PERFORMANCE AND ARCHITECTURE

Species Niches performance pavilion. Courtesy Harrison Atelier.

EXPANDED FIELDS
Architecture/Landscape/Performance

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At first glance, one might consider architecture and performance to be antithetical to one another, in so far as a building is generally characterized by qualities of stasis and permanence while performance, understood here in terms of movement, is its opposite, temporal and impermanent in nature. However, beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, the discipline of architecture embarked on what has been at least a century-long experiment to embody and express the dynamic qualities of movement. On the one hand, this experiment has materialized in the form of literal movement in space—that is, the design of kinetic building elements, such as flexible wall partitions, and an emphasis on representing the less tangible aspects of architecture: the movement of bodies in space. On the other hand, it has materialized in a more figurative manner, as architectural form that, while static in nature, lends aesthetic expression to the dynamic qualities of movement. Or as a building that, while fixed in place, might function as a vehicle for engendering social and political forms of mobility.

In large part, this interest in temporality and impermanence at the turn of the twentieth century had to do with broader technological, scientific, and socio-political influences. In addition to the Industrial Revolution, which introduced the machine and with it a new cultural mindset characterized by speed, Einstein's theory of relativity was a revolution of another sort, a complete reconceptualization of the universe as inherently relative and subject to perpetual change. Amid such technological and scientific paradigm shifts, architecture commenced a re-evaluation of its fundamental relationship to time. Contemporaneously, the social and political revolutions taking place throughout Europe evoked qualities of movement, albeit in a more figurative manner, compelling a new generation of architects to speculate on the capacity of buildings to induce social change. Indeed, the term "social" entered architecture for the first time during the modern movement, expanding the discipline's traditional discourse on material, geometry, and space, to include matters of use.

Although the Second World War interrupted this development, after which some historians ventured to declare its technological and social manifesto a failure, a second generation of modernists emerged in the 1950s and 1960s with a renewed interest in the social potential of architecture, and with it qualities of temporality and

impermanence. Similar to their predecessors, this second generation was inspired by emerging technological and socio-political movements, which during the 1950s included electronic media, computing, advertising, and a cultural climate characterized by the implicit speed of mass production and consumption. In the 1960s, many of these technological influences carried over into a new decade of anti-authoritarianism, fueling a progressive period of social, cultural, and political change, which in its challenge to the implicit stasis and permanence of tradition became expressive of a figurative mobility in society. Comparable examples from the period can be found within landscape architecture, wherein the design of public urban space by progressive landscape architects, like Lawrence Halprin, often sought to empower rather than constrain the user.[1] As such, the design of public urban space in the sixties and early seventies was conceived not as a mechanism for maintaining social order but rather as a catalyst for producing new forms of social, cultural, and even political agency at both individual and collective scales.[2]

It is from within this rich architectural lineage that Bernard Tschumi emerged in the mid-1970s. Critical of the aesthetic mannerism and technological functionalism associated with first as well as second generation modernists, Tschumi's early work might be viewed as a critical and much more conceptual expansion of the discipline's general desire to challenge conventions, first and foremost the traditional assumption that architecture is a field identified principally with qualities of order, stasis, and permanence.[3] On the contrary, Tschumi's theoretical projects from the seventies celebrate qualities of disorder, temporality, and impermanence through a critical reassessment of "architectural space," drawing upon a wide range of extra-disciplinary influences as a means of doing so, including art, performance, cinema, literature, and philosophy.[4] For instance, his curatorial collaboration with RoseLee Goldberg in 1975 on the exhibition *A Space: A Thousand Words* at the Royal College of Art in London brought together participants from a diverse array of fields to interrogate the word "space." The exhibition explored the paradox inherent in space: on the one hand the immaterial idea of space that exists as rational concept, and on the other hand experiential, sensory space, existing as perceivable or "felt volume," i.e. the body in space.[5]

This investigation provided a means through which to challenge and ultimately rethink traditional definitions of "architectural space." Typically defined by the confluence of geometry and materiality in the articulation of a static three-dimensional enclosure or volume, "architectural space" as understood through the alternative lenses of dance, performance, and cinema was reconceptualized by Tschumi in terms of the intangible and transient qualities of movement as well as the potentially transformative effects of use or in some cases misuse. As Tschumi writes:

> Architecture and events constantly transgress each other's rules, whether explicitly or implicitly. These rules, these organized compositions, may be questioned, but they always remain points of reference. A building is a point of reference for the activities set to negate it. A theory of architecture is a theory of order threatened by the very use it permits. And vice versa.[6]

No longer static or predetermined, this was a definition of "architectural space" characterized by dynamic and at times transgressive human activity.

