

# Exhibition by Design: Paper and Project

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper and its accompanying projects present an exploration of the premise that the ideas that motivate design can be presented in alternate forms. The vehicle for this exploration is in the form of exhibitions, specifically of work done in architectural design studio. The objective is to probe the potential of further expression of an idea that has already been expressed in another form.

A first experiment in this exploration began in a graduate architecture design studio I taught a few years ago, "The Architecture of the Undead. The idea to be investigated in the studio was that of the 'in-between': a ground in which two sensibilities collide and influence each other's meaning while maintaining something of the force of each identity. Readings, discussions and exercises were held around the topics of death rituals, immortality and virtuality, with a semester project to design a place to connect life with death.

Following the studio, one of the students and I talked about the idea of extending the investigation of the in-between by designing and installing an exhibition not only of the studio work, but also of the ideas it contained. The design of the exhibit was to be as much about the ideas underlying the studio as were the projects displayed. The exhibit room was rendered a grassland with clumps of dry grasses pulled from the site, interspersed with lurking bits of study models. Slides of completed studio work were projected through these grasses and appeared on a wall, loosely covered with thin white cloth which billowed in the draft of the room. The room was dark, save for the hall light creeping in the door, the projected images, and a few flickering candles illuminating a mounted studio description and project abstracts. In the background was ethereal music. Within this exhibit, the idea of the in-between was invoked...in-between light and dark, the visible and the imagined, virtual and real, and here and there.

## THE TRANSPORTABILITY OF IDEA

The Undead/In-Between exhibit demonstrated a way in which the ideas that motivate acts of design can move from

one form into another. This suggests that such ideas can be generic and can have expression that is different from their originally designed manifestations. Acknowledging that ideas are made manifest in a variety of ways, the intent here is to explore one particular kind of manifestation: that through the exhibition of designed work.

First, I'd like to clarify the terms 'idea' and 'design'. An idea is a mental impression, something formed in the mind by thinking. It is the thought that lies behind something, in contrast to its physical existence. An idea may involve form or it may not; a design is always manifest in form. The act of design is giving form to idea; it is the material construction of it. The idea is the catalyst, it causes a reaction while in essence remaining relatively unchanged itself. I'm suggesting here that this catalyst is generic and can thus take on a variety of forms; that ideas can be retrieved in and through any number of designed, material manifestations; and that it is the material expression of the idea that is transformed, not the core idea itself.

As illustration, consider that category of potent conceptions known as 'the ideal'. In *The Machine in the Garden*, historian Leo Marx looks at the roots and manifestations of the Pastoral Ideal in American culture and uses literature to both elaborate the concept of the ideal and as an exemplar of its manifestation. Marx examines *The Tempest*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby* in terms of their demonstration of what he calls "complex pastoralism", a concept that describes the tension existing between nature and art, between the simultaneous desires for a bucolic Virgilian existence and the comforts of a sometimes painful technological society. This same complex ideal motivates, or is manifest in a variety of other 'designed' ways in addition to that of literature. Evoking a sense of that ideal, the bountiful world of our ancestral shepherds, dimmed by the darker aspects of reality, is played out in song: Leonard Cohen's "...garden of freshly cut tears"; in the landscape art of Mary Miss<sup>2</sup>; in the fruits offered up by Madison Avenue: "It doesn't get any better than this" (after a hard day of rock climbing in a panoramic wilderness); in the theories and designs of landscape architects like Patricia Johannson, Chip

Sullivan, AE Bye, and Martha Schwartz; in public parks and private gardens; in the projects of S.I.T.E.; and in the work of architects from Ambasz to Wright. The ideal of the pastoral, even a complex version of it, is manifested in all of these designs; it is the mode of expression that changes.

It is important to distinguish the ideas that motivate design from the design work itself and, as well, from the process of making the work. An idea acts on design, it projects influence; the design work is the expression of or the manifestation of the idea, a projection of it in material form. The idea may be elaborated upon or refined in the process of constructing its expression, or other ideas may evolve as germane in the production of the designed work. In any case, ideas are the motivators of action; their expression is the designed work and the process that made the work.

