

## Principle and Practice: The Ethic and Efficacy of Donald Judd's Interventions at La Mansana de Chinati

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By now, most of us in the art and architecture fields know the basic story of Donald Judd and Marfa, Texas. We are aware that Judd, in the early 1970s, having already established himself as a successful

artist in New York, found in Marfa, then a somewhat economically depressed west Texas railroad watering stop and ranching town, a place where he could work with less distraction and acquire relatively in-



Fig.1. Aerial view of a portion of Marfa, Texas. The grid pattern of the streets is aligned to the railway (upper left) and highway (center diagonal) rather than to true north, thus the rotation. Donald Judd's compound, "La Mansana de Chinati" is seen center left (within the circle). Notice the interior U shaped wall within the overall walled compound.

expensive real estate suitable for large scale art installations.<sup>1</sup> From 1973, a year after his arrival in Marfa, to 1994, the year of his death, Judd acquired no less than fourteen properties, some with multiple buildings, in and near the center of Marfa, as well as a nearby former United States Army fort and several ranches in the mountains southwest of the town. At the time of his death, Judd was a large property owner, even by Texas standards.

It is edifying to know the intention of the artist, but even more revealing to discover, by direct observation, if his act of making truly reflects his polemic. This paper relates the strongly opinionated architectural principles (ethics) espoused by the artist Donald Judd to the actual interventions (practice) he made to his properties in Marfa, Texas. The initial questions that are posed are did Judd act as he expounded, and how effective were his architectonic transformations?

Most of the Marfa buildings that Judd purchased were either in a state of disrepair or they required various degrees of transformation in order to provide a suitable context for the installed art that was to eventually occupy the interior spaces. In some cases Judd engaged in new construction for ancillary buildings. Since he acted as his own architect on these projects, all decisions rested on his judgment, and success or failure were his and his alone.

Some of the Marfa buildings that Judd owned were repaired but left empty or near empty, while others became the repositories of his work and other art, as well as the books, furniture and objects that he collected. Numerous structures were sensitively altered specifically for the permanent installation of site specific art, either of his making or by other artists he respected.<sup>2</sup> Because Judd had a myriad of real estate holdings in and around Marfa, of which all received some degree of alteration, this investigation, for the purpose of conciseness, limits the discussion mainly to a square block size parcel he called "La Mansana de Chinati."<sup>3</sup>

Judd was not trained as an architect; he studied studio art, art history and philosophy.<sup>4</sup> However, he had strong opinions concerning architecture and often expressed those beliefs in published writings. There are indications that he may have even had an alter-ego that viewed itself as a professional architect. For example, on Marfa's main north-south



Fig.2. Looking into the "Architectural Office" with Judd's furniture prominently displayed.

street there is a stout two-story brick building, owned by Judd, called "The Architecture Office." Lettered on the ground-floor window, facing the street, are the words, CLARENCE JUDD, ARCHITECT. Significantly, Judd's middle name was Clarence, and both his father and grandfather had that same name, but neither were architects.

Inside in one column-free room, is a row of three tables designed by Judd and made from  $\frac{3}{4}$ " marine grade plywood. At the north end of the row is a writing desk, higher than the three tables, designed by Judd and also constructed from the same type of plywood. Taped or pinned up on the brick east wall of the space are ink-on-vellum drawings of elevation and sectional studies of a quite large building, known as the Peter Merian Haus in Basel, Germany by Zwimpfer Partner Architekten. Judd was commissioned by the architects in 1993 as a consultant for the building's elevations. Pinned to the north wall are nine drawings of two other projects in Germany. Several straight-back chairs of Judd's design line the east wall below the drawings, and closer to the street-front window, but toward the north side of the room, is a bass wood model of the same Basel building. The ceiling is of pressed tin, a material in keeping with the late nineteenth to early twentieth-century period of the building's construction. The wood flooring, polished to a high sheen, complements the plywood furniture. The space and the objects within appear to have been selected and arranged in order to create a tableau representing a pre-digital age architectural office.<sup>5</sup> It is my feeling that this space is really an art installation created by Judd, who not so much attempted to represent the work space of an architectural firm, but rather

allowed the materiality of the profession's commonplace furnishings and objects, such as tables, chairs, drawings and models, to manifest themselves, whether it be the warm grain of the Douglas fir plywood reflecting in the afternoon light, or the dull surface of the drawings set back in the protective shadows of the interior walls. At the same time, one cannot help but wonder if this installation did not also unintentionally represent Judd's conceit, whether deserving or not, that he was as competent, if not more so, than most practicing architects when it came, at least, to the formal and experiential qualities of a building.

