

Some modes created 'creatures' whose colour, shape and movement followed the frequency and amplitude dynamics of individual syllables and sentences picked up; other modes responded to wider collective phenomena, e.g. distorting a grid in response to the crowd volume, or creating a rush of wind through a wheat-field landscape.

But the one day, in Moscow, something strange happened. I visited Mr. Melnikov's house—a symphony of great architectural geometry. A safe haven I thought—no silliness here. But, in the marital bedroom, the very place which Mr Melnikov shared with his wife and children, Mrs Melnikov had gathered together all kinds of decorative trappings, ornaments and lace, funny old beds and chairs, and, with complete disregard to her esteemed husband's dreamings and makings, she had made a mess. This was architecture (un)done.

# Performance Architecture

## Alex Schweder La

‘Performance architecture’ is a term I have been using to describe a trajectory in my work that posits buildings not only as objects but also as open-ended scripts for their occupants’ performance. In this essay I will expand this term by discussing projects that flesh out different connections between performance and architecture. As a way of organising these projects, I have divided them into five different categories: *Buildings That Perform Themselves*, *Bodily Performances In Architectural Time*, *ReScored Space*, *Architect Performed Buildings*, and *Forms That Follow Performance*. Before discussing these in more depth, however, I will contextualise performance architecture within the larger practices of architecture and performance art, and in relation to philosophical writings on subjectivity.

At the crux of my thinking is the notion that performance already exists in architecture, but is not named as such. For example, when an architect writes ‘living room’ on a floor plan, he or she designates a specific space for a particular action. Architects use the term ‘program’ to describe the act of organising the relationships of actions within space. Of course, there is no single way an occupant ‘performs’ something like a living room; rules, gestures and behaviours change not only from one culture to another, but from occupant to occupant. Architects also write instructions for the performance of a building using the building itself. Buildings are made with behavioural cues—doorways, vistas, stairs and so forth—that instruct occupants how to act, where to go, how long to stay and so forth. From this perspective, architecture can be considered a score for how its occupants behave.

Yet codifying our behaviour in buildings only to serve the functions we assign to them misses the potential of working with behaviour as an aesthetic end in and of itself. My approach of constructing architecture around the way we ‘perform’ it offers its occupants agency in determining who they become in relation to a space and having that space facilitate their desires, hopes, anxieties and needs. Carried out to this concept’s ideal extreme, occupants of buildings become partial authors of their environments as well as producers of their meanings. By consciously engaging performance, the material form of a building will result from how it is performed. Through performance and

performativity, traditional conceptualisations of architecture can be unpacked, altered, and reconfigured to produce environments where the distinction between the life of the subject and the architectural object becomes productively unclear.

At present, architectural practice does not contain the conceptual resources that are needed to realise these ideals, but it is beginning to benefit greatly through initial affiliations with performance, just as visual art did in the last century. When visual art joined with performance, the new genre profoundly changed the way we think of both visual art and performance. Performance art continues to shed distinctions between viewers and performers, between subjects and objects, and between sanctioned viewing venues and everyday spaces. The same can happen with architecture.

The proximity of the term ‘performance architecture’ to ‘performance art’ intentionally draws a parallel between them to acknowledge the linking of their histories and ambitions. I will focus on the ways that performance art can expand architecture, but first I want to point out that the mingling of performance art and architecture also expands the field of performance art. For instance, most performance art occurs within institutions or is staged in such a way that it is obvious that it is a performance. When framed as architecture, however, performance art is sited in spaces and situations where people are not generally expecting art. The uncertainty on the part of a viewer that comes with not knowing whether something is a performance or a ‘real’ event is invaluable to many performance art practices. Many other, not yet knowable, advantages for both fields will make themselves apparent as work by other thinkers is endeavoured in the future.

Many works in performance art are focused around architecture. Take for example Marina Abramovic’s<sup>1</sup> famous work *Imponderabilia* (1977, 2010) where two live nude bodies stood face-to-face in the threshold of a door. Here the passive naked bodies of the artists charged the score of the building (the doorway) forcing its occupants to make a decision as to whether they would pass through the narrowed doorway by facing either the male or female body, if they chose to pass through at all.

Artists, like architects, have a history of writing instructions for people who happen upon them. In contrast to architects’ prescriptive instructions, artists’ instructions are explicitly open-ended. Common to the instructions of artists in the 20th and 21st centuries is the recognition that the outcomes of the performance of these instructions are as manifold as the people

who follow them. Consider the number of possible outcomes to Yoko Ono's (2001) instruction 'Imagine Peace', or Lawrence Weiner's (1991) rescripting of bathrooms by replacing the 'men's' and 'women's' signs with 'us' and 'them' signs.