All of this assumes that there is something intrinsic or basic in an idea that **can** be translated into different modes of expression; something that is generic, waiting to be rendered in specific, material form. Some call it essence, some locate it through typology or memory or phenomenology or even hermeneutical studies. As a means of elucidation, I offer up some examples which give consideration to intrinsic properties, their transportability, and the way in which they manifest themselves.

Kahn describes the threshold where silence, the unmeasurable, the desire to express, meets light, the measurable, the giver of all presence. In this "sanctuary of all expression...the Treasury of the Shadow", the desire to be, to express, "can be visualized as becoming a wild dance of flame that settles and spends itself into material." He is heedful that in the drive to express, a distinction must be made between the unmeasurable and the measurable, between existence and presence.

A great building...must begin with the unmeasurable, must go through measurable means when it is being designed, and in the end must be unmeasurable. You must follow the laws of nature and use quantities of brick, methods of construction and engineering. But in the end, when the building becomes part of living, it evokes unmeasurable qualities, and the spirit of its existence takes over.<sup>3</sup>

As the examples cited from Marx have already shown, literary works are demonstrations of ideas as manifest in form. The allegory, however, presents an occasion in which form has a dual nature. An allegory is a symbolic narrative; it says one thing but leads you to something else. It harbors two constructed realities, adding a weight of additional significance; that is the central aspect of its design. Dante's *Inferno* is an allegory that is both about something and a representation of it in another mode. His spiral of Hell, the realm of those dead who in life had rejected spiritual values, is a commentary on ethical conduct from the vantage of a man from the Middle Ages who felt his life blighted by the corruption of the times. Its manifestation as a physical construct is a complex structure based on the numerical

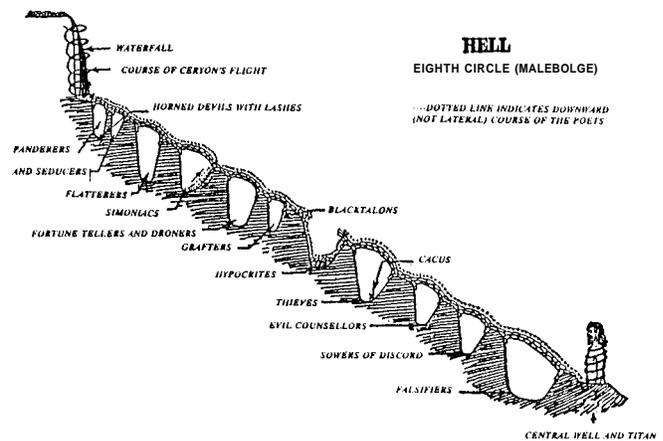


Fig.1 Dante's *Inferno*, the Eighth Circle

symbols of the Trinity and the Unity. All its layers and gates and circles and its path of descent present a graphic rendition of this moral code in a separate manifestation of the same message. The allegory is a tool for the expression of an idea rendered in multiple forms.

## EXHIBIT AS DESIGN

Among the ways to express design, and the ideas it embodies, is through exhibition, one possible stage in the design process. Not all exhibits are treated as expressions of design ideas; the conventional venue of exhibit - in a gallery or museum, or for a client - is seldom designed to be anything, in itself, at all; these exhibit environments are most often seen as neutral backdrops for the things displayed.

In this discussion, I'm speaking about a different kind of exhibit, one that intentionally extends the act of design into another medium. Not only can this kind of exhibit be a display of design work, but also a new design which is, itself, about what the exhibited designs are about. The goal is to develop exhibits that express affectively, exhibits that express the thought, spirit, intent and ideological content of the works being displayed. Exhibition can be seen as a performance of the ideas being investigated as well as a display of the products of a similar investigation. An installation, with its promise of multi-sensory experience has spatial, temporal and experiential qualities that cast it in the realm of performance, with all the subjectivity that performance implies.

## STUDIO AND EXHIBIT AS PLAY AND INDEX

The work described here continues the experiment that started with the *Architecture of the Undead* exhibit. Two more exhibits have been made. In both cases, the projects produced in architectural design studios at SUNY Buffalo were exhibited and the exhibits were 'made' by students of the studio.