As mentioned, Judd had strong, defined opinions on architecture, especially architecture designed to house art. He had a disdain for many of the late twentieth-century's notable practitioners such as Robert Venturi with his inclusive approach, as well as Peter Eisenman with his periods of linguistic or deconstructive correlations. He clearly disliked the architectural expressionistic and sculptural approach of Frank Gehry. He felt that most museum design reflected more of the architect's expressive tendencies rather than a true desire to create suitable spaces for the sheltering of art.<sup>6</sup> At the regional level his lack of respect for the work of most practitioners was equally disparaging. He wrote, "The El Paso telephone directory has a list of architects and yet there is no architecture in El Paso."<sup>7</sup> His model architects in the recent past were Rudolph Schindler and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and closer to his own generation, it was Louis Kahn. In an article entitled, "Art and Architecture, 1984," he did speak well of Wright and Le Corbusier.<sup>8</sup> However, it was mainly Schindler and Kahn, along with Mies, and the anonymous vernacular builder, who escaped his harsh criticisms.

A discussion of Donald Judd's treatment of architecture should begin with the first building that he is known to have owned and subsequently renovated. The property, a late nineteenth-century, five-story cast-iron structure in the SoHo district of New York City, was in poor condition, at least the interior, when he made the purchase in 1968.<sup>9</sup> He immediately felt that "the building should be repaired and basically not changed."<sup>10</sup> In keeping with his belief of preserving as much of the existing building as possible, Judd retained the open plan of the five floors, and utilized each level for a specific activity: working, art installations, relaxing, or cooking and

eating. His bed was a mattress on a platform on the fifth floor. However, when it came to replacing water damaged flooring and ceiling on the fourth floor, he chose to use the same material, pine, on both the floor and ceiling in order to create a condition of visually "parallel planes."<sup>11</sup> For Judd, the ceiling and floor replacement was an opportunity to experiment with planar perception. Sometime prior to 1989 he wrote, "Other than leaving the building alone, then and now a highly positive act, my main inventions are the floors of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> floors and the parallel planes of the identical ceiling and floor of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor." He continues, "The baseboard of the 5<sup>th</sup> floor is the same oak as that of the floor, making the floor a shallow recessed plane. There is no baseboard, there is a gap between the walls and the floor of the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, thus defining and separating the floor as a plane." Despite his repetition and occasional confusing syntax, here Judd defines his understanding of spatial and planar perceptions in the making of architecture.<sup>12</sup>

Three architectural propositions that Judd held as principle were enclosure, natural light and exterior expression of interior volume. He felt that architecture should enclose or make space rather than occupy a site in a freestanding manner. He abhorred the free standing building, especially the skyscraper. He was unintentionally prophetic in referring to the tragic World Trade Center towers as "twin tombstones."<sup>13</sup> He also believed that architectural space and light were symbiotic. In a published essay he paraphrased Louis Kahn's, "No space, architecturally, is a space unless it has natural light..."<sup>14</sup> And, Judd was antithetic to buildings that had undifferentiated expression of their internal condition. He wrote, ".....nothing is architecture unless the interior volume is evident. Otherwise a building is only a large object, as most of the skyscrapers are. If there is no evidence of the internal space and scale, there is no external scale."<sup>15</sup>

In 1973, a year after moving to Marfa with his two young children, Judd purchased part of a parcel in the center of town that he called La Mansana de Chinati or the Block. A year later he acquired the remaining quarter of the parcel. The total property contained three existing structures, two World War I airplane hangars that had been moved to the site in the 1930s by the U.S. Army and a two-story frame building that had served as the Quarter Master's headquarters. The total cost to

acquire the property has been reported to have been \$48,000.<sup>16</sup> The property previously used by the U.S. Army had been turned over to the town as surplus real estate, and had eventually found its way into private ownership.

