

ACSA Collaborative Practice Award

2015-2016 Winner Submission Materials

LOUDER THAN A BOMB

TERRY BOLING

University of Cincinnati





LOUDER THAN A BOMB

Louder Than a Bomb is a youth poetry festival designed by the Young Chicago Authors (YCA) in 2001 to be a platform that not only gives youth a voice, but gives them a chance to share their stories, learn from each other, and find common ground. Since its founding, it has become the largest youth poetry festival in the world, and has spawned competitions in urban areas throughout the country. "The value of the program is that it offers a vehicle for the voice of the youth, while providing mentorship and guidance, personal confidence, an improved sense of agency, and a broader understanding of others, all the while increasing literacy and community among young students through competition." (LTAB website)

The University teamed up with the local Louder than a Bomb organization to create a series of portable performance environments for the 2015 Finals held at the Harriet Tubman Theater in the Cincinnati Freedom Center. For 15 weeks, we collaborated with more than 12 academic and community organizations and sponsors, including Elementz, a non-profit hip-hop youth arts organization, Wordplay, a local nonprofit literacy group, and the Taft Research Center. Our students worked with local high school student teams to design and construct prefabricated performance environments (platforms, walls, seats, lighting, etc.) for the competitors to use during their preliminary and final performances. We worked directly with full-scale mock-ups and working prototypes as our primary mode of design inquiry. The fabrications were intended to support the young poets, yet not distract from the performances. The material assemblies needed to be easily assembled and dis-assembled, inexpensive, durable, and performative in their own right. The prototypes will be re-purposed for subsequent competitions, and are intended to be altered for new or changing criteria.



former Louder than a Bomb Chicago winner Malcolm London



poet Tony Styxx at DPCR workshop

The poetry slam:

A poetry slam is competitive spoken-word poetry, where the contestants have three minutes to perform, which is then judged on a scale of 1 to 10. While at first glance appearing highly competitive, the events are actually extremely supportive environments for high school students to share their personal stories. Our own students attended several workshops and lectures by prominent spoken word poets to learn more about the art form, and visited participating high schools to observe practice sessions and to talk with the performers about how they use space. We quickly realized that the poetry slam is effectively “one person and a microphone”.

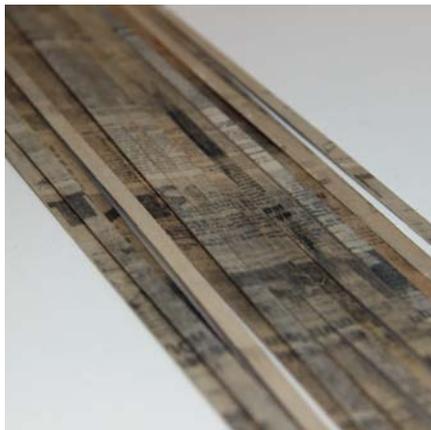
This helped form our strategies about how material and structure can perform in a complimentary manner, supporting the poets without overpowering or distracting them.

“Our collaboration with the poets offered a very unique and personal opportunity to think about a project within the context of our own city, and allowed us to witness how the final fabrication of our designs empowered and inspired this incredible community of artists.”

Nikki Weitz, 4th year architecture student



performers at the Cincinnati Museum Center



Material:

Simultaneously to our research on spoken word prose, we were working at full scale in the studio on material investigations- trying to uncover attitudes or strategies about material that might help us create environments for the performers. We worked with inexpensive and readily-available materials and techniques that we hoped would somehow connect to the particularities of the event- namely the rough, raw, and beautiful-sounding prose that we were being exposed to. Four primary materials- newspaper, wooden pallets, steel, and acrylic were subject to operations like bending, burning, cutting, laminating, etching, and sanding, with the goal of transforming them from something banal into something unexpected and precious- a kind of alchemy.

As we worked with the young poets, we defined a few conditions that we felt could contribute to the experience of the poetry slam:

Performance platform:

All of the performers we worked with expressed a need for the definition of their "zone". The rules of the competition stipulate that the microphone is fixed, limiting the movement of the performers.

DJ area:

Music is an integral part of the event, and is played between the performances and used to set the tone and hype up the audience.

Exhibition/Seating area:

We wanted the audience to understand the significance of the poetry and wanted to create a reflective place outside of the immediacy of the competition.

