

Notes on a Provisional Architecture

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Fig. 1 Marc Paygnard (photographer); Saline Royale d'Arc-et-Senans. An architecture whose nature is contingent on its circumstance.

"What is fullest, what is most alive, what is felt as experience itself, in which the subject who perceives reality and that reality become intensely, tightly merged, is what constitutes the work of art."

— Ignasi de Solà-Morales¹

Late twentieth-century art can be characterized, in part, by the location of the subject matter of the artwork in the perception of the viewer. In this sense, the art object is not inherently vested with meaning. Rather, a work's meaning and significance lie in its role as a catalyst for the self-enlightenment of its audience. Artwork such as this is grounded, not in formal or referential attributes, but in the experience of encountering the work.

In Walter de Maria's sculpture, for example, the art object itself possesses relatively little intrinsic value. Instead, the sculpture gains its meaning through the experience it engenders. Set in west central New Mexico, an area that seasonally expects electric storms three days in thirty, De Maria's

Lightning Field (1977) is composed of a one mile by one kilometer square grid of four hundred stainless steel poles (sixteen poles wide by twenty-five poles long placed 220 feet apart). Each pole is a different height to accommodate the variations in the terrain (ranging from 15.07 feet to 26.72 feet) so that their tops form a level plane. While the occasion of a lightning storm produces an extraordinary containment of lightning bolts, it is no disappointment to encounter the piece in more stable weather conditions. Expecting to be in the presence of a powerful sculpture, one is first overwhelmed with the landscape, and in the bright light of the day, the intervention is barely noticeable by comparison. However, when the sun sets (an occasion far more frequent than a lightning storm) it reflects on each pole, and transforms the place into a fantastic quasi-electrified field. The viewer is overwhelmed with this carefully articulated presence in the landscape.² The shift from an omnipresent natural landscape to an omnipresent constructed one in the same physical space is remarkable. It is this type of shift in the

