

Shared Beds: Ragdale Ring 2019

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Launched as an international competition in 2013 to reinterpret Howard Van Doren Shaw's Ring as a temporary, experimental environment, the Ragdale Ring competition has provided young architects and designers the annual occasion to conceive and construct a temporary performance venue and public gathering space on the Ragdale campus in Lake Forest, Illinois. The premise of the competition responds and reinterprets Shaw's original Ragdale Ring, which was conceived as an open-air theatre for his poet and playwright wife, Frances Wells Shaw.¹ As the winning proposal of the competition and built on the grounds of the Ragdale Foundation in June 2019, Shared Beds sought to challenge the role of the individual vis-à-vis the collective by reconsidering the seemingly inanimate quality of everyday objects such as beds and their assumed

immutable location inside private domains. Thus, beds are used in this project to invoke a shared public life through a nuanced, abstract language of simple geometrical forms.

Framed through Hannah Arendt's concept of the "space of appearance,"² the beds are meant to be read as a communicative architecture that evokes a potential public realm and a desirable sphere of political life. As a form that synthesizes the relationship between the things that we make and the things that make us, beds act inside the private realm to give it form and substance but, when inserted into the public domain, they become a precondition for political action. Often manifested as unquestioned disciplinary technologies, configuring and standardizing all aspects of everyday life, the



Figure 1. Shared Beds—Interactive Beds Double as Seating. Photographer—Robert Laemle.



Figure 2. Shared Beds—Beds in Motion. Photographer—Robert Laemle.



Figure 3. Shared Beds—View From The Beds Toward The Stage. Photographer—Robert Laemle.

objects that occupy and shape architectural space are embedded with aesthetic, technical, and cultural histories.³ Yet the bed, too often treated as banal or fixed, is a technology of the every-day that reinforces and formalizes the social conditions and relationships that have given it its form. They can prompt moments of self and other awareness in which political action may be possible.

Thus, Shared Beds is composed of three interactive communal beds acting as a public form of architecture. Two of the objects are described by a circle of 15 ft in diameter. Resting on a tipping axis, these objects teeter back and forth depending on the movement inflicted by each occupant. Instead of the upright position of seating in a bench or a chair, the bed allows for horizontal occupation. Moreover, the horizontal surface at the top, in its most abstract sense, defines a space of rest avoiding the two-sidedness of a traditional orthogonal bed by making all the possible places of rest equidistant to each other. The largest of the 3 objects, described by a circle of 21 ft in diameter, has an asymmetrical tipping axis that produces a primary face that is always in contact with the ground. If the smaller beds change and tip depending on the motion of its occupants, the largest bed conditions the occupants to reimagine their movements and performances with the top oblique surface.

Consequently, the activation of these objects, whether by movement or applied motion, challenges the inherent biases regarding our claims to possess the places where we rest and with whom we share them. The vulnerability experienced by laying horizontally is highlighted when conducted in public, exposing rest as a desired collective respite instead of an individualized secluded activity. Moreover, the public space obtained is never fixed in time nor is its visual configuration but is rather left open to the continuous unfolding of the actions they can elicit. This indeterminate state ensures—George Baird writes at the end of *The Space of Appearance*—the creation of a public space where “passionate symbolic reinterpretations” take place and whose social meaning “we will not be able to determine by ourselves, or in advance.”⁴

These strategies are further reinforced by the placement of the beds throughout the site. The larger bed, which operates as a center stage, is first positioned tangentially to the 80 ft circumscribed boundary of the site. The axis of the stage parallels the axis of approach from the main entrance and the road. Concerning the stage, the two smaller beds are perpendicularly positioned towards the stage with their tipping axis allowing for an amphitheater-like performance space. By pulling apart the two smaller beds, the axis from the main entrance is preserved with that of the stage, creating an embedded space