In the first exhibit, the students were surprised by the instruction to 'exhibit by design'. The first year studio was to design a toy with emphasis on craft and how concepts, such

as that of play, can be designed into built form. The toy was to be seen as a toy, not an instrument; having no special utility, it is used for its own sake, for pleasure. Play was to be an integral part of this design process.

At the end of the project, I sought volunteers to help install an exhibition of some of the toys in the lobby of the architecture building, a space with two long display cases along one side and two shorter ones at its ends. When the toys, their drawings and eight students were assembled in the lobby, I asked them to do one thing only in getting the toys mounted in the cases: "to play". After a tentative start, they began to engage the instruction and did some playful things: a set of blocks falling from the sky into a heap, a broken toy located as if another toy had created the calamity, an assemble-it-yourself small wooden chair mounted as if it were an isometric drawing of itself. At first the students gravitated to a single toy for expression and to the edges of the long cases and the whole of the smaller end ones; they were seeking physical boundaries against which to begin the play. Soon it became clear that the middle of the cases would also have to be populated, and there were other projects lying around wanting display. They started to "play" a whole case by using the black void remaining in the center of the case as a receding ground for a set of blocks. The void receded in very small moves, made by one of the students early each morning. Eventually their focus shifted in scope to the whole room: a train jumped cases and a puzzle was completed elsewhere. Play was engaged in, executed and displayed.

The second exhibit was more deliberately planned. I introduced the concept of 'exhibiting by design' at the end of a fall semester graduate design studio. Our venue was to be a third floor crit room in the school's century-old studio building.

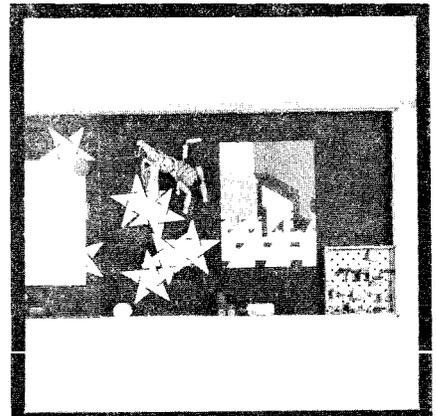
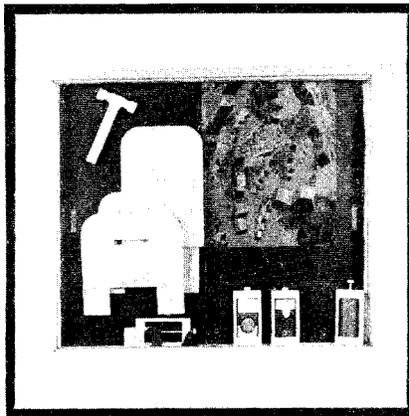
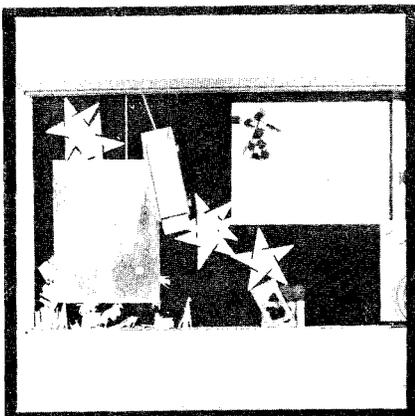
The studio, "Index in Architecture", concerned itself with relationships that derive their meaning along a purely physical axis. These relationships are so simple and direct that they are not subject to or dependent on extraneous connotations or culturally supplied meanings. An index points out or points to something (i.e. the index finger). Critic Rosalind Krauss distinguishes indexes from symbols, which are prod-



Fig.5 Lot-line wall

ucts of cultural coding, and calls them "the marks of a particular cause and that cause is the thing to which they refer..."<sup>4</sup> Indexical relationships sit underneath elaborate interpretation, they are simply the objective translations of explicit physical conditions: the play of light across a wall, a path worn into a lawn or stone steps, the trace of a former neighbor's existence embedded on exposed inner city lot-line walls... all are examples of index in architecture.

The studio employed readings, exercises and a design project to approach the idea of index obliquely, not directly. I wanted to encircle the idea by initially looking to other perspectives and processes which engage very direct rela-



Figs.2,3,4 Toy Exhibit

tionships We read Borges' "The Shape of the Sword", a paradoxical tale that sits within a scar; experimented with a phenomenological way of seeing the world, one which side-steps the intellect and simply observes what is there; explored how memory edits out the superfluous, leaving the indelible behind; and a cause-and-effect exercise was done around the concept of index directly.