We used these three categories to frame our development of the materials.



Steel:

Transformation through heat and force was an important technique in several of the early material studies. The steel iterations demonstrated the strengths of the iterative process that framed the pedagogy of the studio. Countless small studies interrogated the material, first by testing limits and possibilities, and then by applying the discoveries to practical applications- structural armatures, clips, connectors, and straps.



Forged, bent, and welded connection details



forged steel strap and frame prototype



forged steel frame stabilizers and leather pads



shaped pallet bench



steel clip and aluminum LED light channels



Newspaper:

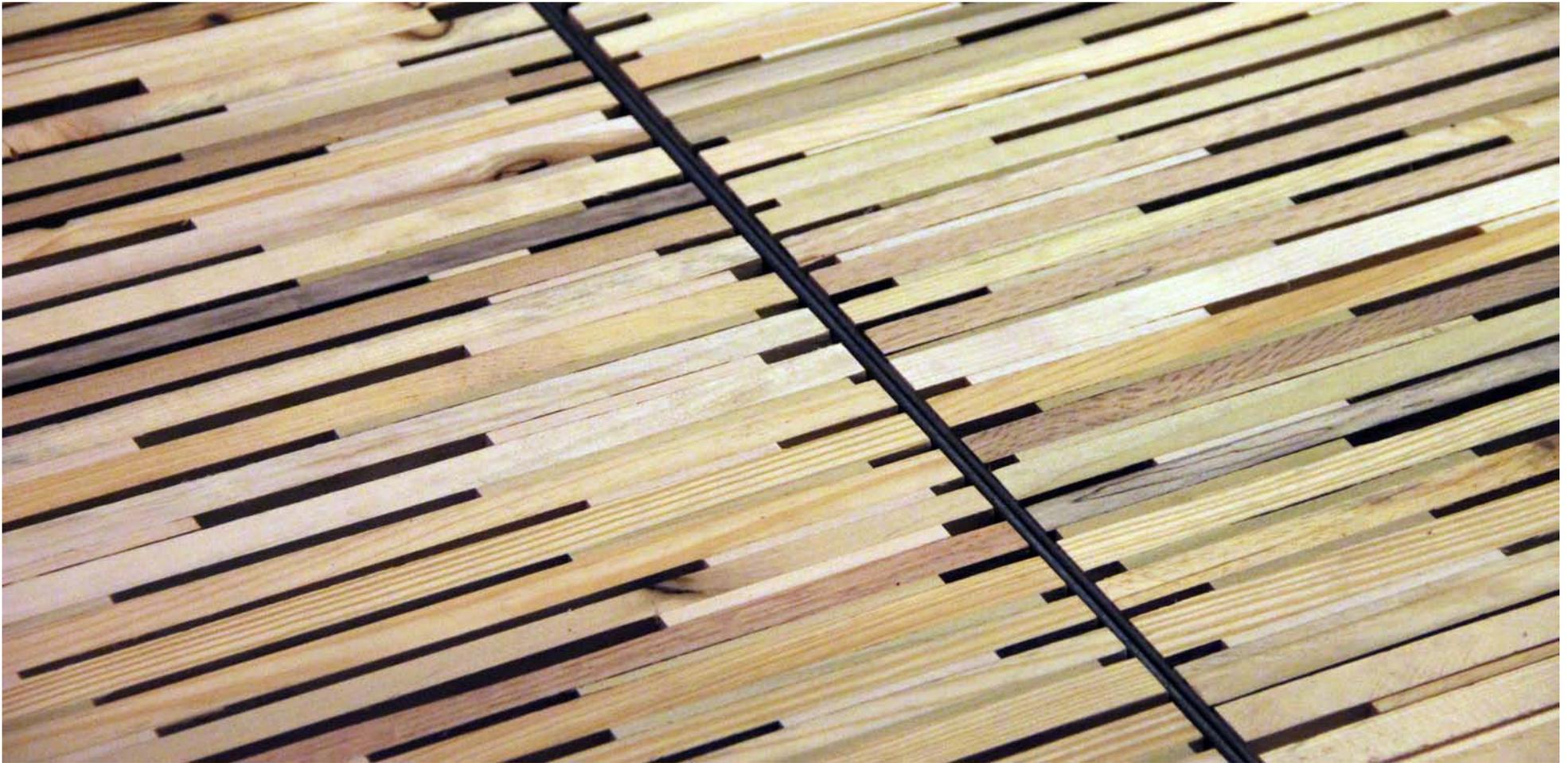
The students glued and laminated sheets of newspaper together to form 1/8" thick panels that were then sanded to reveal intense stratifications. The text of the newspaper was visible in traces as beautiful organic patterns emerged from the surfaces.