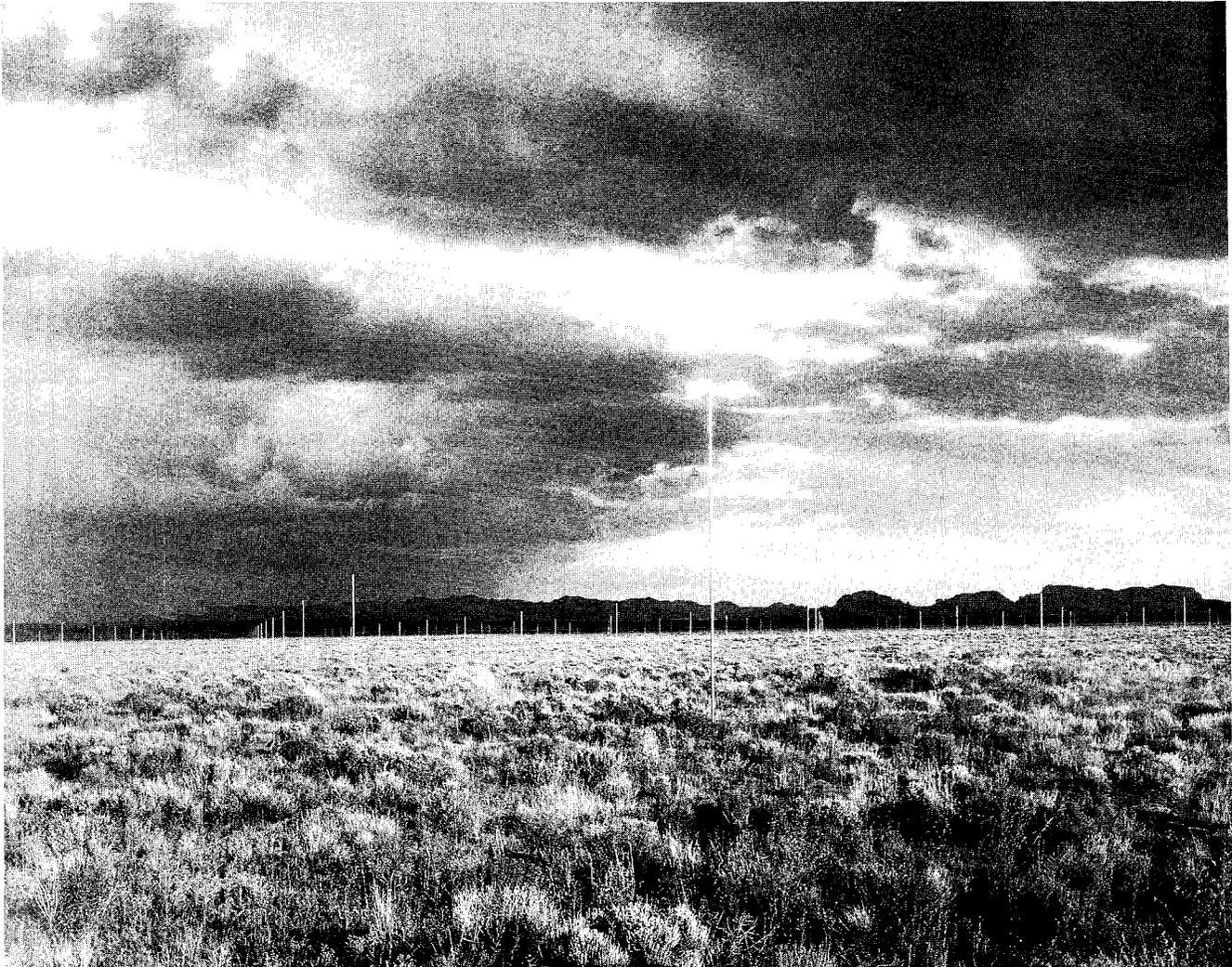


Fig. 2 Walter De Maria; *Lightning Field* (1977); Quemado, New Mexico

in the viewer's perception rather than the artifact itself that constitutes the subject of the artwork.

To understand architecture similarly as a cultural enterprise fundamentally tied to experience and perception hardly seems a contentious proposition. Nonetheless, examining architecture *primarily* from this perspective proves to be enlightening. The precise nature of the reciprocal influences between experience and architectural form tends to remain within the fixed bounds of buildings either determining, or specifically accommodating, activity.

ARCHITECTURE AND ACTIVITY

Buildings necessarily involve activity through being occupied. Yet if we examine the nature of this relationship – a building's interaction with activity and events – we find that buildings tend to structure particular activities, e.g. eat here, sleep here, look there, etc., and matters of propriety, e.g. eat communally, sleep privately, don't notice the litchen when in the dining room. Whether it is in the accommodation and

subsequent choreography of accepted domestic rituals in a house, or in the facilitating of extraordinary experiences in special spaces such as in the Berlin Philharmonic, the world is full of buildings where structuring the nature of activity is their chief preoccupation.¹ What emerges is an understanding of *architecture as a mechanism for determining the proper occupation and experience of a building.*

This understanding suggests that the *program* of a building contains within itself all of the motivations necessary to determine form and space, and consequently, that the more fantastic and specific the program or activities that it is meant to contain, the better the building will be. The canon of modern architecture is replete with examples of this kind, where the emphasis is in celebrating its program in one fashion or another.⁴ One expects, for example, that an institute for experimental film would be a much more interesting building than a warehouse.

It is not surprising that buildings are often about presence rather than absence, about distinct ideas rather than metaphors, and that they usually extend or impose themselves

through definitive form rather than invite the need for experience to be complete. Architecture is defined by a history⁵ that in fact focuses on what makes buildings distinct rather than on what connects them to the rest of the built environment, social life and circumstance.⁶ What is left to us from this history are those buildings that are permanent and definitive. However, the fact that the structure persists is not proof that the most important thing that might have been going on in any given building at any given time was not, for example, what people were doing, the way they were dressed, or what they wore on their heads. While it is to be expected that this history is a constant source of inspiration, it is also not surprising that even when historical forms are not literally adopted, architecture is defined as substantial and definitive.'