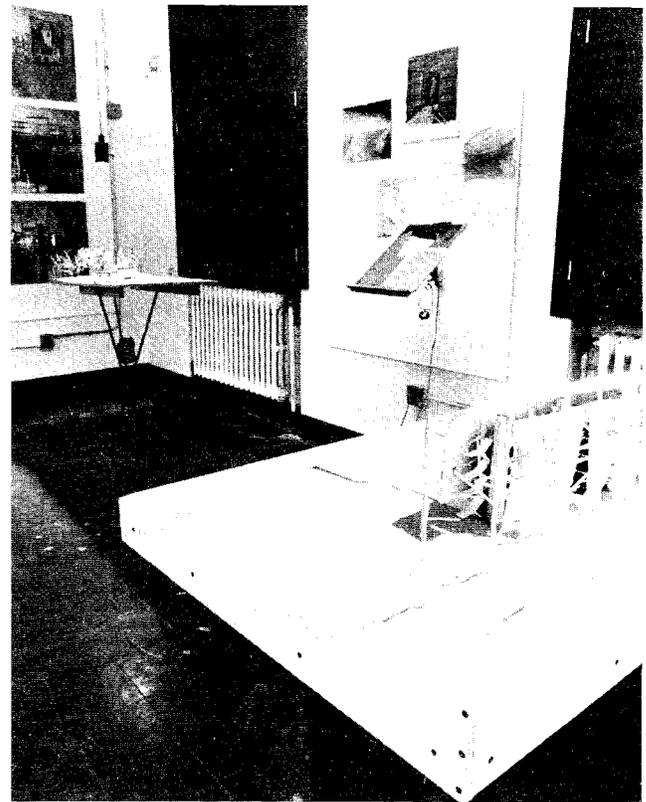
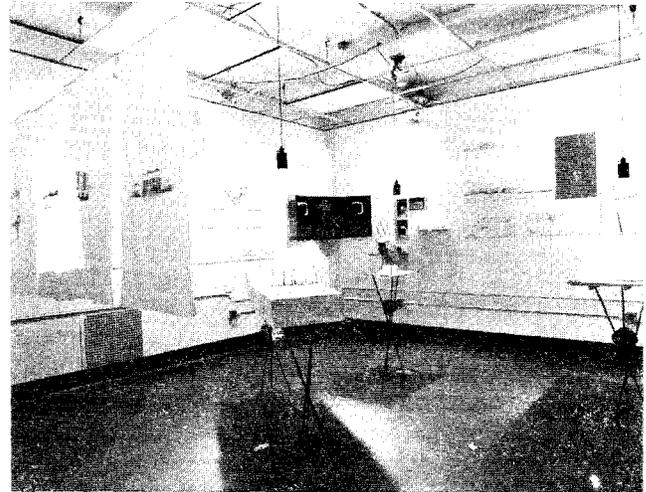
The semester project was to design a Bingo parlor for 500, employing the concept of index. The site, across from Buffalo on the Canadian shore of Lake Erie, was the now-wooded ruins of a popular early-century amusement park and casino. The Bingo program was chosen precisely because its standard form is nondescript: usually a church basement or one of the decorated commercial sheds that line suburban boulevards.

At the beginning of the spring semester three of the Index Studio students' and I began to think about making the exhibit. We felt that the spontaneity often inherent in and particular to indexes and their relative, the trace, would have to be given room to occur, and were mindful of the constraints a deterministic process could produce. We debated ideas, gathered and photographed the studio work constructed part of one of the designs as an entrance clue, reconstructed one of the preliminary exercises at full size to engage these ideas at an experiential scale, and found a way to reproduce the students' project abstracts such that only the shadow of the text (a trace of it) was visible. We gave ourselves two days and a night to install the exhibit. In keeping with the 'cause and effect' exercise, we employed a "try this and see what effect it has" approach. We used project intentions, lighting, positioning, view sequence, internal relationships, sound, and existing peculiarities in the room to continually re-present the concept and act of indexing.

