thoughtfully made with attention to efficiency and the spirit of a place and built with ecological prudence. The overlap of building and art through materials, color, natural light, texture, attention to detail and the spatial experience is at the heart of what they design. A majority of their work and experience has been for organizations that value an architecture of aspiration and meaning: academic/schools, cultural/museums and non-profits, yet their studio continues to address a variety of scales from the complex master plan to the playful architectural installation. Parallel to their practice, LaFoe maintains a drawing and painting studio.*