1-1-2006

Architecture Held Suspect: Notes on Design and Collaboration

Dan Pitera

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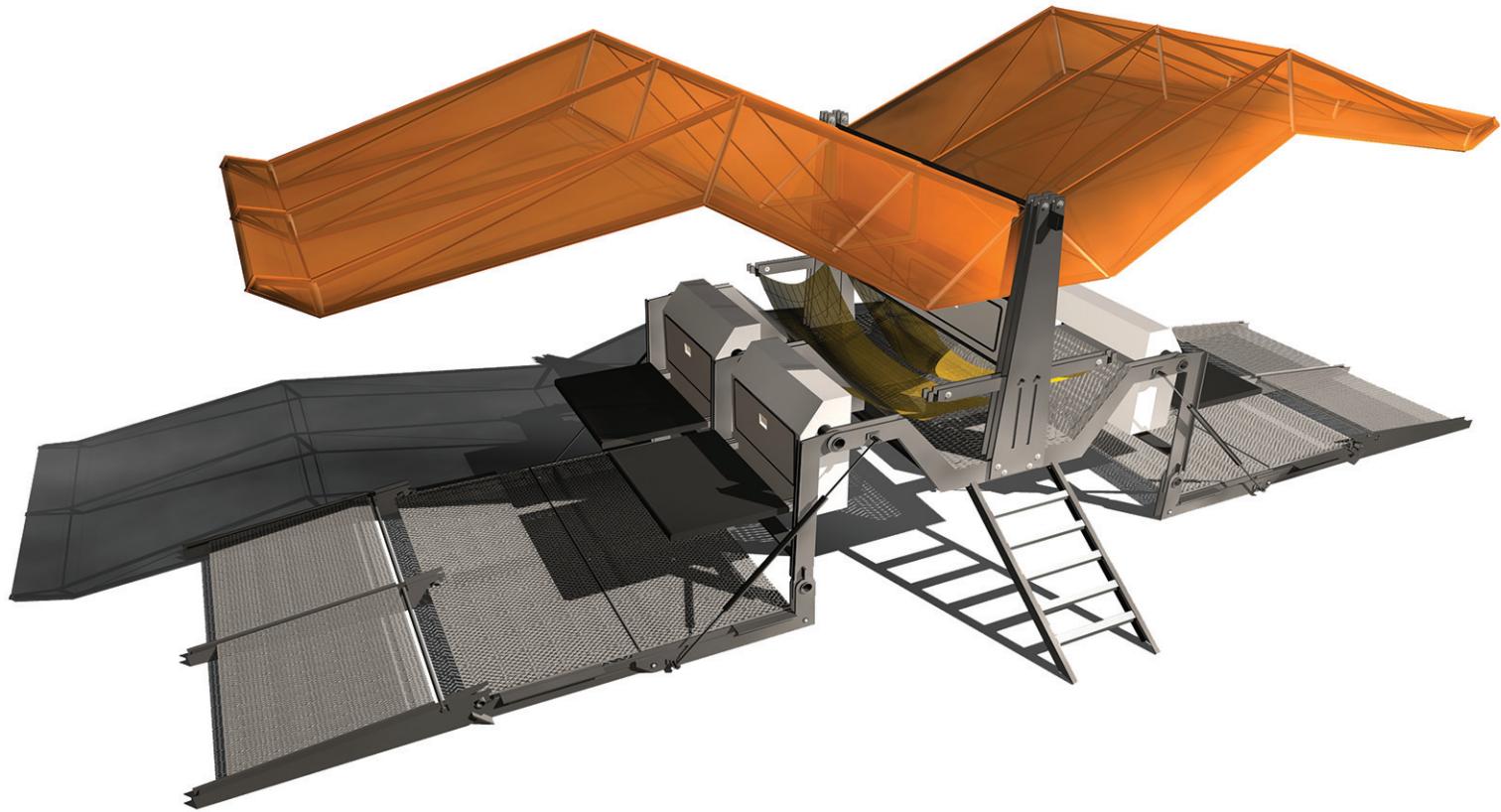
[n]EV-[nomadic] Engagement Vessel *was our entry into the competition sponsored by Architecture for Humanity [www.architectureforhumanity.org] for a Mobile AIDS Medical Clinic to cover the Sub-Saharan region of Africa. Our "site analysis" outlined the areas where there were absolutely no services available to people with HIV/AIDS. This region became the site of our project. Because this area of no services was larger than the land area of Brazil, the design strategy focused on a "swarm" of little objects versus one grand gesture [i.e. airplane, blimp]. To provide the structure for this swarm of interventions, the pickup truck was selected. Presently, it is the most common vehicle in Africa, which makes it one of the easiest to maintain. Also, the infrastructural needs are minimal. This decision essentially provides two "sites" for the clinic: the Ground and the Truck. When folded, the clinic is designed to fit and travel in the "bed" of the truck. When it arrives at a site, it unfolds and connects with the ground. The truck disengages from the clinic and travels the area to transport patients back for treatment, counseling, and/or education.*