PRESENCE AND OCCUPATION

How might we see the relationship between activity and the built environment differently, so that event and circumstance are somehow primary? And how might this effect our understanding of buildings' value? From this perspective, we identify characteristics of the built environment that might be called *provisional*: to do with *presence* and *occupation*.

Presence

In the first instance, we can identify event and circumstance as primary in an architecture which is temporary – a place whose essential character is ultimately set by the presence of an event, and given form through that occasion. Form and program are here intertwined because activity directly determines the architecture. The architecture's expression and character are a consequence of occupation, not as something designed to be legible.⁸ What arises is quite different from the contrivance of predetermining activity, and is essentially absent of rhetorical gesture. We see this in the vibrancy of a farmers market, or a beach shelter, where life, event and human activity give rise to - and largely constitute - the character of the place. Compare the richness of the Haymarket,

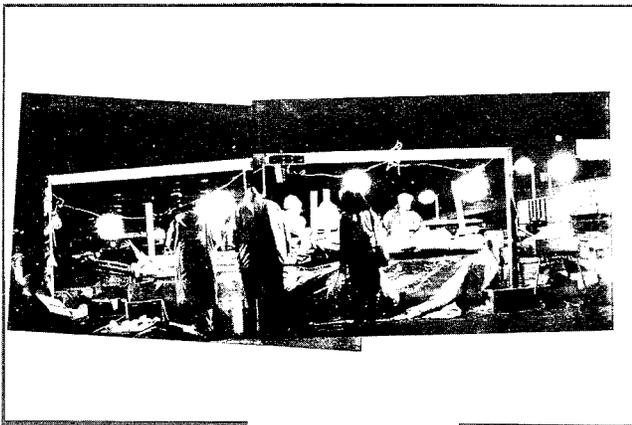


Fig. 3 *Presence*: David Hurn (photographer). The essential form of the place is ultimately determined by the presence and circumstance of an event.

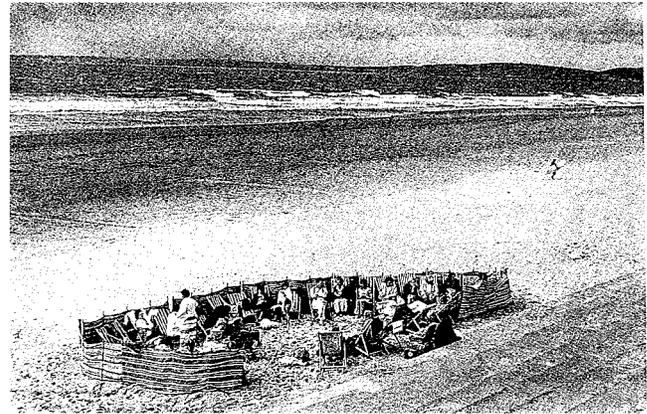


Fig. 4 The Haymarket, Boston, 1989. Without prescribing or predetermining, the architecture of the market sets the foundation for events to happen and is ubiquitous at their occasion.

a contemporary farmers market in Boston, with Quincy Market one block away. The form of the Haymarket arises from the activity taking place, whereas Quincy Market has been designed as a simulated farmers market, complete with electrified wooden carts and costumes. Its architecture is designed to be interpreted in a certain manner, namely as a kind of romantic vision of the past.