Ultimately the stakes of focusing on a visitor's behaviour in an open-ended way are similar in art, architecture and performance. In each case, those who come to a work of art, building or performance, participate in the production of its meaning.

Winston Churchill (1943) instrumentalised the connection between the formation of subjectivity and architecture when he said 'we make our buildings, thereafter they make us'<sup>22</sup>. Many writers have theorised how subjectivities change in relation to their surroundings in ways that can be useful to the architectural ambitions that I have outlined above. Particularly important in regards to my thinking about performance architecture are the writings of the American philosopher Judith Butler, French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and British architectural theorist Neil Leach. Butler's (1990) proposition for example, that identity and gender are not fixed but performed, can easily be applied to architecture; just as we can imagine that the degree to which we are masculine or feminine depends on the context we are in. We can even facilitate gender enactment by altering the spaces we occupy. As an obvious example, painting our walls a certain colour can embody an expression of gender. Both being social constructs, gender and architecture can be altered or destabilised, becoming malleable to suit an individual. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) writings on 'becoming' offers particularly productive perspectives of flux in subjectivity, providing a way of thinking about subjectivities and their contexts as overlapping rather than discrete. Leach's (2006) theory of camouflage builds upon Butler, Deleuze and Guattari to propose an architecture made from neither subjects nor objects, but rather the interplay between the two. Through the overlap of performance and architecture, subjects are constructed that create, occupy, are impacted by, and modify their environments in a continuing process.

The next sections of this chapter present projects from my practice that posit different ways of thinking about performance and architecture, ranging from objects that change over time to instructional works that require a change in the occupant.

## Buildings That Perform Themselves

Performances are recognised as events that change over time according to a script or score. Buildings are not thought of as performances mainly because we construct them to be static; by building them from materials and using imagery that we think of as stable. Yet despite our best efforts, buildings change. These reconfigurations usually happen at rates that are too slow for us to perceive. Imagining the structures we occupy as unstable, undermines their ability to reassure us of both our physical and psychological safety. It is this last mental protection that buildings offer that has been a point of departure for destabilised building projects by many artists, including myself.

My attraction to the anxiety that a volatile building produces was initially linked to the way that we use buildings to fantasise about bodies. History is filled with examples of architecture that is based on the perfect bodies we desire: the Greek caryatids; Vitruvius' proportioning system; and Le Corbusier's modular man to name a few. Building upon this history of buildings being used as mirrors for the way we would like to visualise our bodies, I made several architectural works that mirror the bodies we actually have; leaky, painful, titillating and contradictory. One can read *Buildings That Perform Themselves* as mirroring our own demise. In these projects, the rate of this change is sped up to something that we can perceive—a performance. This is the way I understand the American artist, Allan Kaprow's work *Fluids* (1967), where he took blocks of ice and built architecturally scaled boundaries 9 metres long, by 3 metres wide, by 2.5 metres tall and let them melt. Kaprow's gesture shifts a viewer's attention away from the stability of large walls that exist at the beginning of the work, to their slow but perceptible degradation, collapse and disappearance.

The performance of an edifice changing into a landscape is also the script for two works that I will discuss from my own practice. *A Sac of Rooms All Day Long* (2009) begins as a 9 metre by 6 metre puddle of clear and black vinyl on a museum's floor. As the air from four independent blowers slowly fills the four room-sized chambers, the black lines that once lay in a jumble start to become recognisable as architectural elements. After an hour of fans turning off and on the volume of a house emerges, yet the imagery from two houses is apparent. The outer sac, depicting the exterior envelope of a 50 square metre 1950s bungalow, is filled with four other sacs articulating with the

Opposite:  
Alex Schweder La, *A Sac Of Rooms All Day Long*, San Francisco, USA, 2009. This work was included in the show 'Sensate, Bodies and Design', curated by Henry Urbach . Photo: SFMOMA/Ian Reeves.



rooms from a 90 square metre 1920s house. In this way, *A Sac of Rooms All Day Long* is something too big inside of something too small. Each room (a living room, dining room, entry and kitchen) is separate and inflates with its own independently timed fan. At a certain point the skin from the 1950s bungalow can no longer contain the swelling rooms inside of it. The rooms start to steal space from one another; the living room sac might slip under the entry sac; the kitchen and dining room press against one another, each gaining the ground from time to time. Slowly, almost as if exhausted, the frequency of inflation diminishes until it completely stops. At the end of six hours the houses have again returned to the floor, where they await until the next day, to toggle between landscape and building.