At the preliminary competition, we asked the poets to write down a line of their poetry in their own handwriting. These words were then laser etched into the surface of the paper panels, which were displayed as an illuminated layer on the exhibition wall for the final competition.

The students used the free digital facilities at the city's public library for much of the laser etching- demonstrating that the technology is available to anyone.

A stack of old, yellowed newspapers is held together by three large metal clips. The top newspaper has a handwritten note in black ink that reads "all come from the dirt. fallen from the stars." The word "BRIEF" is visible in the top right corner of the newspaper page. The stack is thick, and the pages are heavily aged and stained.

all come from the dirt.
fallen from the stars.



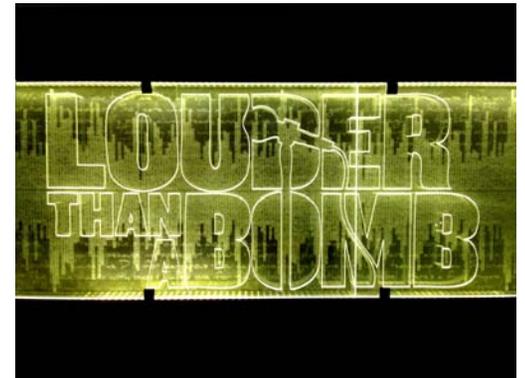
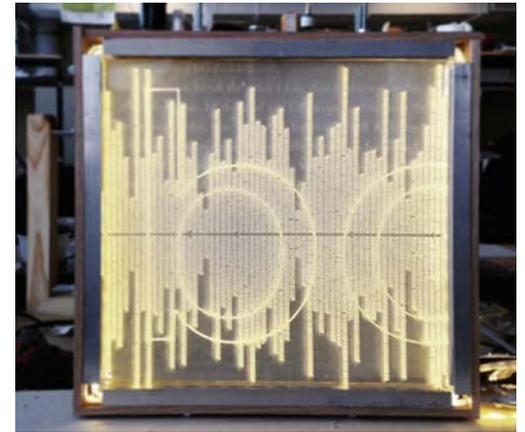
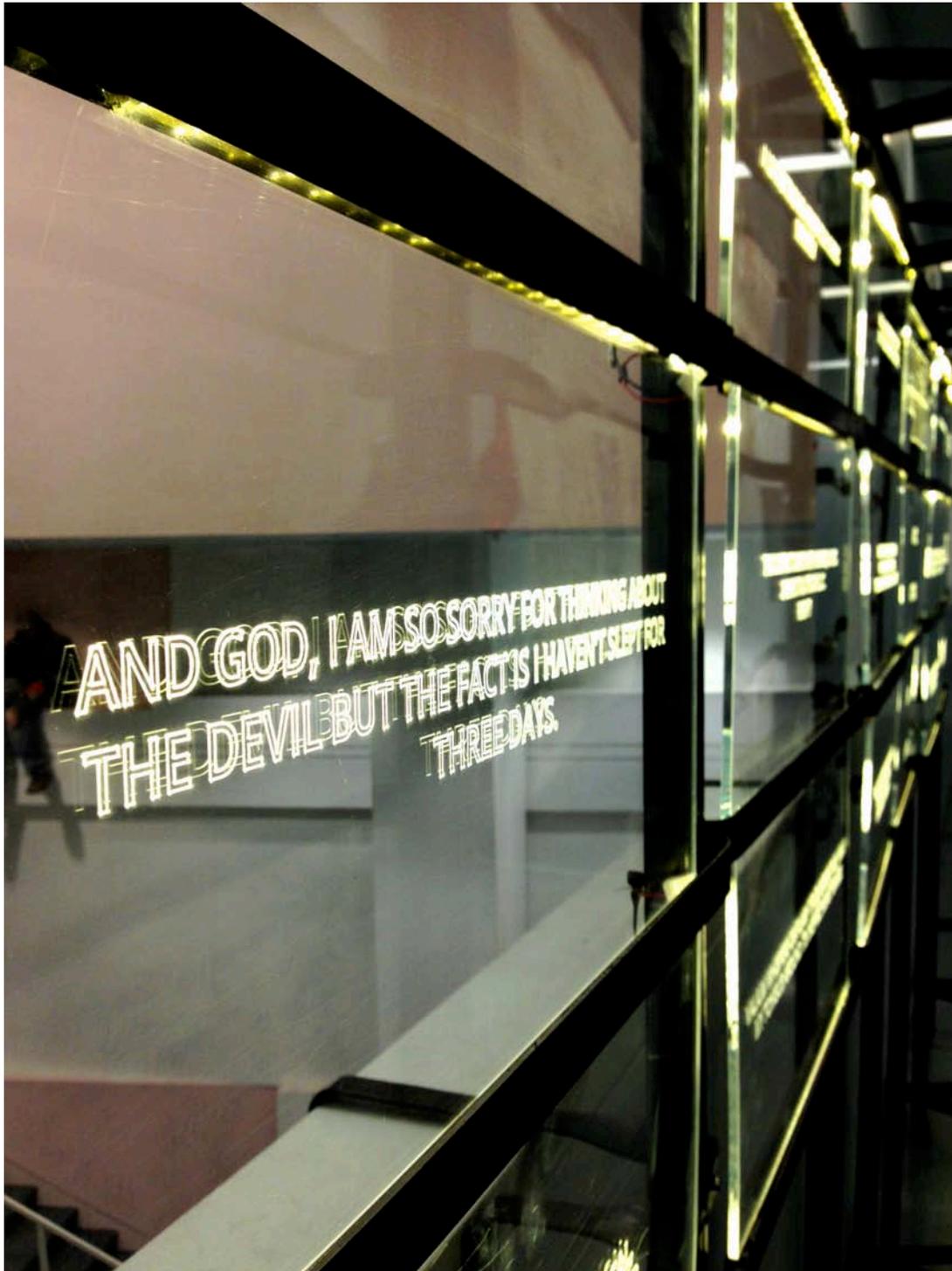
Wood:

We found a steady source of free wooden pallets, often made from sturdy white oak and richly colored Douglas fir that we disassembled and re-worked as raw material. Harvesting the pallet wood areas without nails set the module size for the panels, which were then sized for easy assembly and transport. We glued and nailed strips together and sanded them with an industrial sander, transforming the rough surfaces. The modules were set in simple steel angle frames and used in the semi-final competition. For the final event, we applied a flame-treatment gradient, materializing the “heat” from the performers.



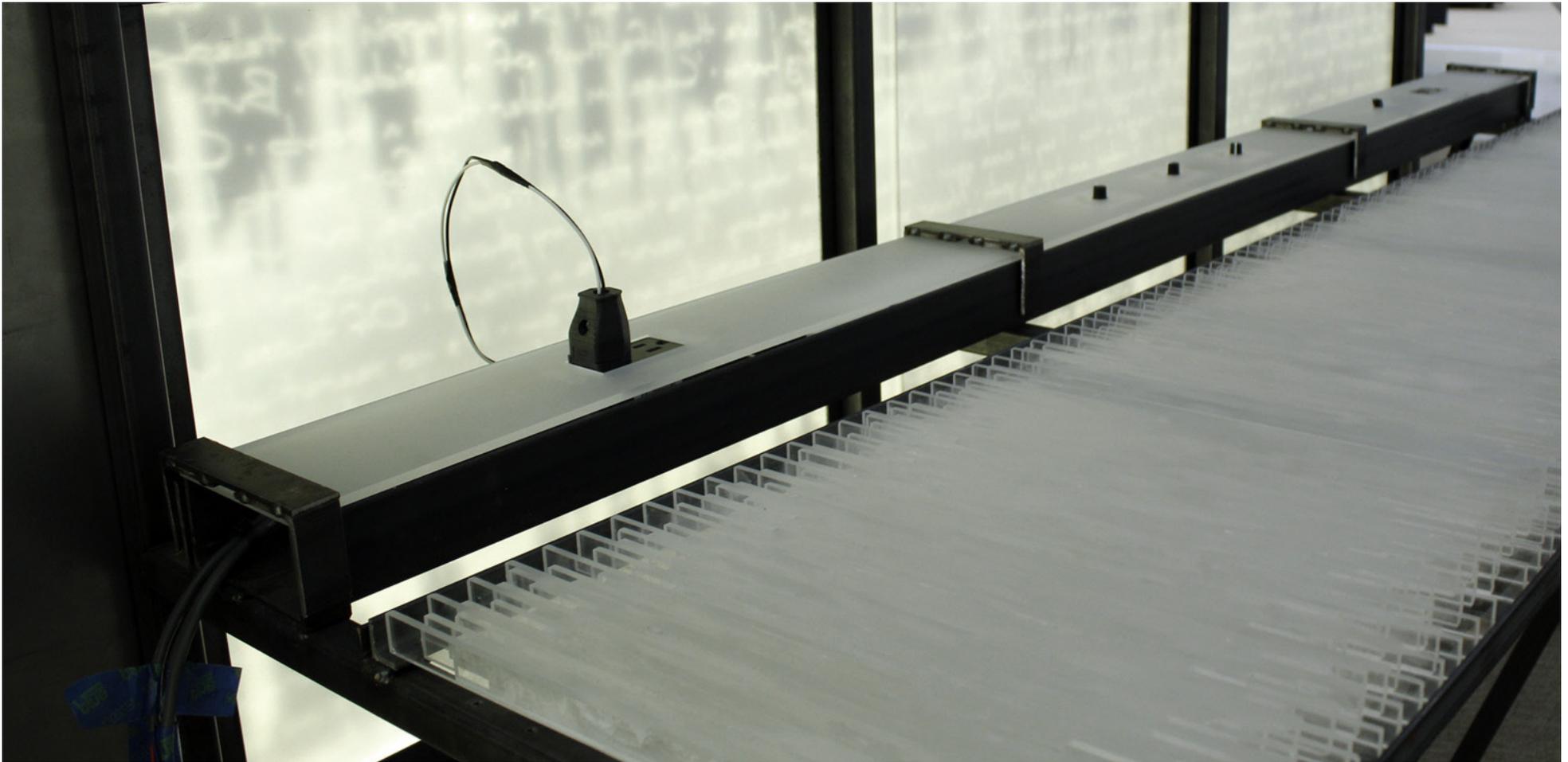


Pallet wood strips were routed on a template, laminated together, and then sanded to produce shaped bench profiles.



