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Architecture catches the acting bug

By Christopher Hawthorne
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Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley's "ReActor." (Richard Barnes)

Of all the ways that architecture has tried to reconstitute itself after the economic collapse of 2008 — a collapse in which the profession and its relationship to high finance and predatory bank lending were directly implicated — one of the most fascinating has involved the intersection of buildings and performance. Young and midcareer figures such as Bryony Roberts and Spain's Andres Jaque have developed projects that either tell stories about architecture and its history or use architecture or public space as a kind of temporary stage.

The appeal of these efforts, for their creators as well as audiences and critics, has a good deal to do with their impermanence and often their informality. They come and go. They're proudly unprofessional. This puts them in clear opposition to the pricey monuments, the immovable, perfectly polished temples to form-making and the easy movement of global equity, that were regularly produced by architecture's most prominent figures in the run-up to 2008. (And have re-emerged of late.)

They're also striking for how they choose to position their creators and the larger profession of architecture. If you imagine a spectrum that has a glossy rendering of a new condo tower on one end, an image ready for its debut in a full-page ad on the inside cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, many of these performances, populist and low-budget, occupy the extreme other end.

In the case of Roberts' "We Know How to Order," which took place in Chicago in 2015 and involved the combination — or maybe the collision — of an African American student drill team and a Modernist plaza by Mies van der Rohe, the critique covered even more territory. The performance suggested a new way of measuring urban space or putting it through its paces, especially the kind of pedigreed urban design produced by a figure like Mies.

This interest in performance among architects is less a style or a fledgling movement than a register, a way of working. It's a means of sketching out a new set of priorities — and giving up older ones that are tarnished or compromised. It's also open-ended, challenging the idea that a building can ever really qualify as finished. It makes room for perspectives that come from other fields.

The artist Alex Schweder, for example, has been mining similar territory for nearly a decade (as have a handful of others in the art world, including Tino Sehgal). Schweder's work is performance art in the familiar sense but also relies heavily and explicitly on architectural themes. Last year he and Ward Shelley produced a piece called "ReActor" that takes the form of a rotating glass house balanced atop a concrete column. The house was designed to behave like a see-saw: If you walked from the middle to one end, it would tip.

Schweder and Shelley moved into the house — each was allotted one half, with a shared bath in the center — and just by spending time there activated the themes of the piece, which include cooperation, solitude and the pedestal atop which critics and historians have placed Philip Johnson's landmark 1949 Glass House in New Canaan, Conn.

This month Schweder — calling himself the Schweder Office of Architectural Performances, or SOAP — brought a new performance piece, "Architectural Advice for Performative Renovations," to Edward Cella Art & Architecture, the gallery on La Cienega Boulevard. It's part of a new annual show there called "Vernacular Environments," which in this edition includes work by Robert Smithson, Stephen Berens, Jennifer Bolande and Raúl Cordero, among others.

Schweder's piece as it's physically arranged has a lot in common with a therapy session. A simple desk is positioned near the middle of the gallery's polished concrete floor, holding a small sign reading "Architectural Advice." (The resemblance to the booth that Lucy sets up in "Peanuts," with a sign saying "Psychiatric help: 5 cents," is so strong that it has got to be intentional.) The artist sits on one side and his subjects — which last weekend included me — sit on the other.

Schweder's interest in the relationship between architecture and performance, he told me as soon as I sat down across from him, "grew out of a sense that buildings are time-based things. They change over time. I started working with that. And once you speed up that slow rate of change, it becomes something that you can perceive as a performance. But what does that really mean? Does it mean the building is the thing that is performing, or are you performing within it? Does it construct us? Are we performing our identities through it? Does it give us cues and prompts for how to behave?"

In "Architectural Advice" he takes his interviewees through a series of questions about the house or apartment they live in and what that space enables, reveals or makes difficult. He asks them what they'd like to change about the space and why they haven't yet been able to transform it. It often gets emotional, Edward Cella told me, which is hardly surprising. Our domestic spaces are minefields of repression, dashed hopes and self-criticism.

Often the conversation is just the first part — the first scene — of a longer process that can include several discussions or meetings. Sometimes Schweder visits subjects' houses himself and makes photographs where he dresses up as one of the members of the family, occupying a room that suggests some particular conflict or possibility.

Foolishly or not, I told him I was game. It was clear that we'd both be taking part in a performance, largely improvised, that would begin with a conversation about residential architecture and wind up who knows where.

"I start each of these renovations with the same question," he said. "How did you come to the space that you're in now?"

For an architecture critic, somebody who thinks about built space for a living, it's almost impossible to think of an opening question more fraught. How do the finished, near-perfect and camera-ready rooms I visit on a regular basis relate to my own messy, unpredictable home life?

This really was like therapy. I took a deep breath and began.