The contemporary Haymarket is a place which, for most of the week, exists in not much more than memory, debris, a couple of signs and a few bronze inserts in the asphalt. However, for every Thursday, Friday and Saturday (and six days a week during the summer months), life is infused into the congestion of vehicular and pedestrian traffic with a dense stream of trucks, vendors, produce, stalls, buyers and spectators. Trucks arrive well before dawn, stalls are set up teeming with produce, and transactions begin and transform with the passing of the day. Regardless of weather, life emerges from under the tarps and behind the vegetable stalls. Worked hands and a collage of ancient and contemporary tools meet and facilitate exchange. The place has the combined aroma of many smells (yesterday's and today's vegetables, the exhaust from the passing traffic and from the occasional truck left running as a place to stay warm, and the gas lamps and portable heaters for when the sun goes down), and it has the cacophonous sound of multiple sources (from constant bartering and deal-making and selling, horns and engines from cars on the neighboring artery and streets, and music and shouts from Quincy Market next door). Great corridors are created, with individual stalls interjecting perpendicular to the flow of pedestrian traffic. Crowds appear at one location, and then reappear at another. What is at one moment a thin corridor between masses of people, stalls, goods and transactions is at another moment a broad, partially covered promenade with expanses through the stalls to either side. The market's physical form is never fixed, and it appears to constantly change and wander. Every day it takes a new shape, but it is always recognizably the same. The place's character is defined by the particular people and events. Without prescribing or predetermining,

the architecture of the market provides a framework for events to happen and is ubiquitous at their occasion. In its temporality, the market approaches part of what may be lost in the contemporary practice of architecture: it is immediate, multivalent and entirely tangible. (The same might be said of the old Les Halles in Paris - which stood where the Pompidou Center now stands).

Occupation

In the second instance, we can identify event and circumstance as primary in an architecture where building and activity are on two different courses—where the building has definitive **form**, but that form does not exist in relation to its specific program of occupation. There are a litany of ways in which it engages the rest of the built environment, but the building's character is defined by the manner of its occupation. Building here is not an extrapolation of program (either supporting or undermining it), but rather exists in the world with an agenda different from its occupation. This is found in the pleasure of a masquerade ball in the lobby of an old theater, or playing badminton in a warehouse loft.⁹ While the form of a theater lobby may have been conceived as a sequence of spaces leading towards a performance, and a warehouse may have been clearly constructed to neatly accommodate and withstand the storage of a particular item, their newfound use transforms their very identity and character, as well as that of the event. This intersection provides a richness for both the buildings' and the events' identities not present when the building and program neatly coexist and reinforce each other. The new programs both colonize and adapt to the contingencies of the buildings they occupy.

Permanence is at issue here. The presence of the building has an effect on the occasion, and the occasion in turn transforms the building's identity. While the masquerade ball or the game of badminton determines the event, the building alters the events' nature. Similarly, once the ball has occurred or the game has been played, their memory remains, and the identities of those buildings are transformed

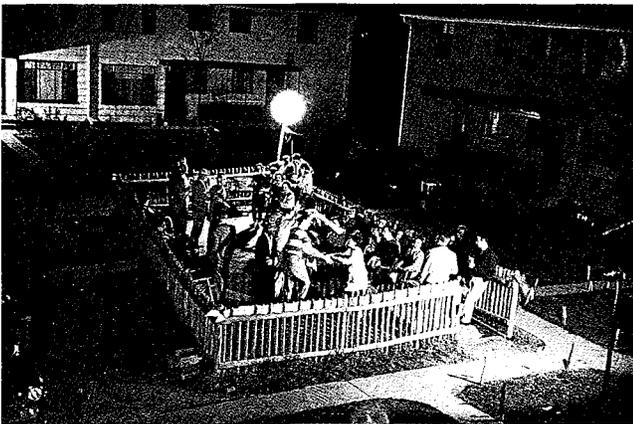


Fig. 5 Occupation: Dan Weiner (photographer); "Party in the Tot Yard." The occupation determines the nature of the place over and against its programmatic designation.

for all who are aware of the former occupation. While a temporary architecture is defined by its direct correspondence to its occupation, these reciprocal influences between building form and social event describe an architecture of contingent occupation.

