

RECONSTRUCTED GROUNDS

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1 ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss the generative role of design narration and video production in the provocation and rehabilitation of an existing environment. "Bemis Gardens" is an exhibition and design laboratory that sought to consider the urban condition of the contemporary art center and its relationship with downtown Omaha through the transformation of the Bemis Center's exterior dock into a public art site and urban garden. In recent years, artists, architects, ecologists and social designers have formed new hybrids between food production and social space, urban ecologies and public art, forgotten space and material ingenuity, and public spectacle. "Bemis Gardens" was structured as an open laboratory and interactive exhibition. Throughout its three-month run the exhibition hosted a series of workshops consisting of professionals from diverse fields in effort to consider urban land use futures and speculate on specific actionable possibilities for the Bemis Center's site. The proposed installation of the Water Hutch designed and constructed by Peter P. Goché is one such actionable proposition. Reminiscent of the many waterways that meander through the Midwest, the work consists of a sinuous line made up of three oxbows. This set of parts served as provocateur for the subsequent design strategies developed as a result of this open laboratory and interactive exhibition whereby I developed a generative literary narrative based on the history of Omaha's "jobber's canyon" and the social phenomenon depicted in a previously produced video. This narrative served to inform the mock installation of the Water Hutch.

1.1 Keywords

Design laboratory, Holistic Design, Interdisciplinary, Social Design and Actionable Proposition



Figure 1. Aerial Image of Omaha.

2 HISTORY

The territory that would eventually become the city of Omaha, Nebraska, was acquired as a part of the Louisiana Purchase, which was completed by Thomas Jefferson in 1803. The open plains of the central United States were, at this time, uncharted lands that held significant potential for the developing nation. On July 21, 1804 William Clark and Meriwether Lewis passed through the area and, consequently, the territory was developed as a trading and fortification outpost.

The development of the warehouse district in the 1800's mirrored Omaha's emergence as a central hub in the United States transportation system. As "Gateway to the West" the district housed several warehouses, grocers and other dry goods outfitters for merchants throughout the Old West. The Bemis Bag Company Building [Figure 2] is located at the intersection of Leavenworth and 12th Street. Constructed in 1887, it was one of several warehouse facilities owned by the Bemis Company. The Bemis Company (founded in 1858) was a national leader in the manufacturing and sale of bags and sacks for flour, grain, and other commodities. The building is now home to the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts. As an artist-centered organization it was founded for artists by artists.



Figure 2. Bemis Center for Contemporary Art.

3 EXHIBITION BRIEF

Bemis Gardens was an exhibition and design laboratory that sought to consider the urban condition of the contemporary art center and its relationship with downtown Omaha through the transformation of the Bemis Center's exterior into a public art site and urban garden. In the midst of the Building | Bemis

construction process, a project that resulted in a significant expansion of the artist-in-residence program, renovated fabrication facilities and a restored front dock — this exhibition and project series served to initiate a holistic reconsideration of the Center’s land use and exterior relationships with the public.

In recent years, artists, architects, ecologists and social designers have formed new hybrids between food production and social space, urban ecologies and public art, forgotten space and material ingenuity, and public spectacle. *Bemis Gardens* was structured as an open laboratory and interactive exhibition. Throughout its three-month run the exhibition hosted a series of workshops consisting of professionals from diverse fields in effort to consider urban land use futures and speculate on specific actionable possibilities for the Bemis Center’s site. Participants included Ruth Dusseault (Photographer), Jeff Day (Min|Day Architects), James Woodfill (Sculptor), Josh Shelton (El Dorado Architects), Michael Beitz (Sculptor), Anne Trumble (Landscape Architect), Author (Installation Artist and Sculptor), Sarah Thomas and David Karle (Landscape Architects), Bryan Kliever (Organic Farmer), Sean Ward (Artist) and Colin Smith (Artist).

4 WORKSHOP

The installation of the *Water Hutch* designed and constructed by Peter P. Goché is one such actionable proposition. Reminiscent of the many waterways that meander through the Midwest, the work consists of a sinuous line made up of three oxbows. The constituent forms are constructed of built up dimensional lumber. The set of parts serve as an ambiguous measure by which people situate themselves. It might best be understood as an object or trace that indicates the presence of, and makes clearly recognizable, its context as referent rather than source or setting. It operates metaphorically as an open set of shelves onto which people, and thereby, memories accumulate. This set of parts served as provocateur for the subsequent design strategies developed as a result of this open laboratory and interactive exhibition. Our role was to consider the socio-spatial effects of this form as it relates to the new space of the dock. Invoking John Hejduk’s published thoughts titled *Mask of Medusa*: “A poem is a poem, a building is a building, architecture is architecture, music is...it’s all structure. Essential. I use it as language. I cannot do a building without building a new repertoire of characters of stories of language and it’s all parallel. It’s not just building per se. It’s building worlds.”