In the room, the work was displayed in standard exhibit format, albeit dimly lit. An entrance screen of hanging fabric panels. the original drawings of one of the projects, served as the field on which projected slides of studio work appeared. All additional light in the room was task oriented: we spot-lit models, drawings, and the wall on which the students' project abstracts were mounted. These abstracts had been printed, in yellow, on clear acetate; the readable text was in the form of shadow traces on the wall. That the lights clearly pointed to events in the exhibit, or made them legible, was important to us as expressions of direct relationships.

We exhibited some of the projects in terms of the specific ways in which they, as designs, had manifested ideas about indexing. The project drawn on fabric panels had employed the aspects of trace that the marking of Bingo cards implies. One of its walls was made of continuously advancing rolls of fabric threaded through the three floors of playing tables, serving as the pre-printed cards on which players make their marks. It seemed fitting that the drawings of this project become the screens on which other projects were marked in evanescent images. In this case, the idea of marking on fabric was revived and recreated as a technique for exhibition.

The student's Bingo Stories (an early programming exer-



Figs.6,7 Index Exhibit

cise) were placed, loose leaf, on a podium lit from beneath and fixed to the wall on which their associated images were displayed. The podium was one of the products of the cause and effect exercise: a piece of heat-buckled plywood into which was carved an opening, shaved to within one ply of the board. The opening, now in a podium, served to light the drawings above.

An interpretation of index (pointing to) as datum (that from which things are measured) engaged the student whose exercise model was built to scale. The intent of the model was to present a surface of water as a datum plane. A thin black pan of water, it was set against a wall on axis with both the

room door and building stair. The pan's height was aligned with an eye-level view from the landing of the stair, a momentary occasion in which one datum plane points to another.

## PROJECTIONS OF SITE

While the Bingo program might have been nondescript, the site wasn't. On a large body of water across from a city, it was simply overgrown ruins and a woods. Some projects made use of the ruins as traces of history, the evidence of past life. In one, the remnants of foundation piers marked a path that crossed a project's entrance canopy; in another, the sea wall of the old promenade became the pivot for a lake-bound, cantilevering structure.

In terms of the site of the exhibit, we re-engaged some of these ideas. We used its location on the building's topmost floor as opportunity to make leading markers. A full scale concrete mock-up of a project wall fragment was bolted onto the main campus path to the studio building; its formwork was placed on the second floor stair landing as both trace and clue.

The entrance to the exhibit room was also marked with used formwork, this time as the remains of some unknown project; the residue of the form was found, discarded in the school's shop and brought into studio as an example of the effect of a cause. This formwork was suspended over an introduction to the exhibit alongside the door to the room: a physical example of the idea of indexing, a pictorial glossary sitting above the verbal one. We aligned the inside of the room with its outside by mounting an identical exhibit introduction back-to-back on the inside of the wall. And, to complete the cycle of referencing elements of the exhibit site, the windows of this third floor room overlooked the front entrance to the building, framing a view of the isolated concrete wall that initiated the exhibit.

At one time, the exhibit room had fixed seating. When the seats were removed, each left an oval of six caulked holes where the seats had been fastened to the floor. The were in rows and evenly spaced throughout the room, a trace left behind of its earlier arrangement. To index this history, 3-



Fig.8 Index Exhibit

point model stands of crossed and wired reinforcing rods were made and installed, axonometrically offsetting the marks of the original fixed seats. On the walls we left all manner of pencil lines, screw holes and paint overspray as further evidence of the room's history. And, as we accentuated the marks on the floor, we accentuated the ceiling's history and inner workings by simply removing the white acoustic ceiling panels leaving only the ceiling frame and residual electrical maze above visible.