The square block parcel, La Mansana de Chinati, is bordered on the south by Highway 90, the main east-west route through Marfa, and on the north by a cattle feed mill – both rather obnoxious, noise producing neighbors. In order to create a privacy baffle, as well as exercise his belief in the necessity of enclosure to make space, Judd had a nine to twelve foot high adobe wall built on all four sides of the block. Thus, Judd, even if principally out of functional necessity, enclosed the lot and created a defined area that was then ready for additional spatial development.

Another early site intervention in La Mansana, and one that had both a hydraulic function (Judd discovered a drainage problem on the site), as well as sculptural ambition, is the three segment adobe wall that Judd had built twelve feet from the earlier south wall and twelve feet from both of the existing hangar structures. This U shape enclosure is open to the north and defines on three sides a section of the site that he had graded level (see fig. 1.). The two wall systems, the outer along the perimeter of the block and the U shape inner wall, are related and form one art concept, as the exterior wall is level in contrast to the interior wall which slopes parallel to the existing contour of the land. Similar juxtaposed relationships were explored by Judd in several outdoor sculptures as early as 1971.

The interventions at La Mansana accurately reflect Judd's ideas concerning enclosed space, specifically courtyards. In an essay entitled "Horti Conclusi," he stated, ".....buildings can enclose space, which is the principle of the courtyard."<sup>17</sup> He continues, "This is the only principle that makes sense....., but almost all construction in the industrial countries is based on the opposite principle of the free-standing building. ....a disastrous principle for a modern city. It's against architecture as architecture, it's usually against reasonable functions, .... It's a waste of money, ....and it's a waste of land...." He saw the courtyard typology as "extensible."<sup>18</sup> It could contain multiple buildings and multiple walls. It could grow into a town and even a city. Given Judd's fascination with expandable geometry, one could rea-

sonably speculate that the grid of Marfa, even with its rotated alignment to the railroad right-of-way, rather than to the cardinal points of the compass, was of some interest to him.

Once Judd acquired the square block of land that became La Mansana, he was free to practice what he believed to be the appropriate ordering of physical space, at least at a micro-urban scale. By enclosing La Mansana with a high outer wall, and by adding a slightly lower inner wall system, as well as strategically positioning new construction, he was able to develop a system of geometric and spatial object positioning that became a field arrangement of similar but differently proportioned three dimensional elements. However, unlike his sculpture and theoretical architectonic explorations, the existing conditions of La Mansana, the exigencies of program and reality of budget required Judd to work within a more constrained arena – more like an architect – and thereby, at least with the existing structures, devote reconfiguration to mainly internal volumes. This fact precluded his principle of exterior expression of the interior. In 1985, twelve years after acquiring the property, he wrote, "Due to the prior existence of the buildings (in La Mansana) my interest here in architecture is secondary. If I could start over the two interests would be congruent."<sup>19</sup> So, here he disclaims any strong architectural ambition, because the structures already existed in place. In the same essay he continues, "But I've carefully tried to incorporate the existing buildings into a complete complex. They are not changed, only cleaned up."

When Judd uses the term "changed" he apparently is referring to the exterior of any buildings in the discussion, because as we will see, he was not beyond making, sometimes modest and sometimes extreme modifications to the interiors. An example is the manner in which he adapted the existing two-story building at La Mansana, previously used as the former Quarter Master's headquarters, to a dwelling for his children and himself.<sup>20</sup> It is unclear as to how the interior was arranged when he began his alterations, but one could reasonably assume that both levels were divided into several rooms each and connected by a central or side hall stairway. It appears that Judd removed almost all of the original partitions (gutted the building, no less), and added a relatively broad open-riser stair to the second level. That upper floor, a container



Fig.3. View of the former Quarter Master's headquarters in La Mansana de Chinati. The exterior appears not to have been altered. In the foreground is the pool built by Judd.

for his collection of Northwest Coast Native American art, was left entirely open, and on the first level, separated from grade by a double-riser stair, two bedrooms were created. A third enclosed space on the lower level, possibly original, occupies the northwest corner. While the exterior of the former office building was more or less preserved, the interior was completely modified. In his thinking, the modifications to this particular building were reasonable and appropriate.



Fig.4. Interior west hangar in La Mansana de Chinati with Judd's installations and dividing walls.