Figure 3. Workshop performance.

The exhibition of this work included a performance-based workshop conducted by (Author’s name). This interdisciplinary performance was staged on the *Water Hutch* in Gallery One at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art [Figure 3]. The participants were Elizabeth Zimmerman (musician), Annie Binder (Poet), Scott Ricketts (Novelist), Jassim Al Nashmi (Design student, ISU), John Kerner (Design student, ISU) and Jasmine Singh (Design student, ISU). The workshop included a series of oratories presented by (Author’s

name), Binder and Ricketts and a musical performance by Zimmerman. As an introduction to the social phenomenon associated with the hutch, the following literary abstract was presented.

Teetering along this obscure line, I'd enter gaited time and situate self within the intimacy of accumulated daydreams. Into this, sometime later, I inserted self [a concentrated being] and reciprocally, the embodiment of community. Within, I am seized by the sensation of something vast and deep and boundless. It took complete hold of me and, for several moments, I was overwhelmed by the grandeur of its shadowy trace. Marshaled by Hejduk's angels, I slip into subconscious, and lie flat amongst a new repertoire of characters and stories and language and enter into full communion with the fertility of its host surround. Off in the distance, a little boy hums in vernacular.

As a result of workshop contributions and response, the following literary excerpt was developed as a generative means of design thinking while living on the grounds as guest artist for two weeks following the performance.

The morning sun traces the naked contour of Asiam's descent along 12th Street. She arrives beneath a skeleton of time and ascends into a crazy little garden overgrown with last year's growth. The grade rises and then falls beneath her bare feet. Arrested by a wooden hutch, she pauses and is inscribed by a ring of water. Inebriated, she studies its nuance and is reminded of her childhood tracings while playing in the dirt beside her mother's watch as Oxbow wades out into the world and bathes in its lazy current. Aroused by the smell of sweet basil, Asiam steps out from this crucible of time and is escorted west by her grandfather, Meriwether.

For days the hutch remained fixed except in the hour before dawn. Over this still moment, Guernica presides. Leaning out the second floor window, she'd watch over through hollowed baldachin. With lantern in hand, she'd illuminate a cast of woolen's while they performed in the garden below. Each character, wearing wool clothing, would dance along the hutch singing the stories interred there by the previous days inhabitants. Standing in an old niche looking onto the hutch, Oxbow lingers. Unclothed. At the close of ghost hour Isabelle would extinguish her flame and retreat with a crow's caw and the impending diurnal trace of the sun. The elongated shadow of its early morn creep stretches out across the basin of earth as the hutch begins its meander.

It had been years since her initial engagement with this figural creep, this sunken line. Asiam's return toward morning sun lead her back through the Midwest and down Leavenworth Street where she was rejoined by Oxbow – a long since forgotten companion. Enjoined between the candlelit canyons of used books in Sutton's Archive, they stare into each other's eyes as their tongue rest in a residue of coffee and cream. The stale scent of old books seduce while light seeps through shelved stories. A candle is tipped. From inflamed silence faint screams of Earnest Hemmingway and Walt Whitman are heard. Asiam and Oxbow weep. The library smolders. Staggering away they take refuge up the street beneath the Bemis Bag Company dock. Turning to look back, tears fall as the neighborhood children sift through the ashes. From inside the factory Asiam hears a watery cord progression accompanied by a sweet voice singing of people and the earth. Looking up she recalls the silly garden she had played in. Ascending the stair, she is followed by a chorus of children carrying hymnal bindings filled with blackened word. Asiam entered the garden and fell asleep in the niche as children's hands polished the hutch with ash and olive oil.



Figure 4. Video still

In addition, a video [Figure 4], developed in collaboration with Cameron Campbell (photographer and multimedia production) and Elizabeth Zimmerman (musician and composer of video score; *To the Earth*), was presented in effort to document and study the situation of people with respect to the set of oxbows.