Acrylic

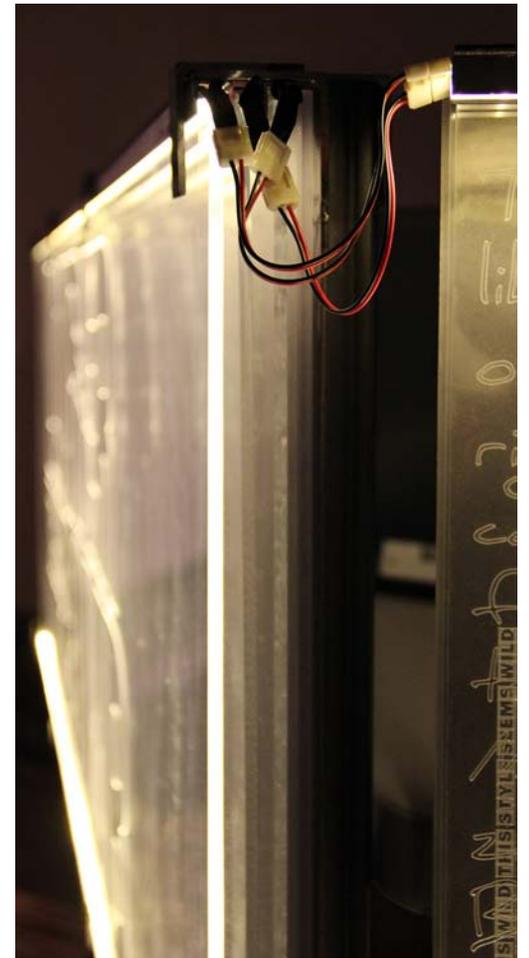
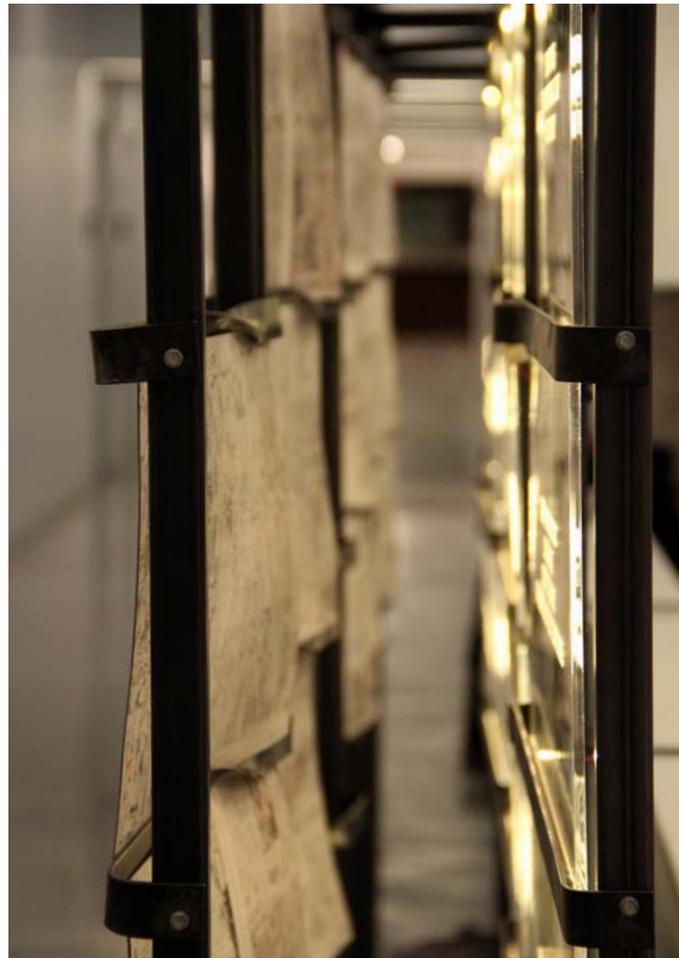
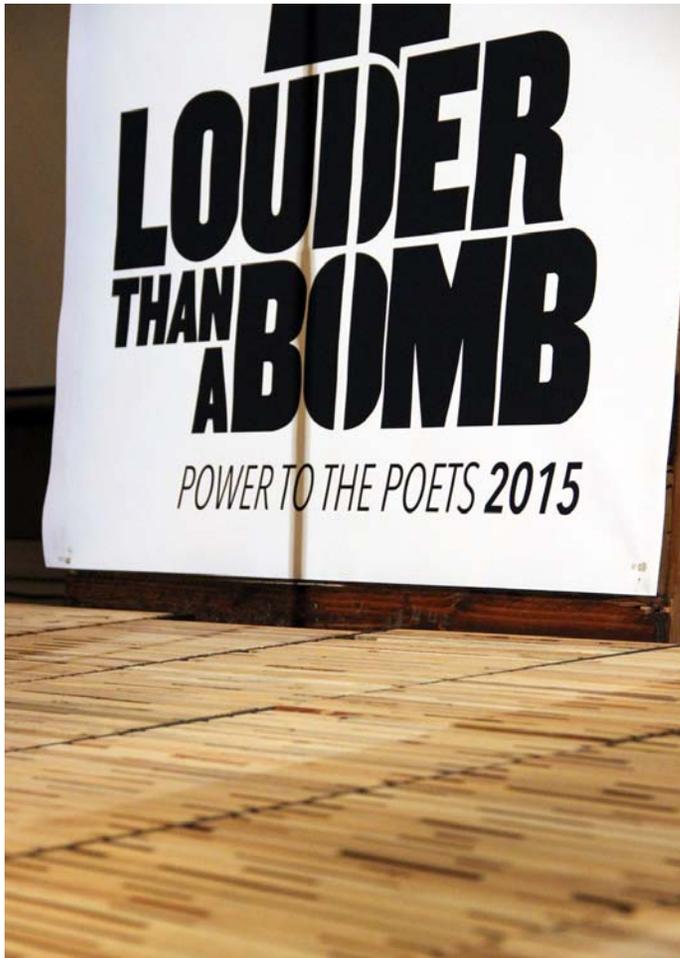
We were interested in the idea of lightness and ephemerality in contrast with the rough and raw surfaces of steel, wood, and newspaper. The students explored laser etching and edge lighting with clear acrylic panels and LED tape lighting. Just as the handwritten words of the poets were burned into the crafted surface of the newspaper panels, the same words were laser etched into the acrylic surface as text, enabling the words to float in space.