An interest in definitive buildings re-occupied by a new presence is similarly elaborated upon by Aldo Rossi. In his book *L'architettura della città*, Rossi discusses this condition in his recurring reference to the amphitheater in Nîmes, France.

"The amphitheater at Nîmes had a precise and unequivocal form as well as **function**. It was not thought of as an indifferent container, but rather was highly precise in its structure, its architecture, and its form. But a succession of external events at a dramatic moment in history reversed its function, and a theater became a city. This theater-city **functioned** like a fortress and was adapted to enclose and defend its **inhabitants**."¹⁰

In Nîmes, the amphitheater takes on many identities not related to its original function, but always directly engaged with its original shape and character. Rossi employs this example, in part, to explain how these metamorphoses in the use of urban artifacts emerge as the dynamic of the city.

PROVISIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Inasmuch as the characteristics of temporary presence and contingent occupation rely on the form of activity to determine their character (as a temporary and complete entity or in relation to a pre-existing circumstance, respectively), buildings of this kind gain their value from the vicissitudes of perception that occur in relation to events, and consequently their meaning and presence is malleable. Their impression is not predetermined (like a building that is an expression of power, wealth, independence, community, or the like) but rather, is contingent on the viewer. Here, meaning dramatically changes with the inclination and circumstance of the buildings' occupants. While meaning is never independent of this, the degree of dependency is at issue here. An architecture of this kind embraces the precariousness of event and the residue of memory as tangible aspects of building, and the value of such an architecture is understood in relation to these qualities. We might define this as a *provisional architecture*.

Akin to the structure of language, where the meaning of a word is determined by how it relates to other words in a sentence and to sequences of sentences, the structure of a provisional architecture might be understood not as having a specific meaning, but as the intersection of a series of "texts" created by the architect, the viewer, the occupant, the client, the public and a host of exterior circumstances. One can argue that even the most indexical words, e.g. "him," have a specific meaning. However, this is consistent with the definition of a provisional architecture. Like the word

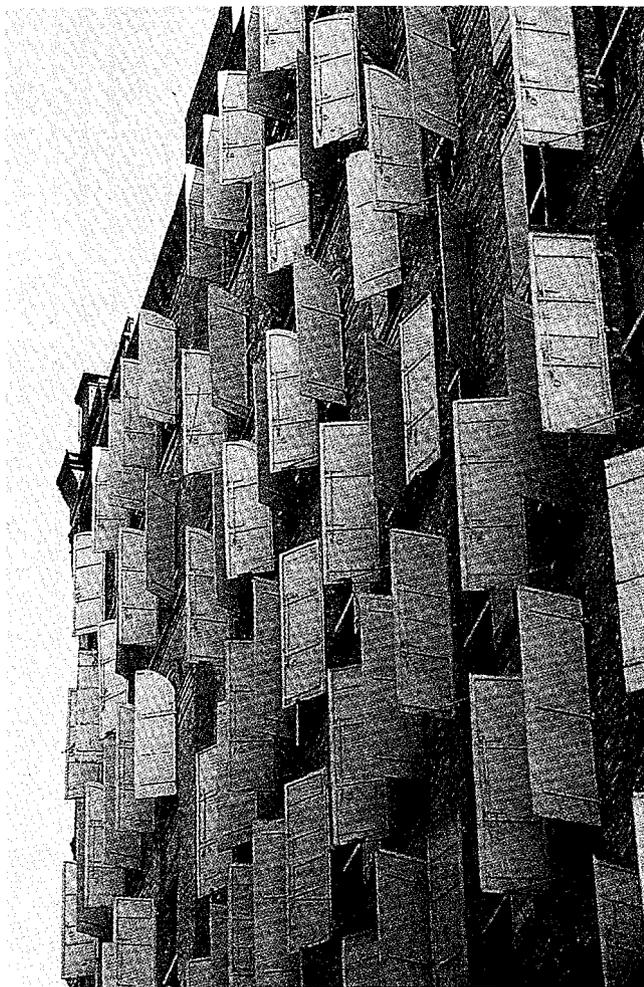


Fig. 6 Geneviève Hafner (photographer), Little Italy, New York, 1988. Expression is a consequence of activity.