Similarly, Tschumi's early theoretical projects beginning in 1976, which included *The Screenplays* and *The Manhattan Transcripts*, questioned the conventions and carefully guarded traditions of architecture as a means of reimagining it, principally in terms of proposing a newly transient and indeterminate urban architecture. In effect, the emphasis was removed from the static object of architectural form and placed instead on the dynamic body of its inhabitants, that is, human activity or event: "Our work argues that architecture—its social relevance and formal invention—cannot be dissociated from the events that 'happen' in it."[7] In turn, these early theoretical projects laid the groundwork for Tschumi's first major design commission, Parc de la Villette in Paris, for which he won the international competition in 1983. Untraditional in its approaches to both architecture and landscape, Tschumi's design for a large-scale urban park at the end of the twentieth-century seeks to challenge and ultimately reimagine public space and by extension architectural and urban space. Rather than constrain, determine, and stabilize conventional forms of use and meaning, the park celebrates temporality, ambiguity, indeterminacy, and impermanence at literal as well as conceptual levels. It was the overwhelming success of La Villette as an important work of contemporary architecture and landscape that resulted in a series of subsequent architectural commissions for Tschumi, including the celebrated Le Fresnoy Art Center in Tourcoing, France, the architecture of which, according to historian and critic Sylvia Lavin, "performs as a producer of fluid connective tissue that stages the corporeal drama of contemporary life."[8]

This special section of *PAJ* on architecture, landscape, and performance is concerned with our contemporary moment, specifically the ways in which the disciplines of architecture and landscape architecture continue to engage aspects and qualities characteristic of performance. However, when considering the present it is useful to reflect on the past, in part because one inevitably discovers that while the work of the present may seem novel in many respects, it is inextricably linked to the issues, challenges, debates, and ambitions of previous generations. In this respect, we consider Tschumi to be an important figure within the discipline whose work and ideas provide an historical bridge between the first and second generation of modernists and our more recent period of architectural experimentation and production at the turn of the twenty-first century. As a result, we begin by featuring an interview with Tschumi before proceeding to the work of ten contemporary architecture and landscape practices.

In our current age of digital communication technologies, the contemporary experience can be seen as one characterized by temporal flux, virtual space, speed, and contingency. Norbert Weiner, a pioneer of cybernetics in the 1950s and 1960s, anticipated this technological and cultural shift, describing the future of human experience as one increasingly defined by the dynamism and contingency of information networks.[9] Furthermore, we live in an age marked by the haunting effects of climate change, and with it the growing instability of morphing environmental

conditions. It is this existential threat—local, regional, and global in scale—that provides a different kind of temporal flux characteristic of our age, one in which the relationship between humans and nature, and by extension architecture and the environment, has been fundamentally destabilized. It is precisely this environmental and existential instability that has emboldened a new generation of architects and landscape architects to question the relationship between the built environment and the "natural" world, embracing rather than resisting the forces of change as a new normal in the twenty-first century.

Diller Scofidio's Blur Building pavilion, designed and built at the dawn of the new century for the 2002 Swiss Expo, exemplifies such an approach. Working in collaboration with EAR Studio and MIT's Media Lab, both of which specialize in interaction design and computing technology, the Blur Building combines a wide variety of information and climate technologies, including a weather monitoring system, misting infrastructure, and a wearable computing/sensing apparatus, which the firm labeled a "braincoat." Playing off "the cloud" as an artificial phenomenon (i.e., "cloud computing"), as well as a natural phenomenon (i.e., "the cloud" as weather system), the overall effect is both a literal and figurative "blurring" of the definition of architecture in any conventional sense of the term. Likewise, it disturbs the traditional distinctions between artificial and natural or architecture and environment: "Unlike entering a building, the experience of entering this mass-less and elastic medium in which time is suspended and orientation is lost, is like an immersion in ether."[10]

Even prior to the Blur Building, Diller Scofidio's practice was highly interdisciplinary, venturing into the territories of conceptual art, installation art, media art, and performance as a means of rethinking architectural convention. Their collaboration with The Builders Association on *JET LAG*, a media, theater, and performance piece staged in 1998, is but one example. Similar to Tschumi, much of their early experimental work in art, media, and performance eventually served to influence their approach to the making of buildings. While the Blur Building might be seen as situated somewhere between architecture, art, and technology, an experimental pavilion and thus not a "building" per se, the success of the project led to a series of high profile architecture and landscape commissions, including the renovation of Lincoln Center's mid-century campus on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and the conversion of the High Line, a former elevated industrial railway on the West Side, into a vibrant public park.