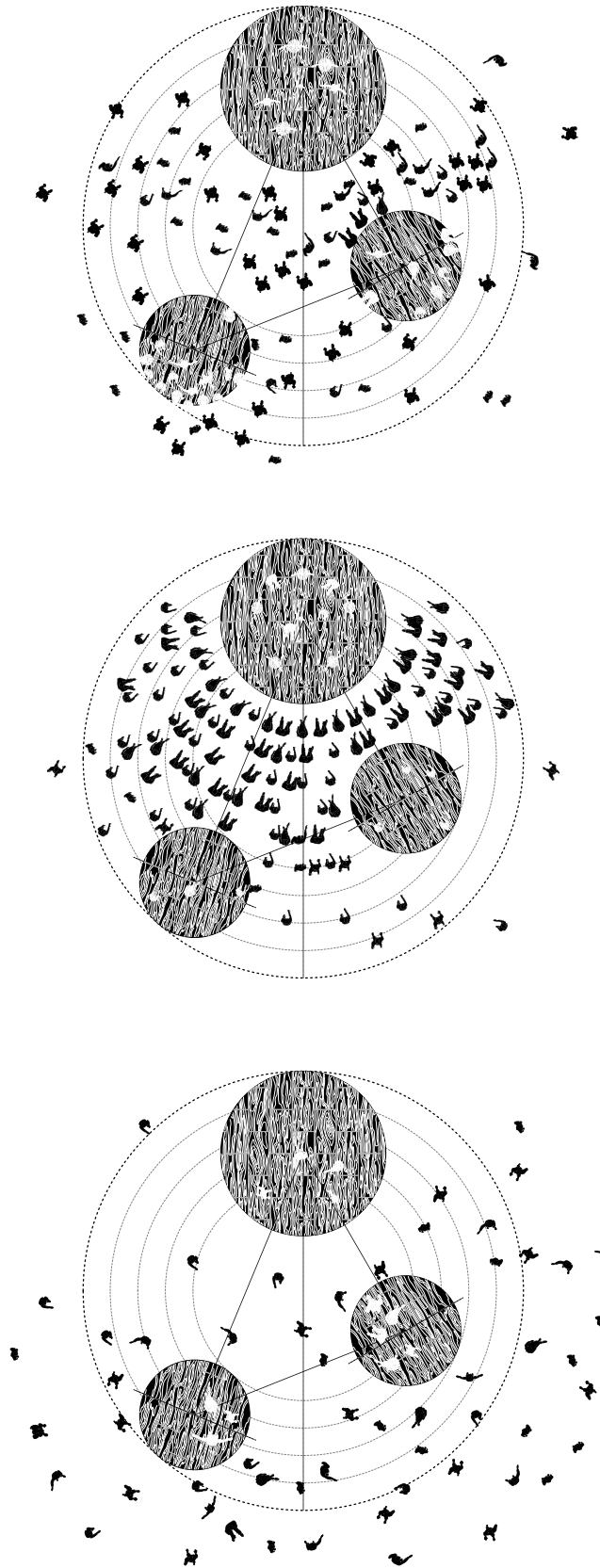


Figure 4. Possible Uses And Configurations. Drawing by Authors.

