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SPACING temporary architecture

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, September 6th, 2017

If we can accept a working definition of architecture as “*enclosed space for human occupancy*”, then, “temporary architecture” would be “enclosed space for short term human occupancy.”

How does it come about, how is it made, how is it occupied, how long should it last, how does it end ... all these depend on the circumstances that made it necessary or desirable ... and feasible.

In our time we have produced, in terms of temporary architecture thus defined, some structures that have a limited rapport to the physical and human environment and an even more limited rapport to social and cultural values given their determining programmatic priorities for economy and security, for example: the seasonal worker shacks camp site, the natural and industrial catastrophe-related tent city, also familiar to immigrant and war-related displaced persons influx.

We have also produced, as illustrated in P. Jodidio’s TEMPORAY ARCHITECTURE NOW, examples of exhibition stands, fair ground structures, temporary interior systems, mobile recreational shelters, etc. with the designer’s touch that makes them go beyond the immediate response to satisfy basic needs ... i.e. be touched by the more sensory stimulating, symbolic and use-based experiential dimensions of spacings.

In the feature image I show the forefather of temporary architecture: the classic play shelter made by children to their own scale, using various pieces of furniture and blankets stayed with stones and bricks and walled up with the occasional plywood or corrugated plastic panel ... universally understood, accepted and appreciated.

Because industrialized societies can produce temporary building deserving the qualifier of architecture, we have selected two cases illustrating two approaches to temporary, non catastrophe-related, housing projects as presented by P. Jodidio in his TEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE NOW!: the **process approach**, placing the emphasis on community experimentation, design, building and occupation, but exposed to negative social evaluation and reaction, and the **product approach**, professionally designed and built to meet criteria of functional flexibility, and of economical and ecological design, but open to positive occupancy related changes.

The process approach:

Trucks, containers, collectives (various locations)

REF. TEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE NOW!, Taschen, 2011, pp. 121-123

Arch. – Artiste: S. Cirugeda

Photographers: C. Richter, Straddle 3

According to the architects:

“ The trucks, containers, collectives project ... allowed us different management and funding protocols, mechanisms for occupying sites or buildings, ways of operating collectives ... as well as self criticism and evaluation tools ... “

Featuring the work of a bona fide architectural office in Seville, Spain it uses an inventive social and economical mix of industrial parts, used containers and collective participation.

That work is by necessity process-conscious as shown below in the experimental work stage.

Given the sophisticated way of organizing the process of producing a movable structure it is curious to note the similarity in formal improvisation between the play shelter set on a sidewalk green strip, and the experimental modular container habitat using found material, benevolent man power, out of pocket funding and a siting on an abandoned urban zone ... down to the entry porch roof made of a blanket stretched over a metal pipe frame, shown in the image below.



Experimentation phase – Photo Credit C. Richter

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Naturally the professional hand does show in the real project as shown below, using the same mix of sources of materials and labor to produce environmentally (physical and social) sensitive and sophisticated result as one can judge from the solar panels on the roof, and the cantina under the front porch roof.

Two small containers are placed on top of one long container placed next to a concrete retaining structure and along a roof covered porch. The proportions of the building ensemble and the choice of finishes lends to this building a certain temporary, almost store bought or prefab aspect.

The ensemble is as much physical as it is social as subsumed in the “collective” and open approach to its production; as such it is bound to be moved, changed, and even disassembled, etc.

It is temporary in an unpredictable way: change of building and utility systems ... change in the social constitution of the collective using it change of location due to economic context ... increase of the number of units on the site, etc.

It has proven to be temporary in a dramatic way when it was torched by the locals in reaction to the embodied transgressions of conventional architectural values from process to product.



Production result – Photo Credit Straddle 3

The product approach:

Office of Mobile Design (Joshua Tree, California)

REF. TEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE NOW!, Taschen, 2011, pp. 311-316

Arch. – J. Siegal

Photographers: M. McGregor, B. Chan

Featuring the work of a seasoned architect whose anagram OMD defines its objective: to design a structure that is transportable, that can accommodate various occupancies from office, to house, to workshop using “eco friendly” building and utility technologies, and that is affordable.

This translates, in a nutshell, in avoiding the trailer home type for one that is at ease in a desert as well as in a city environment: basically a prefab house that can be pulled up from one site and moved to another ... and modified from one occupancy to another.

The product: two equal compartments covered by a sloping 10 to 12 feet high roof, separated by a utility core of kitchen and bathroom, for a total length of 58 feet and width of 11.5 feet, that can accommodate any occupancy that needs a front (public) and a back (private) space, that is floor heated, that comes under 250,000 \$US, etc.



Product on a desert site – Photo credit M. McGregor

Far from being austere, its generous volume is a naturally lit interior from bright front to subdued rear, with a judicious spacing of openings, horizontally and vertically, that allows possible subdivisions given the floor heating system.



Product on an urban site – Photo credit B. Chan

Note the telling attention to details with the folding “wing” roof over the entrance in both images, and the fact that it represents the type of occupant initiated modification that can be grafted onto the body of the structure.

Mobility and functional flexibility are the sources of the temporariness of this mobile prefab home structure as its occupancy can change depending on its tenure: rental or ownership, its type and length of occupancy, its type of site, etc.

Discussion

What do these cases tell us in terms of the spatial sensations, perceptions and use-based experiences subsumed in the notion of spacings, when the buildings-structures that modulate them are circumstantially limited in time?

The obvious answer lies in the circumstances themselves!

How autonomous, mobile, flexible, affordable must these structures be? Where and by whom will they be built? How and by whom will they be occupied? Where will they be sited in relation to the

more permanent built environment or the natural one? Etc.

Children, a housing coop, a family in transit or a traveling craftsman workshop and showcase will have differing answers to these questions as shown in the cases presented.

In all cases however there is a *complementariness of opposites* in terms of *materials* (new vs. recycled – preassembled or in units), *labor and technological resources* (world wide vs. local), *design and construction processes* (from the bottom up vs. top down), *market structure* (world wide vs. local) and *market nature* (type of tenure, type of mobility-temporariness, price range, social acceptance or rejection), etc. that *will affect the resulting spacings to which we can assign the label of architecture, however temporary they may be.*

Bibliographic note.

Huxtable, A.-L. ON ARCHITECTURE – Walker, 2008

Jodidio, P. TEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE NOW! – Taschen, 2011

Feature image credit Maurice Amiel for snapping (ca 1963), and Bogdan Karasek for developing the image (2017).

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