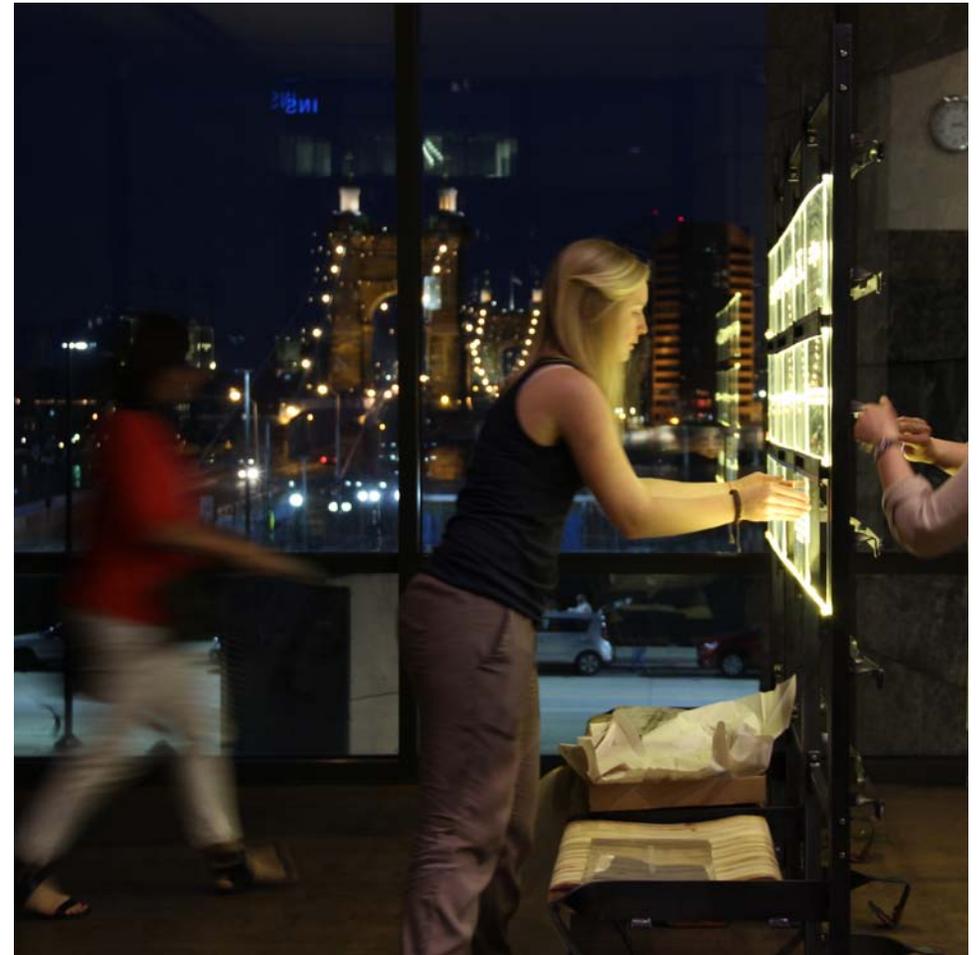
Acrylic DJ table:

Scrap strips of acrylic were cut to a consistent thickness and chemically welded together to form a beautiful striated surface for the DJ area. The students also created a simple switch panel that was used to control the three layers of edge lit LED lighting in the DJ screen.

A mix-up in the original DJ's schedule created a fantastic opportunity for two of the students working on the DJ area, who were actually DJ's themselves. They took over and provided all of the music for both semi-finals and finals.



Semifinals:
Preliminary versions of the stage modules, DJ screen, seating and exhibition area were installed and tested during the preliminary competition.



Assembly

As the finals were held in a large and popular venue, our time for assembly and disassembly was extremely constrained. We knew going in that we had just one hour to deliver and assemble, and one hour to dismantle. Amazingly, the students pulled off both deadlines without a hitch. All of the work was designed for this in mind, as the entire production was assembled and disassembled three times; semi-finals, finals, and the school end-of-year exhibition.