I: Underpinnings[2]
Tactics for Operating

We work under the premise that to fabricate architectural, landscape, or urban insertions, interpretations, and alterations is an activist endeavor that is often ignored or unconsciously pursued. Design supports or disrupts the actions of individuals and the actions of the institutions that culture has formed. To consciously work in this way gives purpose to the "support" or the "disruption." Thus, the architectural process can be an act of civil disobedience, which distinguishes design as a method that reflects on its position within the cultural, social, and political context. In particular to the work of the Design Center, we question the "practice" of architecture, which centers on repetition as a way to make an efficient process. Instead, we reflect on what a "praxis" of architecture might be, which searches for alternative methods of working, where the process itself is used to examine the outcome. For example, it is not our aim to "give a voice" to those "who do not have a voice,"[3] This is a phrase that has become almost a cliché in our culture. The Design Center believes everyone has a voice. But due to the current dominant paradigm, some voices are louder than others. Thus instead, we attempt to "amplify the diminished voice."[4] We position the act of design as a commodity that should engage those marginalized and neglected by the dominant paradigm.

Tactics for Design

Our process of making is rooted in the notion of "montage"—the strategic searching, revealing, and uncovering of relationships and connections through the acts of cutting, splicing, and reassembly. Architects do not create anything new; instead, they establish different connections between existing "things." We do not create space; we alter existing space. We are caught in a continual act of montage, both in our process and in our products. The generative moments of our process are often small threads that are woven and interwoven with other threads to reveal and form relationships. This should not suggest that we are cognizant or aware of all of the relationships prior to the process of weaving. It is the intent of this process to reveal and form these relationships as a way to help dispel preconceptions. In other words, we attempt to find a sort of amnesia towards the project. We address various cultural datum, stereotypes, and assumptions. With all of these threads, we form a matrix or a tapestry of intentions. This is in contrast to a process of a hierarchic "family tree" stemming from one or two emergent ideas. How do we find these threads? Our process takes us through language, mappings, precedent, art, science, cultural, social, and political paradigms, user needs, and client intentions. This tapestry does not try to uncover universal truths or definitive definitions. Instead, we work from the premise that our cultural construct is a mythology where the distinction
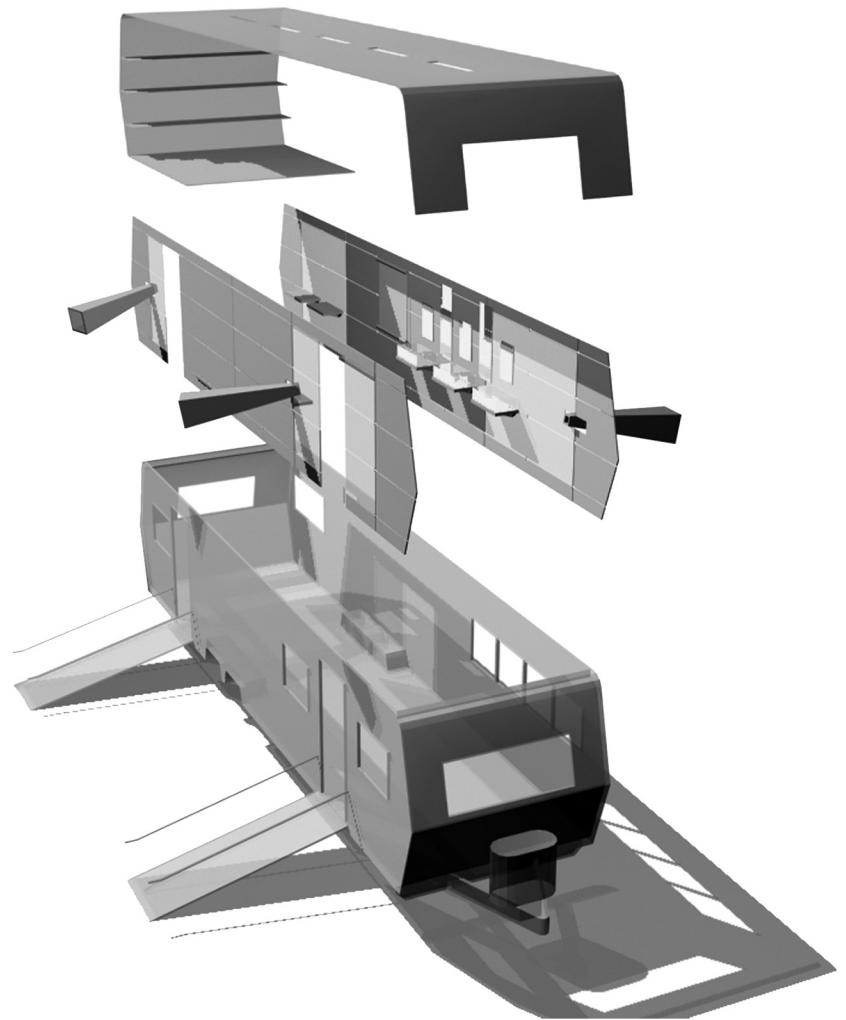
Black History 101: Mobile Archive
With continuing cuts in educational funding, school have begun to reduce or eliminate field trips to cultural institutions like museums. A local Detroit collector of racist artifacts and artifacts that celebrate African American culture, has confronted this issue by taking his collection "on the road." This mobile archive will travel school parking lots and cultural events to bring the museum to the children. The local artist, Tyree Guyton, will fabricate the exterior. Our design penetrates his new exterior skin with "view ports" and resurfaces the interior with a new planer hanging mechanism. Phase 2 will be a trailer built "from the ground up" that will spatially transformation each site, while being site responsive.