In referencing Bernard Tschumi and Diller Scofidio's early experimental work, we identify them as exemplars of the architect engaging aspects of performance as a means of rethinking the disciplines of architecture as well as landscape. Such historical engagement with performance thinking on the part of architects and landscape architects leads us to question what current practices could be seen as emblematic of this approach. It is precisely this question that we address with the ten contemporary practices selected for *PAJ*, each of which represents a new generation of design experimentation invested in issues related to performance. Not unlike the Blur Building, many of these practices engage both the motile human occupant and the

dynamic environment itself as the "players" in their performances.[11] In this respect, architecture and landscape are conceived as inherently flexible and responsive not only to the changing pressures of human inhabitation and flow but also responsive to the complex and often unpredictable dynamics of the environment. Such practices include ANAcycle, Lateral Office, Future Cities Lab, WEATHERS, and Port.

Meanwhile, other practices are more preoccupied with the challenges as well as opportunities of the information age, a topic addressed by the Blur Building, producing experimental works of interactive architecture through the play of responsive lighting, sound, robotic, and sensing technology. FoxLin, Liquid Factory, Minimaforms, and Höweler + Yoon are four such examples.

Finally, still other contemporary practices engage the art of performance itself, staging interdisciplinary collaborations not unlike Diller Scofidio's joint venture with The Builders Association. Harrison Atelier is representative of this approach, as evidenced in their recent architectural installation/performance piece, *Species Niches*, commissioned by the OMI International Arts Center in upstate New York.

In selecting these ten design practices, each of which *expand* the field of architecture as a means of redefining it, largely through the incorporation of external forms of knowledge and expertise, we hope to establish a compelling lineage within the architectural history outlined above, specifically the ways in which the disciplines of architecture and landscape architecture have played with and continue to engage aspects and qualities of performance.[12] Much of the work featured in the following pages operates at the relatively small scale of site-specific installations, both in the context of cultural space (the gallery and sculpture park) as well as in public space (the city). In this context, the projects can be viewed as more theoretical and experimental in nature, and not unlike Tschumi and Diller Scofidio's early work, they lay the groundwork for large-scale architectural and landscape proposals to come.

NOTES

1. For more on Lawrence Halprin, including the influence of choreography on his approach to the design of public space, due in large part to his wife Anna Halprin's work in dance and performance, see his book *RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment* (New York: George Braziller, 1970).

2. An expanded view of social and political agency as it relates to urban renewal in Lawrence Halprin's work can be found in *City Choreographer: Lawrence Halprin in Urban Renewal America*, Alison Bick Hirsch (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

3. See the introduction to Bernard Tschumi's collection of essays, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 4–5.

4. Bernard Tschumi, "Questions of Space: The Pyramid and the Labyrinth (or the Architectural Paradox)," originally appeared in *Studio International*, September–October 1975 and was reprinted as the essay "The Architectural Paradox" in *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 40.

5. Tschumi's discourse on space owes a debt to the 1920s notion of *Raumempfindung* or "felt volume" articulated by Oskar Schlemmer: "The relationship of the 'geometry of the plane' to the 'stereometry of the space' could be *felt* if one were to imagine 'a space filled with a soft pliable substance in which the figures of the sequence of the dancer's movements were to harden as a negative form.'" RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011), 104.

6. Bernard Tschumi, "Violence of Architecture," in *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 133.

7. Bernard Tschumi, "Spaces and Events," in *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 139.

8. Sylvia Lavin, "Inter-Objective Criticism: Bernard Tschumi and Le Fresnoy," in *ANY* 21, How the Critic Sees: Seven Critics on Seven Buildings (New York: ANYONE Corporation, December, 1997), 34.

9. Norbert Weiner, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Da Capo Press, 1954), 8.

10. Diller Scofidio, "Blur: Swiss EXPO 2002 Diller Scofidio, Ear Studio, MIT Media Lab," in *Assemblage*, No. 41 (Cambridge: MIT Press, April, 2000), 25.

11. In his discussion on the cultural value of the play principle, Johan Huizinga articulates a philosophy that underlies much of the contemporary work to which we draw your attention: outside of so-called "ordinary life" in both space and duration, characterized by freedom or the ability to opt-in, and impermanence born of motion and contingency. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Beacon Press, 1955), 3.

12. The term "expand" has its origin in Rosalind Krauss's influential essay on interdisciplinarity, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" from *October*, Vol. 8 (Cambridge: MIT Press, Spring, 1979), 30–44.

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