My intention is that this work be perceived as a drawing. The black lines in this work use the same conventions that an architect would to draw a house; thinner lines indicating less prominent features like wainscoting, and thicker lines demarking the outermost boundaries of rooms. While one can move around *A Sac of Rooms All Day Long* and it is a scale at which one could occupy, a viewer was never meant to enter this work nor do they participate in determining its form. While

this is not a shortcoming of the artwork, my goal is to realise an architecture that truly blurs the line between subject and object. For this to happen, a viewer of a work of art must shift to become a work of art's occupant. A step beyond that would be for the occupant to claim partial authorship of the work.

A step closer to this is *This Apple Tastes Like Our Living Room Used To Smell* (2007-2012). This project is centred around two architectural models, one made from bioplastic and installed in a garden and one made from rubber for a museum. The bioplastic model is continually in a state of decay and is added to every few weeks. The rubber represents the bioplastic model in a moment of decay (pictured below). Rot is welcomed in this project as the beginning of a garden. As parts of the model representing different rooms begin to decay, another room is added onto the

Alex Schweder La,  
*This Apple Tastes Like  
Our Living Room Used  
To Smell*, Seattle, USA,  
2010. Photo: Author.



house to replace its function. If one of the bedrooms rots, the owner can decide to replace it with another bedroom, not to replace it, or to design an addition with another function. As the house moves across the site through these additions, the garden follows in its wake. In *This Apple Tastes Like Our Living Room Used To Smell*, the garden is not a concentric zone around the house. Rather, each addition to the house is food for the garden to come.

The occupants continually align the house with changing circumstances in their lives. If they are anticipating a child entering or leaving their lives, for example, the next addition would contain an extra bedroom or let the old one turn into the garden. In this way it reflects who they are or want to become.

Seattle collectors Bill and Ruth True commissioned these models for their domestic garden and their museum 'Western Bridge'. The biodegradable plastic disintegrates within three months of planting and is made by Australian manufacturer Plantic. The original part of the model that was 'planted' in their garden depicts the original house that was torn down to make room for the new house that was built. The Trues tried to keep the original structure but could not fit their needs into it. In this way the bioplastic model is a kind of ghost of what was once there.

Both the original model and the subsequent additions are loaded with grass seeds that feed off the plastic turning to soil. In two years time, when we have agreed to stop adding to the model, what will remain is a patch of taller grass. The model in this way turns itself from a representation of what was, into a real garden that exists in the present.

## Bodily Performances in Architectural Time

If *Buildings That Perform Themselves* speed up the rate at which a building changes, then *Bodily Performances In Architectural Time* slow the actions of occupants down to the time of a building. These instructional text pieces are written directly on the building in which they are installed. When followed, some slight change happens to the building that might go unnoticed if the instructions did not bring an occupant's attention to it.

While on residence at Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, I renovated an entire building with such 'reader-enacted' instructions. The building was a former meat locker plant and had a large, south facing window that was once its retail area. Behind the retail space was a room with very thick walls and no windows where the meat was stored. These two rooms



were connected with a single insulated door. Whilst the door was open and with no mechanical assistance, the temperature difference between the two rooms was approximately 10 degrees Celsius. When a person passed through the threshold, the temperature difference was immediately noticeable. Unnoticed was the infinitesimal increase of temperature affected by the viewer when they stood in the cooler room. To bring this to their attention, instructions for a performance were installed spanning through both rooms. Through the doorway, in text 12 centimetres tall, by 600 centimetres long, were the instructions:

‘Inhale this warmer room, exhale it into this cooler room,  
until their temperatures are the same’.

The intention of these instructions is not to literally complete them, but rather for occupants to observe that simply occupying a space alters that space in some subtle way.

Artists have been using this strategy for decades and this vein of thinking owes much to them. Consider one of Yoko Ono’s *Paintings* (1960):

#### BLOOD PIECE

Use your blood to paint.

Paint until you faint. (a)

Keep painting until you die. (b)

The kind of radical rethinking of painting that Ono and other artists working along this trajectory offer can be easily rethought in terms of architecture. If one thinks of architecture as an amalgamation of interplays between actions and objects, then it can be constructed with shifts in perception, as well as bricks.

## Rescored Space

Another Fluxus<sup>3</sup> artist whose instructional works offers architecture an important insight through performance is the American artist George Brecht. His work *Chair Event* (1961) draws a direct connection between actions and objects:

#### CHAIR EVENT

— Sit down

— Stand up

By thinking of a chair as an event embodied by an object, Brecht offers architects a way of thinking about the things they

Opposite:  
Alex Schweder La,  
*Homing MacGuffin*,  
New York City, USA,  
2008. Photo: Author.