between fiction and reality is not merely undetectable but actually unimportant and useless. In this case, our work may seek to exploit or alter cultural myths, fables, and fantasies.[5] We rarely use a dictionary. It supports and validates a dominant paradigm...

It is often forgotten that [dictionaries] are artificial repositories, put together well after the languages they define. The roots of language are irrational and of a magical nature.

—Jorge Luis Borges

We love the irrational...

II: Notes on Collaboration
Schools of architecture traditionally attempt to produce "great designers"; instead, perhaps they should produce people who "support great design." As a result, architecture taught and practiced today is born out of a tradition that rejects collaboration between the architect and non-architect—community residents (regardless of class, race, religion, gender, etc.), students, client representatives, end users, builders, designers, and other concerned parties and stakeholders.

A diagram of the traditional model may be formed with the "architect" at the apex of a pyramid with all others working below for the good of his/her idea. What if filmmaking was viewed as an alternative model? Who is the author of a particular film project: the screenwriter?, the director?, the producer?, the actors?, etc. Each brings their authorship to the process. Like film, the making of architecture, by its very nature, is a collaborative process. In this model, the "project" is at the apex with all of the various contributors to the process below.

I would not like to make what I design with my own hands. Nor design all my own.[6]

—Alvaro Siza

It is often heard that working collaboratively produces mediocre design. This is because a collaborative process is confused with working through a committee structure. There is a difference between design by collaboration and design by committee. Design by collaboration celebrates difference, while design by committee celebrates sameness. In a community design process that engages all participants in a project, all are seen as providing a particular expertise essential to its success. This expertise is acknowledged and used during the process. In other words, we may be designers who bring out particular expertise to the table, but we do not live in the neighborhood; we may not use their particular program; we will probably not be the constructors; we may not be their race or ethnicity; etc. The intent of this process is to ensure that, through active meaningful engagement,[7] the design criteria reflect the needs and concerns of all involved. It also fosters a commitment and understanding of the project as a whole and of the necessary requirements needed for its successful completion. However, this participatory process does not seek consensus; it does attempt to listen and incorporate all voices at the table. Design by committee does attempt to find consensus, which leads to the purpose of a "minority report." Through difference, thoughtful design that responds to more people can develop without foregoing quality. This should not suggest that collaboration and participatory design processes ultimately produce thoughtful design. Similar to the fact that the quality of a construction ultimately lies in the hands of the constructor, the quality of design still remains in the hands of the designer—since "design" is the expertise we bring to the collaborative process. What a collaborative process does do is connect the design and programming to the direct needs and desires of those typically outside of the design activity. It challenges preconceptions and stereotypes held by all participants.