"him," where understanding its meaning varies with the context of utterance, the artifacts of construction have specific definitions, but their actual identity is defined through their relationship to exterior contingencies.

While it is true that any building can be used contingently, and that even a carefully orchestrated building does not literally force the occupant's body to move through or understand it in a predetermined manner, a provisional architecture assigns a priority to activity, and hence to its occupants. In a building of the former type, the contingencies of activity happen over and against the interests of the building, which is designed to promote specific kinds of occupation. For example, while one can certainly inhabit the New York Public Library in many ways, there is a very careful sequence of spaces that proceed towards the reading room, each having their own specific program of occupation. A *provisional building*, by contrast, is more hesitant than assured, ambivalent rather than decisive and unresolved instead of predetermined. A provisional building is not the center, but rather it is a background to activity, occupation, and experience.

It should be noted that a provisional building is different

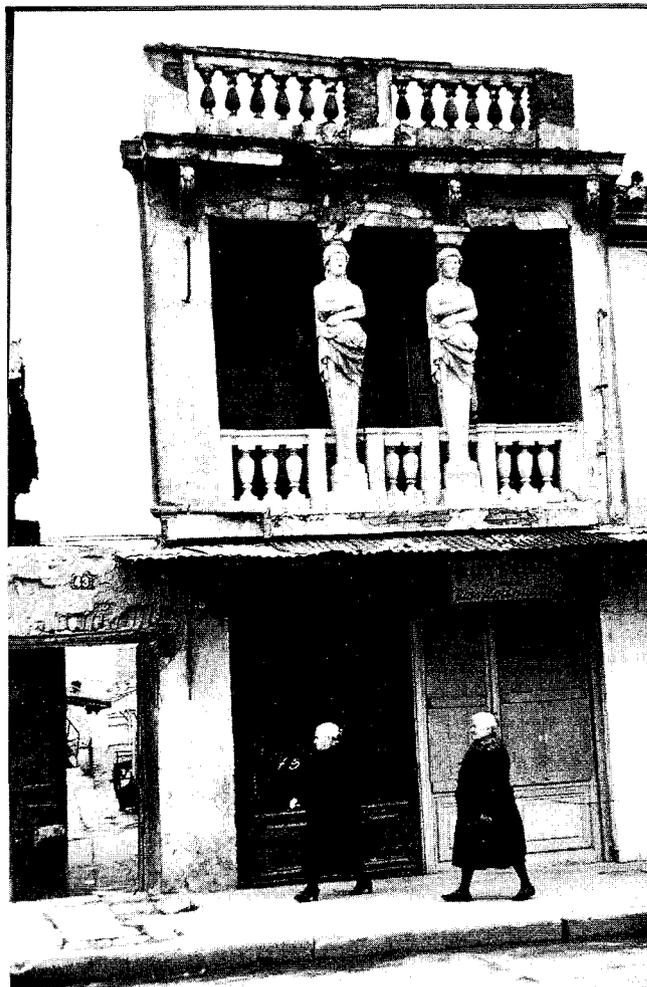


Fig. 7 Henri Cartier-Bresson (photographer); Athenes, 1953. The building engages activity and circumstance into dialogue.

from a building designed for multiple uses. A multi-functional building is in fact little different from a building with one specific use, only it structures the use of the building for several specific activities. In contrast, a provisional building does not anticipate its own use. It allows for the possibilities of different activities during different periods its life, which vary according to the will and actions of those who use it: the building provides the background and its significance lies not in how it accommodates activity, but in the consequence that the background has for activity.