The largest structures on La Mansana, the two former airplane hangars, were preserved quite scrupulously by Judd on the exterior. However, the interiors, once undoubtedly open plans, are currently subdivided into several spaces of different sizes. It is unclear if Judd had the dividing, non-structural walls installed. From contemporary section draw-

ings<sup>21</sup> that indicate footings under those interior walls, one could assume that it was the earlier owner, the U.S. Army, who subdivided the original open plan, perhaps when the hangar structures were moved to their present location. But this is admittedly an unsubstantiated supposition. Nevertheless, Judd utilized these smaller spaces for libraries, storage, domestic space, and large permanent art installations.

Judd did add several new structures to La Mansana, a bathroom and a small office, both built of adobe, as well as a wood framed storage building wrapped in black building paper and known as the "tar paper building." He also built a raised swimming pool, a vine covered pergola of the same horizontal dimensions as the pool, and some garden and animal enclosures. He felt that, "It's very important that all structures work together, be 'meek and bold' among themselves. The old buildings should not drag down the new or the new denigrate the old."<sup>22</sup> More structures and a pond were planned by Judd at the north side of La Mansana,<sup>23</sup> but other than what has been described, nothing more was built before his death.

Did Donald Judd practice his own polemic when it came to architecture? He claims never to have built on virgin land.<sup>24</sup> However, on his ranch, Ayala de Chinati, sixty miles southwest of Marfa, he built new but did limit new exterior construction to a pergola, a few modest and removable sheds and a water tank surrounded by concentric stone walls made from site-found rock, as well as a corral of the same material. He wrote, "This (the ranch) has two small houses which I've thought a lot about, but done little about, since I hate to damage the land around them."<sup>25</sup> He deplored what some of the neighboring land owners had done to their ranches by grading unnecessary roads or by subdividing for profit. While there was clearly artistic ambition in the making of the stone walls on Ayala de Chinati, photographs indicate that they, while obviously interventions, are reasonably compatible with the landscape.

Judd did appear to hold to his principles reasonably well. He certainly did retain original exteriors, seldom if at all making alterations. When he did, it usually was the installation of his often used four-part windows or pivoting doors. The former artillery sheds at Fort D.A. Russell, where he changed the lengthwise arrays of overhead type doors to the large

four-light windows, and where he installed Quonset type vaults over the existing flat concrete roofs were aberrations rather than norms. He added courtyard walls, of course, both on La Mansana, and also on the end of another structure, called the Arena, also on the former fort. There are a few other exceptions, but for the most part his interventions were generally limited to the interiors of his buildings.

Judd's architectural concepts and principles were far from profound. They were actually quite basic – not so different from what is taught in the early years of architecture school – but because so much of the built-work of our society, even that designed by professional architects, regrettably neglects many of those same fundamental principles, his pronouncements appear poignant by comparison. Other than the masters: Wright, Mies, Corbu, Schindler, and then later, Kahn, he saw little to recommend most architects. He was an advocate of the axial and aligned positioning of openings and spaces, as well as symmetry – both being classical principles. He spoke of proportion and its tremendous importance. He believed that buildings and walls should make, rather than just occupy space. Again, these all are fundamental tenets, but not necessarily critical discussions on the making of architecture today. He despised the historicism of Philip Johnson and Charles Moore, as well as the before mentioned expressionistic buildings of Gehry (one can easily predict his reaction had he lived long enough to have seen the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao). It would be interesting, although probably predictable, to know how he would have reacted to the more recent explorations with fluid spaces and forms as practiced by Zaha Hadid and UN Studio.

Returning to the original questions: Did Judd act as he expounded and how effective were his architectonic transformations? In retrospect, other questions might be: did Donald Judd make a positive contribution to the practice and appreciation of architecture in Marfa, Texas through his polemics and actions, and did his interventions make that west Texas town a better place? His property acquisitions in southwest Texas saved quite a few vernacular buildings from demolition by neglect. His interventions were, for the most part, as he espoused: light-handed and sensitive to the new uses. Exteriors were changed only slightly and usually for the better. His interior interventions often improved the spaces by opening them up to more natural