It also reveals and uncovers content and information early in the process essential to high-quality design. A skilled set of designers can take this content to produce a thoughtful response. Though the majority of the people who will read this article are designers or people who directly influence design, we must remember that everyone influences the aesthetic and content of our built and natural environment. It is this oversight that sets up confrontation in the design process. Thus, collaboration can improve awareness and quality of design.

III: Meaninglessness of Architecture
The impetus nudging me to write this section of the article is the delight I hold for the indeterminate nature of architecture and the distaste I hold for those who try to "correct" and suppress this very same indeterminacy. At the same time, architects who attempt to assign meaning to architecture and to stabilize its cultural reading also bewilder me. Symbolism or other similar modes of representation privilege certain people. It sets up the difference between "those who are in the know" and "those who are not." The work of the Design Center looks at the meaninglessness of architecture as a meaningful approach. In other words, the question when viewing a project should not be: *What does it mean?* It should be: *Is it meaningful?*

A child's toy box contains objects that are capable of assuming many forms and carrying many values. To a child, a fragment of rope tied to a doorknob may be a guideline for a mountain climber, a portion of a ship's sail, or a leash on an exotic animal. To the child, each reading is not independent and complete, but tenuous, overlapping, and fleeting. Artificial lines delineating separation, or an artificial taxonomy has not yet been formed. The rope does not contain these meanings. The rope has not been assigned these

meanings. The child reads them and is constructed to read them through her/his interaction with culture. In the same way, designers should not impose or assign particular meanings and motives to objects. A designer designs the opportunities for interactions, actions, and reactions. It is through these interactions, actions, and reactions that the user constructs meaning. Again, this meaning is indeterminate and fleeting. It is indeterminate because everything and everyone come with "cultural baggage." A designer cannot predict who is carrying what bags.

A construction is a matter of an interference in space. As stated previously, we do not create space; we alter space—we interfere. Architecture alters and transforms the spatial quality of an existing condition. It is always an intervention, or perhaps an interference. It is our interaction with this interference that derives meaningfulness and not an assigned reading or meaning.

The way the Design Center operates in this way follows on Alvar Aalto's thoughts that architects should design the verbs of architecture not the nouns. In other words, this is the difference between designing a stair (noun) and designing ascending and descending (verb). Thus, as a part of our participatory design process, we ask the participants and ourselves many questions. We perform many activities, many verbs. These questions and activities typically center around three things: people, actions, and space. This ultimately arrives at a series of verbs that we use as our point of departure in the design process.

IV: Disruption
Every action we make has both overt and covert implications and understandings. The covert implications run silently in our actions as designers. They are the issues of politics, as well as the issues of the power structures, gender, race, etc. All of these govern the moves that we make and thus, define our architecture. The "covert"

is present within our assumptions. It is present in the things we are taught to "take for granted." We as designers must question our assumptions. Remember that the practice of architecture as a client-based profession has a short tradition. Our method of operating in this tradition is just as young. As suggested in the section "Underpinnings," we need to continuously challenge our methods of working and whom we are working for. By asking these two questions, we turn the critique both internally (the profession) and externally (outside of

the profession). For a system to remain healthy and viable this critique is necessary. Since our profession is rooted in culture and in power structures, it is our role as designers to challenge them to make or fabricate a better world. (*If it works, it is obsolete).*

Similar to Fluxus and Situationists, we must mistrust our "art"—to hold it suspect. We must not just question the materials and tectonics of our "art," but the motives underlying our art. In doing so, we will be questioning and disrupting culture.