Through enabling human activity to have a priority in setting the character of a building, a provisional architecture empowers its occupants to interact with their place. Like the contemporary art discussed earlier, a provisional architecture's meaning and significance might lay in its role as a catalyst. In suggesting an alternative possibility for the relationship between *social occasion* and *architectural occasion*, this is an architecture that might stimulate discourse; highlighting reality and engaging activity and circumstance into dialogue. It represents a possibility for buildings which are neither aggressive nor prescriptive, but rather provisional and ambiguous.

The Random House Dictionary defines provisional as "existing only until permanently or properly replaced."¹² Something provisional is understood as *not proper*, and by its conditional status it implicitly questions the circumstance in which it is situated. Rafael Moneo speaks about architecture being "the proper tool to act upon... reality."¹³ However, as with contemporary art, building might not physically change reality in order to act upon it. Rather, through an architecture which is unresolved and provisional – not proper and questioning – people might be precipitated into contemplation, and to ultimately act upon and constitute reality themselves.¹⁴

THE QUESTION FOR ARCHITECTURE

Returning to Walter de Maria and contemporary art in general, we see these issues in their pure form. But the intimation, in contemporary art, is that one encounters them innocently and without the contamination of other concerns - a condition which is not possible in architecture. Buildings are always caught in the mercuriality of other conditions: use, program, place, etc. However, part of what is pertinent

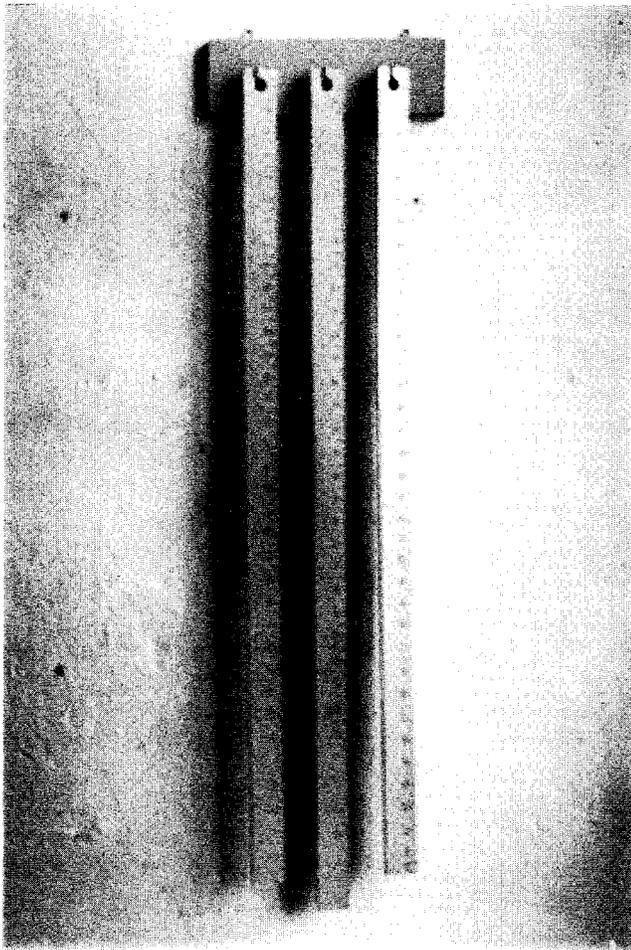


Fig. 8 Robert Moms; Three Rulers (Yardsticks) (1963). Each bronze "yardstick," while measuring thirty-six inches, is of a different actual length. Consequently, objective notions of scale are relegated to individual perception and subjectivity.