light and air. His primary ambition, of course, was to make spaces suitable for the making and permanent installation of art. His aesthetic disposition was for minimal (although he disliked the term "minimalism") and ahistorical art and architecture rather than for referential and emotive models. He stated, "I understand buildings if they're strong or somewhat assertive. But I don't understand when they're very quaint, when they're very complicated, or produce a lot of commotion, which most of the buildings do now."<sup>26</sup> His transformed spaces are clear, ordered and extremely habitable. Because of his architectural ethics, Marfa, Texas, for some, is a place of optimism rather than despair. There, much new construction, whether renovation, addition or "ground up," is a tacit act of resistance to the banality, caprice and provincial predicaments of most communities. Marfa is far from being architecturally perfect (there is much misdirected new housing on the fringes). However, a much higher than usual percentage of visual experiences are interesting, if not inspiring, and void of the visual pollution concomitant with most communities – rural or urban. Donald Judd's interventions at La Mansana de Chinati, as well as his other properties, have determined a paradigm of order, clarity and purposeful experimentation in much of Marfa's recent architectural situations. For that fact alone, this small west Texas town is a more interesting place.



Fig.5. New construction in Marfa by Candid Rogers, Architect

## END NOTES

1. Peter Ballantine, a longtime Judd collaborator, related that because of the artist's fame in the early 1970s, people

would often knock on the first floor windows of the SoHo cast iron building that served as his studio/live space.

"Judd couldn't stand it anymore – too many distractions in a city that has always been too full of them." See Randy Kennedy, "Minimalist Oases in a Bustling Manhattan," *The New York Times* (April 23, 2004): n.p.

2. Several examples are the former artillery sheds on the former Fort D.A. Russell that were converted to house Judd's site specific "100 untitled works" in mill aluminum, the seven former barracks buildings, also on the Fort, adapted to contain the fluorescent light installation by Dan Flavin, and a former warehouse in the center of town, restored for the sculpture of John Chamberlain.

3. Craig Rember, a former associate of Judd's and the collection maintenance person for the Judd Estate, told me that Judd never referred to his living compound in Marfa as *La Mansana*. However, in an essay published in 1989, five years before his death, Judd did use that Spanish term for the city block he occupied. See Marianne Stockebrand, Editor, *Donald Judd Architektur*, (Munster: Edition Cantz, 1992), 48.

4. Judd acknowledged that prior to beginning college, he considered studying architecture, but the thought of working with clients, as well as managing a firm discouraged him from pursuing that career. He felt, rightly so, that art would allow him the autonomy he desired. See Stockebrand, *Donald Judd Architektur*, 195.

5. Judd's vision of an architectural office predates the current period of the ubiquitous computer at each work station.

6. Brigitte Huck, "Donald Judd: Architect," in Noever, *Donald Judd Architecture*, (2003), 36. Had Judd lived to see some recently built and less expressionistically formed art museums such as SANAA's New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, David Adjaye's Museum of Modern Art in Denver and Allied Works' museum designs for St. Louis, Seattle and Michigan, he might have been more tempered in his almost wholesale indictment of the architectural profession, at least when it came to museum design.

7. *Ibid.*, 25.

8. Stockebrand, *Donald Judd Architektur*, 186.

9. Donald Judd, Todd Eberle, et al., *Art + Design*, (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1993), 15.

10. *Ibid.*, 16.

11. *Ibid.*, 16.

12. For an understanding of Judd's critical opinions on painting, sculpture and what he refers to as three-dimensional work, including visual perception, see "Specific Objects" in Thomas Kellein, *Donald Judd 1955-1968*, (Koln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, 2002), 86-97.

13. Stockebrand, *Donald Judd Architektur*, 41.

14. *Ibid.*, 40.

15. *Ibid.*, 40.

16. Pilar Viladas, "A Sense of Proportion," *Progressive Architecture*, Vol.66 - Issue 4 (April 1985): 104.

17. Stockebrand, *Donald Judd Architektur*, 40.

18. *Ibid.*, 41.

19. Donald Judd, "Marfa, Texas," *House and Garden*, April, 1985, 101.

20. When Judd moved to Marfa he was a single parent, having obtained custody of his two children from his former wife.

21. For excellent measured drawings of many of Judd's Marfa properties see Urs Peter Flückiger, *Donald Judd Architecture in Marfa, Texas*, (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2007), 61, 70-73.

22. Donald Judd, "Marfa, Texas," 101.

23. Viladas, "A Sense of Proportion," 102-108.

24. Stockebrand, *Donald Judd Architektur*, 61.

25. *Ibid.*, 60.

26. Viladas, "A Sense of Proportion," 107.