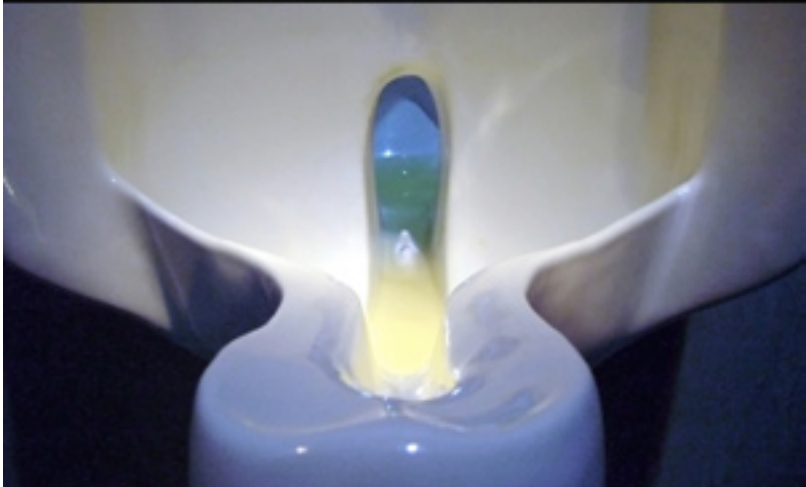
design as instructions for an action. Perceived in this way, the instructions ‘stand up/sit down’ are still deployed no matter whether the chair was designed in the style of Charles Renee Mackintosh or Marcel Breuer. The chair’s style becomes the equivalent of a font, for example Times New Roman vs. Helvetica, where the instructions ‘stand up/sit down’ to be written with words instead of furniture. Plato’s concept of ideal forms is useful to understand this point. He posited that the ideal form of, for instance a chair, existed as a concept first and as a material object second. The concept of a chair is basically something to sit upon. In this way, *Rescored Space* operates on the level of the ‘ideal form’ where the concept is manipulated rather than the appearance of what exists.

In this category of projects, architectural objects must feel familiar enough that when people first come upon them they immediately think they know how to interact. Once they start, however, they notice that not all is as expected and they need to interpret these objects in order to decide how they will behave. This decision on an occupant’s part opens the possibility of becoming partial authors of what a space means.

Upon entering *Homing MacGuffin* (2008), installed in a Harlem Brownstone as part of Homebase III<sup>4</sup>, one senses a familiar environment: wall-to-wall carpet and shapes reminiscent of furniture. Yet the furniture is not as we normally expect—it was installed prior to the carpet. With this reversal

Right:  
Alex Schweder La,  
*Plumbing Us*, Wisconsin,  
USA, 2009. Photos:  
Scott Lawrimore,  
edited by Author.

Below:  
Alex Schweder La,  
*Snowballing Doorway*,  
Syracuse, USA, 2008.  
Photos: Warehouse  
Gallery/David Broda,  
edited by Author.



of the order of installation, visitors of this work need to negotiate—this almost familiar environment—using their desires and urges to guide the decisions they make about how they will behave in this ‘livingroomish’ space.

In *Plumbing Us* (2009), the behavioural instructions of a urinal to ‘pee here’ are deployed to entice visitors to enact the script. As participants follow the script, another parasitic script to ‘mix bodies here’ is followed. The two urinals in this piece are conjoined to make one urinal sharing a common drain. Female on one side and male on the other, two participants see their bodily fluids mingling as they go down the drain. This work was made during a residency at the Kohler plumbing fixture factory in Sheboygan, Wisconsin as part of their Arts/Industry program.

Another rescored space that uses fluid exchange as a structuring concept is *Snowballing Doorway* (2008). This inflatable work is comprised of two mirrored and conjoined 4.5 metre tall, by 4.5 metre wide, by 3 metre deep arches that prompt the instructions ‘Pass through’ or ‘Don’t Pass Through’, depending on which arch is engaged. There is only enough air to fill one of the arches at a time and this volume is passed back and forth throughout the day. It is the in-between stages, however, when the instructions are not clear that a viewer must make a decision about what instruction is given, and how they will interact with the work.