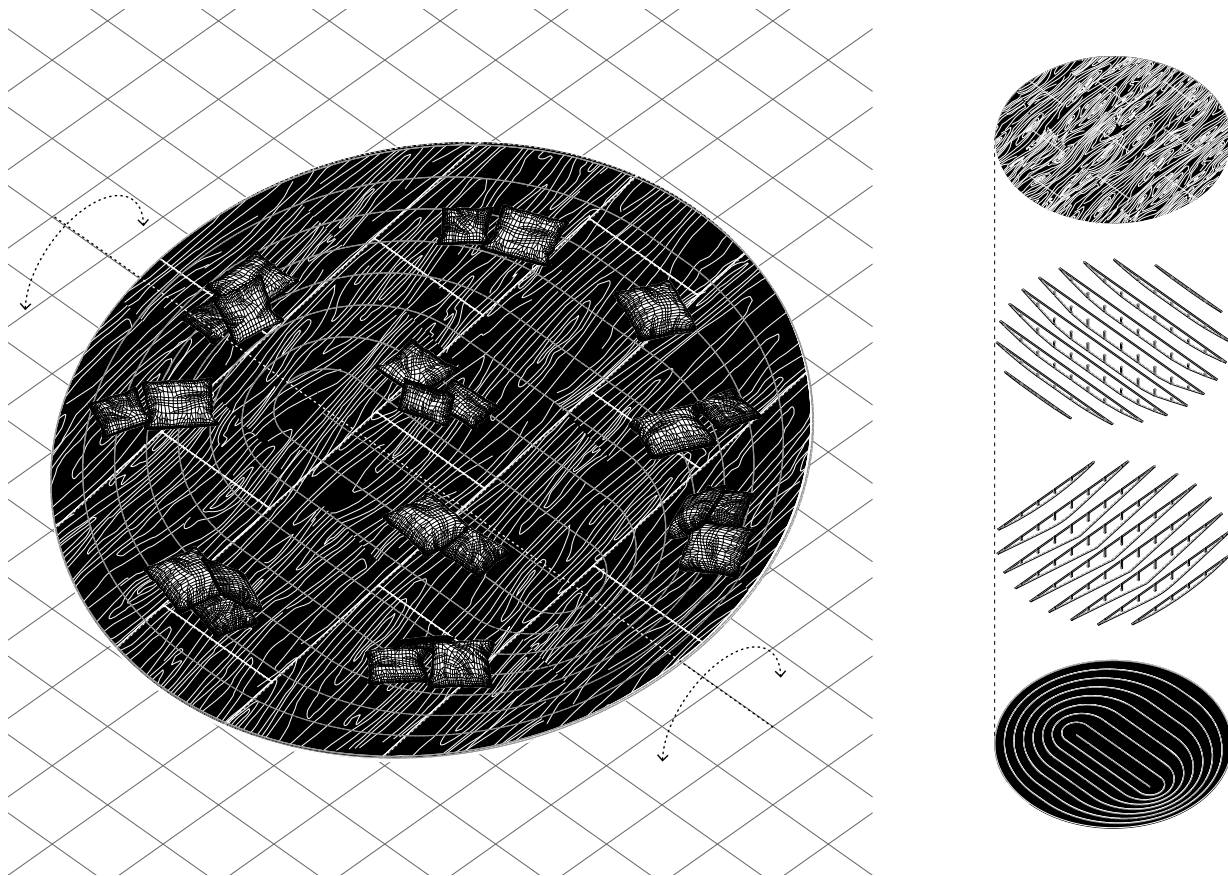


Figure 5. Diagram of the Bed Motion & Assembly. Drawing by Authors.

that can also be occupied during performances and events. This overall configuration of the objects allows multiple uses without being fixed to a single occupation. From a traditional performance space to a playground, the installation changes according to the presence of bodies in the space.

Architecture is then assigned to the role of quietly organizing and conditioning the urban social space that the beds, in this case, construct. The resulting public space thus affords varying degrees of visibility, proximity, and spatial continuity among the different actors and the opportunity for people to manifest their existence. This lived dynamic engenders a public life that can only be perceived through action. While action, as posited by Arendt, is the fundamental exercise of politics and the precondition for the public realm.⁵

Arendt claims that people can only appear to each other freely in speaking and acting publicly. This freedom emerges by transcending the exigencies of private life whenever people speak or act together. Under this light, Shared Beds provides a fruitful testing ground for architectural education and how we can generate knowledge within the discipline. By reconsidering the agency of architecture through the reprogramming of the objects that have narrowly defined its site of action, we discover its potential to address political life without enforcing

totalizing ways of being in the world. A shared bed represents a plurality of perspectives, matching the plurality of the human condition itself. Thus, following the framework provided by Arendt, Shared Beds abandons any assumptions of autonomy for the much more radical autonomy of others to act.

ENDNOTES

1. "Ragdale Ring Competition." Ragdale. Accessed November 12, 2020. <https://www.ragdale.org/ragdale-ring-competition>.
2. Arendt, Hannah, and Margaret Canovan. *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
3. Colomina, Beatriz, and Mark Wigley. *Are we human? : notes on an archaeology of design*. Zürich, Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers, 2016.
4. Baird, George. *The space of appearance*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995.
5. Arendt, Hannah, and Margaret Canovan. *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.



Figure 6. Centro Social Concert. July 26th 2019. Photos from Ragdale Foundation.