in looking to contemporary art is the implicit encouragement of participation and provisional experience in granting value and meaning. If indeed there is some contingency between the provisional and the fixed which is ever-present in the full complex experience of architecture, and having observed the richness of buildings which can be understood as provisional, the question for architecture might be: *What sense of that which is fixed in buildings encourages the revealing engagement of their provisional occupation?* While it seems clear that the regard between events and civic conduct relies on a constitution of civic presence to make it explicit, we might ask what form architecture takes when it does not focus on the didactic. Or, alternatively, where we place the role of formal clarity. Do either hierarchical or non-hierarchical forms suggest a meaningful clarity of use more than the other? Would a non-hierarchical disposition of rooms suggest a different, more engaging occupation to occur? And having disengaged these properties to some extent in buildings, what consequence does this understanding of the relationship between social occasion and architectural occasion have for discussing the city?

NOTES

- ¹ "Weak Architecture," Ignasi de Solà-Morales in *Quaderns D'Arquitectura / Urbanisme* #175 (Barcelona, Col·legi d'Arquitectes de Catalunya, 1987)
- ² *Lightning Field* similarly reacts to all the modulations of nature, light and cloud (e.g. moonlight, fog, frost and the like).
- ³ Robin Evans addresses this issue in his article "Figures, Doors, Configurations" (*Architectural Design*, April, 1978, pages 267 - 278). Evans points out the absolute correlation of activity to a building's plan, and by implication, the tyranny over activity of certain notions of propriety as located in plan. He explains through the vehicle of the private house that the plans of Renaissance buildings had a decidedly different life than twentieth century ones. The invention of the corridor and the valuing of rooms with only one door produced a private life very different than those of previous days when rooms were thought to be better when they had many doors. Life as played out in the former type of building was rich with chance occurrence and unexpected meetings, where servants and served, residents and visitors roamed the same ground. By contrast, the latter homes made a clear distinction between served and service spaces and insured that certain paths would never overlap.
- ⁴ This type of celebration occurs in different ways. For example, programmatic interests can be extended in the form of an ideology as in Le Corbusier's plans for Radiant City or Melnikov's project for a parking garage over the Seine, or extended in the form of a critical approach as in Victor Horta's dining room at *Maison et Atelier Horta*, where public bathroom tiles are used in a private dining room. Although embraced in different fashions, the primary motivation for the form and disposition of each these buildings comes from their particular program.
- ⁵ While in general, architectural history is certainly concerned with that which is fleeting, architects tend to look to history in a manner that is primarily concerned with that which is permanent.
- ⁶ By "circumstance," I am referring to social events, occasions, physical context, changing environmental conditions and the like.

⁷ Vitruvius tells us that architecture should embody Firmness, Commodity and Delight; defining Firmness as a primary and necessary characteristic of architecture. Concerns regarding Commodity aside, it certainly seems that one might question Firmness (particularly the notion of Firmness that implies permanence, endurance and immutability), and that regardless, Delight, being the aspect of that equation that is about activity and event, is more the focus of this effort.

⁸ The focus of buildings of this kind is not about their being read or interpreted, or 'saying something.'

⁹ See Bernard Tschumi's essay "Spaces and Events" in *Themes III: The Discourse of Events* (London: Architectural Association, 1983) and reprinted in *Questions of Space* (London: Architectural Association, 1990) and *Architecture and Dis-*

junction (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994) for a discussion of sky diving in an elevator shaft, etc.

¹⁰ *L'architettura della città* (or The architecture of the city); Ado Rossi (Oppositions Books, MIT Press, 1982), P. 87-8

¹¹ "Fireworks," in *Architectural Manifestos*, Bernard Tschumi (London, Architectural Association, 1979)

¹² *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Second Edition, Unabridged*, 1987

¹³ "Comments on Siza's Architecture," Rafael Moneo in *Alvaro Siza, Figures and Configurations: Buildings and Projects 1986-1988*, Wilfried Wang, Editor (New York, Rizzoli International Publications Inc. 1988)

¹⁴ In developing this article, I have benefited from my conversations with Chris Macdonald and Sarah Ksiazek.