Notes

1. *Suspect* derives from the Latin word "*suspicere*" which originally meant "to look up at." It developed along two lines: 1. "look up at, admire" which dropped out of English usage; and 2. "look at secretly," hence "look at distrustfully." [John Ayto, *Dictionary of Word Origins*, (Arcade Publishing, New York, 1990) p. 513.] This simultaneity of the familiar and the unfamiliar interests me here. Architecture holds the possibility of wonder and the sinister. Architecture of the sacred and the profane, not just the sacred.
2. "Underpinnings" focuses on two tactical methods surrounding our thought process of how our office organizes the world around it. "Tactics for Operating" are the notions that are embedded in the subtext of each project. They are the general attitudes we hold regarding the work that we do. "Tactics for Design" outlines the process of our design method.
3. This phrase is important to the work of the Design Center because we work exclusively with nonprofit community organizations. It is our purpose to bring thoughtful design to those who are often neglected.
4. This statement recalls Malcolm X's speech on being a diner at an assembled dinner gathering. "I am not a diner until you let me dine."
5. For example, it is unimportant if we rationally know that different races and genders can attain the same goals, if our cultural myth has

taught us otherwise. Thus, we do not ignore this myth. We seek to work with and/or alter these cultural fables and fantasies.
6. Quoted in: Rafael Moneo, *Theoretical Anxiety and Design Strategies*, [Actar, Spain, 2004], p. 206.
7. The key words here are "active" and "meaningful." Just because an idea or a series of ideas are presented to "the public" for their comments does not make it an active and meaningful process. For a process to effectively engage its participants, it should follow a base set of criteria similar to: 1. The process should be limited to 15-20 people. It should not be a lecture to 50-200 people. If there are more than 20 people, the number should be broken down into smaller groups. 2. The process should include varied methods for people to engage in the decision-making. This allows those with varying levels of comfort with "public speaking" to have an opportunity for their voices to be heard. 3. There should always be a mutual knowledge sharing between all people involved and in all aspects of the project. Thus, the designers are not merely taking notes, they are learning as much as everyone else. 4. There should be sincerity in the process. Sincerity brings trust. Trust uncovers information that may never be revealed in more traditional processes. This information can become the key element that allows the design to truly engage its stakeholders.

Homeboy Industries *is part of the non-profit organization Jobs for a Future. It is their mission to offer young adults an alternative to gang life. As part of this mission, they provide job and life skills and employment opportunities. This new facility is an adaptive reuse of a 4,600-square foot printing facility in East Los Angeles of their main offices and training center. The intentions of Homeboy, and of this project, are to celebrate the human person, and to provide respect to those who are often neglected.*

Mercy Education Project

The client is a non-profit organization centering on after-school tutoring and GED preparation solely directed to female children, young adults, and seniors. This design/build tenant improvement transforms 1,500 square feet of their 8,000 square foot facility into two new classrooms and a snack area. The rest of the facility houses their administrative offices, tutoring "pods," library, and digital technology center. Many of the participants are intimidated by the "image" of a school environment. The space of the conventional school is not perceived by the Mercy Ed user as a supportive learning atmosphere. The design of their project does not find its "image" from past schools, but from the activities of the space, as well as the space of the child. The inhabitable space of a child has a finer grain and intimacy than the space of a room. "Their space" includes the space under a dining room table, or perhaps the space under a stairway. This project looked to these spaces to understand the classroom as more than one large white room.

Fire Break

It is not only the live people who are leaving Detroit. The dead are leaving too. Every year, 300 graves move from the city of Detroit to the suburbs. Every hour, Detroit loses 8.1 [live] inhabitants. It has been described as "the nation's preeminent basket-case." T-shirts proudly state: "Detroit: Where the Weak are Killed and Eaten" or "I'm so bad I vacation in Detroit."

Through time, neglect, and abandonment, the space of speculative development—the urban single family home—has been revealed as an alternative urban public space. This space described by many as empty or wasted has become the space of opportunity or the space of intervention. Presently, there are 8,000 burned houses in Detroit. What once were people's homes have been violently treated and left bare on the side of the road. The Design Center, alongside community artists and residents, are intervening within this urban space. What motivates these mercenary or guerrilla actions is the intense desire to appropriate and transform this blight into a public asset. Thus, Fire-Break engenders the position that everyone—the next-door neighbor, the person down the street—can shape her or his world. These catalytic interventions and interferences have thrown the urban context and one's power over it into the public discourse through both event and word.