## Architect Performed Buildings

Performance architecture continues beyond changed architectural scripts to produce transformed subjects. To observe exactly how a subject changes in relation to his or her space, I introduced a fourth category of architectural performance production called *Architect Performed Buildings*. These buildings have a feature exaggerated to produce an extreme condition. This caricature, theoretically, produces a noticeable change in the subjects who occupy it. In 1968, for example, French theorist Paul Virillio and French architect Claude Perrant were experimenting with occupying inclined planes. To test their speculations personally, they designed *Pendular Destabiliser No. 1*, a living space made from two suspended triangular volumes connecting at a node that they would occupy. The slit at this intersection would be their only way of communicating with one another or anyone else. There were to be no plumb or level surfaces. Unfortunately, events in Paris of that year eclipsed the architect’s desires to realise the project and it was never performed.

In 2009, artist Ward Shelly and I worked with ‘out-of-plumbness’ in a project called *Stability*. The project entailed building a house that had two living spaces on either end of a fulcrum that shared a bathroom and a kitchen that visually divided us. As one person would move toward or away from the centre, the house would go out of level unless the other occupant moved at the same time in the same direction. Constantly negotiating one another through this building, we lived here without exit for a week. By the end of this time Shelly and I had synchronised our rhythms, which were originally discordant.

In another collaboration, *Flatland* (2007), Shelly and I performed in a 0.6m wide building with artists Pelle Brage, Eva La Cour, Douglas Paulson and Maria Petschnig. Installed at New York’s Sculpture Center, the 12 metre tall, by 7.5 metre long, by 0.6 metre deep building was home to six people for three weeks. The script, similar to *Stability*, was to go about your normal life as best you could. The only rule for those performing the work was that once you entered you could leave at any time, but if you left you could not come back in. We shared 19.2 square metres of space; of which 1.6 square metres was each person’s personal space. This quickly divided the group into two types of people: the neat and the messy. With such confined space disorder led to the neat people attempting to impose more rules on the messy people. With each rule came more resentment and resistance. After two weeks the messy people had departed and three of the original six remained in the project.

Opposite:

Alex Schweder La,  
Ward Shelly, Pelle  
Brage, Eva La Cour,  
Douglas Paulson,  
& Maria Petschnig,  
*Flatland*, New  
York, USA, 2007.  
Photo: Mark Lins.

Below:

Alex Schweder  
La & Ward Shelly,  
*Stability*, Seattle, USA,  
2009. Photos: Scott  
Lawrimore, edited by  
Ward Shelly & Author.





Initially I thought that the building would bulge or be reconfigured in some way relating to people's desire for more space. However, it became clear that there was not even enough space to cut wood. Working in your private space meant making debris where you slept. Those of us who had a natural inclination to go inward did so and performed sedentary activities, and the building also remained static.

## Forms That Follow Performances

Springing from an urge to make architecture that is easily manipulated by, and a direct result of, the desires of those who inhabit it is a project called *Its Form Will Follow Your Performance* (2009- ). Clients come to me seeking the 'Free Architectural Advice' that I offer with a glowing sign in a storefront window. The first performance of this work took place in Berlin at Magnus Muller Gallery. There I met with my clients and discussed their relationship with their apartments. After about an hour I wrote a short set of instructions for them to take home, interpret and enact. Through the resulting behavioural change in their apartment, the apartment is considered renovated. Often a renovation will result in small physical collateral; a moved plant, a special outfit worn, a letter that arrives in the mail or a staged fight with the landlord. Each set of instructions is intentionally short and open, the final form will be an interpretation made by the client. Herein lies the opportunity for an occupant to claim authorship of their space and thereby shape their own subjectivity. The thirty performative renovations I have made occurred (or not) in private and were witnessed only by the person who read the instructions that I wrote.

## Architecture Performance

There are many ways of making connections between performance and architecture, from works where people view a time-based building as they might a theatre work, to situations where a person's behaviour directly results in architectural form. Certainly there are many more connections that are not made here or have yet to be drawn by others. As the number of architects who design their buildings with the idea of performativity increases, buildings will come to perform with the strange, complex and ultimately compelling people who occupy them.

Sometimes he imagined the building as an iceberg whose visible tip included the main floors and eaves and whose submerged mass began below the first level of cellars: stairs with resounding steps going down in spirals; long tiled corridors, their luminous globes encased in wire netting, their iron doors stenciled with warnings and skulls; goods lifts with riveted walls; air vents equipped with huge, motionless fans; metal lined canvas fire hoses as thick as tree trunks, connected to yellow stopcocks a yard in diameter; cylindrical wells drilled into solid rock; concrete tunnels capped with regularly spaced skylights of frosted glass; recesses; storerooms; bunkers; strongrooms with armour-plated doors.

and Betticoat, her hair tied up tight in a bun. She shut the door and flung her arms round his neck; she had a warm scent of white linen and newly washed flesh.