## AFTERTHOUGHT

To engage in play or indexing or exhibition as a conscious vehicle for an investigation of the ideas that play, index, or exhibition represent, is a mode of doing research through design, as well as a way of designing. This form of exploration links conception to act by inquiry; that is, grappling with the idea of something while engaging in a performance of it as a means to greater understanding. In an academic context, design logically includes the "what's it about" as well as the material products of the design inquiry. The broad sense of the word design, both as a verb and noun, includes not only the artifacts produced in the process of making and designing, but also the influence of designing with or through the unmeasurable, the ideas that motivate. The use of the premise of this paper, that of the transportability of idea, as a pedagogical device does a number of things: it reinforces the concept that design studio, and the design work that it engages, can be about ideas- that there **is** an architecture about ideas in addition to the one that seeks solutions to stated problems. It suggests and demonstrates that there are many media and modes of expression in which those ideas can be explored and expressed, underscoring the principle that multiple perspectives can lead to a common objective. And it is the conscious exposition of a way in which knowledge about something is acquired, a way of learning about learning.

In attempting to re-engage ideas that had already motivated design work through the medium of exhibition, we learned many things. One was predictable: that willfully changing both the mode of expression of an idea and the form it takes is a powerful pedagogic tool. We are accustomed to moving through modes of expression in the design process in a linear, or at least domino fashion. A sketch is elaborated upon in drawing, a drawing suggests something that can be tested in model form. The objective is the same for all: to focus on the characteristics and qualities of a designed work. We found that when changing the form, from the object of the design work to the 'object' of the exhibit (while maintaining the idea to be expressed), a decided re-examination of the idea had to be made. By engaging a different medium of expression, that of display, a new kind of attention is given the motivating idea; this revisitation broadens its understanding and conception. In addition, the very manipulation of the idea into another mode puts into practice the concept of the transportability of idea.

In doing two different exhibitions, another issue came

into focus. The first exhibit, that of play and toy, was made by the students without forethought. The students were not given time to think about the concept that underlay what they were doing; there was almost no pre-meditation involved, only prompted and then spontaneous play. In contrast, the Index exhibit was expressly premeditated. We were conscious of what we were doing, something that proved to be a handicap at first, given the direct, almost primitive relationships that indexing implies. We came to the conclusion that we had to strike a balance between thinking about the exhibit and **doing/making** it, a situation strikingly similar to the frustration often experienced in the studio design process. There are occasions in design when making something necessarily comes before the thinking about it, occasions when reflection takes the place of premeditation. Because this kind of exhibition is a 'made' design, the time allotted for the installation becomes important. Within this limited time lies the opportunity to make-before-thinking.

Not surprisingly, it became clear that there was a strong correspondence between the idea that was being exhibited and the manner in which the exhibit was made. In retrospect, "to play" was relatively easy; the idea is, itself, an action. In order to manifest the idea of play in an exhibit of toys and their drawings, the students simply played; they engaged the making of the exhibit in a **playful** way. "To Index" is not so common a verb, nor is it so easily performed. The studio and the exhibit team engaged index not only as a verb but also as a noun. Just as the studio work examined indexical relationships, ones that are physical and direct, the exhibit attempted to recast those particular relationships that had been explored directly through the ways in which the projects were displayed. In addition, we used the enterprise of exhibition as a means of making other indexing gestures.

The ideological content of the Index exhibit proved to be perplexing. We found it difficult to express an a-cultural phenomenon, especially because we were planning and designing it with all the cultural baggage that planning and designing can bring; intention is known to hinder spontaneity. In an effort to circumvent this difficulty, we set up conditions and opportunities that would allow, rather than force, indexical things to happen: using various ideas contained in the projects as suggestions of ways to format the room, using light as a source of relation, and perceiving the room and site as elements in and on exhibit.

The exhibit stayed up for one weekend only; by Monday all that remained were an additional set of caulked holes, this time in black mastic, and a few stray wires hanging from the

re-assembled ceiling, projecting the idea of indexing into the future by leaving behind evidence of our own work.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Margaret Howell was the motivator of this exhibit.
- <sup>2</sup> In "Veiled Landscape", a site work installed at Lake Placid in 1979, Miss uses the information in the site - an evergreen-forested valley, primal nature - as a realm through which a symbol of progress, a set of cartesian scrimms, moves.
- <sup>3</sup> John Lobell, *Between Silence and Light: Spirit in the Architecture of Louis Kahn*. Boston: Shambhala, 1985, p.48
- <sup>4</sup> Krauss, R. "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America" *October* v.3, 1977.
- <sup>5</sup> Doru Melencuic, Doug Engel, and Claus Simonsen were the tireless collaborators of the exhibit.

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