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Work

A Temporary Gateway into Infinity

It all started with a mutual interest in the work of Frei Otto, a pioneer of lightweight construction. When Jenna Didier, founder of Materials & Applications (M&A), a Los Angeles–based research center for landscape and architecture, discovered that architect Benjamin Ball shared her interest in Otto's work, the pair discussed the possibility of creating an homage to him in the M&A courtyard.



Serendipitously, Ball, whose work also includes film design and production, had been testing designs using TopSolid Design software. "I was working on what I could do that would be relevant to contemporary exploration of what Otto was doing, and finding ways to apply it to tensile structure," says Ball. He worked on a conceptual design for a year, and in November 2004, he began collaborating with Gaston Nogues, an architect responsible for product development in Frank Gehry's office.

During development, Ball and Nogues realized the form resembled a black hole. They also talked about what an obsessive process it must be to take several hundred pieces and transform them into a whole. It was then they made the connection to the classic sci-fi movie *The Black Hole* and named the project *Maximilian Schell*, in honor of the actor who portrayed the tyrannical Dr. Reinhardt. "The character is a funny metaphor for an architectural personality," Ball explains. "He was a total control freak—control of his vision—and that is exactly what you have to be to get this type of project completed."

The structure is composed of a polygonal matrix of 504 triangles that when combined form a funnel. The material is constructed of mylar laminated over nylon reinforcing yarn and joined together by clear polycarbonate rivets. Assembled on the roof of M&A, the project was then lowered onto a series of cables. The courtyard beneath hums with an accompanying ambient-sound installation by composer James Lumb. The installation will be open to the public until its dismantling at the end of November. R.G.



The changing fractal light patterns of Maximilian Schell add a dramatic element to the courtyard, as does the framing of the sky from the vortex's apex.