5 PROPOSITION

Concurrent with the development of our comprehension specific to narration and bodily occupations, (Author's name) worked with Hesse McGraw (Chief Curator), Anne Trumble (Landscape Architect) and Thomas Printz (2D Artist) to develop a mock proposal for the semi-permanent installation of the *Water Hutch* in a void within the recently reconstructed dock. Located at the north end of the dock, this void measured 20 by 60 feet [Figure 1.3]. Bounded by new concrete retaining walls and the Bemis warehouse, the space is accessed from the dock proper on the south. A pair of windows and a door with sidelights looks out onto this space from inside the Center's information shop. It is adjacent to an alley on the north and 12th Street on the east. The top of the retaining wall system is 48 inches above street level. The structural components of the original building canopy remain above the void and dock. Resident artist are housed in the second and third floor spaces of the Center overlooking the dock.



Figure 5. Proposed garden setting.

Our intention regarding the placement of the *Water Hutch* within this new garden setting [Figure 5] was to provide seating in a manner that would support multiple social configurations amidst a new topography and planting scheme and thereby negotiate the condition of the contemporary art center and its relationship with downtown Omaha. Therefore, we sought to engage those associated with the Center and the neighborhood passersby. In addition, we wanted to develop the space in a way that was differentiated from the level plane of the dock by depressing the plane of entry into the garden and locating two components of the *Water Hutch* so that the seating surface was level with the retaining walls and dock plane. The remaining component was located along the sloped entry plane to accommodate multiple seating heights.

The door and sidelight configuration was to be built up in such a way that the sill block (at dock height) was extended into the garden and created a cantilevered seat or speakers platform. The placement of the *Water Hutch* with respect to this hyper-extended sill block provided a concentric seating pattern. The door was to be replaced with a fixed panel in effort to promote access from the dock and corresponding cross circulation path leading to the main doors of the Center.

6 CONCLUSION

The insertion of this type of line sets up a necessary visual and spatial tension between the rectangular void and the ambiguous form. This kind of misfit provides a social margin or leftover volume whereby people could simply linger. Linda Pollak (2006) cites this type of constructed ground as a space of differences that can be understood as a framework for design practice in which the negotiation between the respective scales at which architecture, landscape architecture and urban design can operate performatively to engage dimensions of difference that characterize the space that is being produced. It is

a spatial configuration that, by abstraction, attracts and supports informal social configurations.

Within this new setting, we imagined routine causal encounters between the local people and artist-in-residence. We were delighted with the reciprocal possibility that the fellows and neighbors might find their own narrative in the story of others. As stated by Michael de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*: "In this configuration, the story plays a decisive role. It describes, to be sure. But every description is more than a fixation, it is a culturally creative act. It even has distributive power and performative force when an ensemble of circumstances is brought together. Then it founds spaces." In this way, we understood the *Water Hutch* not only as provocateur in the evolution of this space and everyday human encounter, but as a type of cultural attendant that, like waterways, serves as line by which people situate themselves.

Over time, as per the design narrative, we envisioned the burial of this work in effort to provide a new ground to be developed into 'garden' by another artist or group of design professionals. In this way, we sought to provide an exterior rotating venue for the production of space within the void. Each arrangement would cultivate a new spatial configuration or set of changes that is an extension of the evolution of micro urban spaces within the contemporary landscape of downtown Omaha.

Even though the work presented and developed for this effort was not actually installed, it engendered a sustained interdisciplinary workshop focused on use and meaning of public space specific to human occupation. Based on this, we sought to re-construct the cultural landscape of the dock and void as a historical site of labor in a manner that would accentuate its recreational potential through a new form of spatial development specific to the generative role of narration in the provocation and rehabilitation of an existing environment. As in "Mapping" by Teresa Stoppani when referring to the James Cowan's novel, *A Mapmaker's Dream*, she asserts the object of the novel is not the map itself, but the process of the making of the map and the endless and yet ever sufficient knowledges that inform it. In the novel, the map as an object never comes into existence, it remains unattainable, its form never defined and closed (Stoppani, 2004). Accordingly, our speculation of the *Water Hutch* within the void served as an alternative approach to the analysis of this place and its spatial manifestation. Consequently, it is an approach that engages strategies of scale and configuration as it relates to identities and has the potential to recalibrate such a site in a way that can reconnect with the fertility of its host surroundings.

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