

Salvaged Layers: A Collaborative Site Specific Performance

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This studio challenged students to explore issues of craft, making and place through a series of full scale built interventions in a historic Indianapolis theatre which had been gutted in anticipation of a planned renovation. The raw state of the theatre's interior gave students a rich and evocative palette to engage while simultaneously liberating them from the conventional notions of stage and audience.

The project was an interdisciplinary collaboration between two groups of students from separate Universities, a group of eleven fourth year architecture students led by faculty coordinator Timothy Gray and a nine Butler University theatre students led by faculty director Melli Hoppe.

PROJECT

By positioning this project as a cross disciplinary collaboration it gave students the opportunity to explore ways in which the different disciplines could creatively engage one another while simultaneously grounding their activities in the specific circumstance of the site. The architecture students drew on a rich mix of precedents to inform their approach which included looking to the work of such architects as Elizabeth Diller, Thom Mayne, Zaha Hadid and Bernard Tschumi, all of whom have been involved directly with performance as an art form but also foreground the idea of spatial performativity in their work as practic-



ing architects. Tschumi famously stated, "there is no place without event"¹, in his advocacy of an architecture "concerned with spatial discourse associated with time, action and movement".²

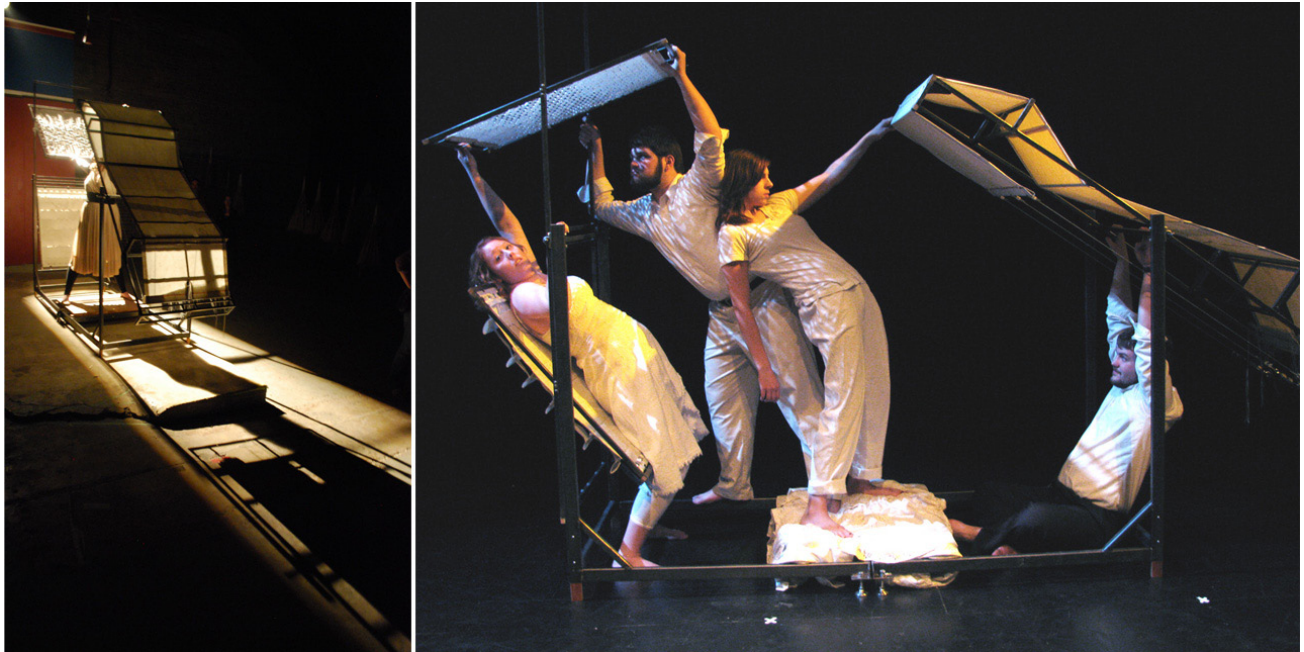


Figure 1: Theatre students documenting movement and light studies with the "SWOPE"

In addition, the architecture students looked to the work of environmental and installation artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, Walter Pichler, David Ireland and Robert Irwin for cues on how generate built work derivative of site. There was no formal program and the students were un-accustomed to the absence of a functional agenda. Students were encouraged to distill the qualities of the site that resonated with them, to empower emotion over intellect for their initial response, and to then propose what Robert Irwin might refer to as a "site conditioned response", where "the sculptural response draws all of its cues (reasons for being) from its surroundings".³

The theatre students modeled their approach after such precedents as the Welsh performance group Brith Gof, whose "placeevents"....operated within architectures that were not backdrops" but rather "the performance and place were integrally invested in one another"⁴. Inspired by the book *Theatre / Archeology* by Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks⁵, the Theatre students began their process by researching history, folklore, hearsay, memoirs, and biographies to create material for their performances. In addition, the students reviewed the work of other groups known for their contributions to the field of site-specific theatre, including the Redmoon Theatre in Chicago, Bread and Puppet Theatre in

Vermont, Forced Entertainment from England and Elan Wales, The European Live Arts Network.

Richard Schechner, founder of Live Arts Theatre, coined the term "environmental theatre" to describe site specific performance. Schechner formulated a series of "axioms for environmental theatre"⁶, which included the following; the spatial implications of which were of particular interest to the architecture students:

- "All the space is used for performance' and 'all the space is used for audience"
- "One element is not submerged for the sake of others.' The performer is no more important than the other audible and visual elements"⁷

As suggested by Schechner's axioms, the entire building became thought of as the site for the performance, there was no distinction between stage and audience. In addition, the installations the architecture students were challenged to design could have their own significance and identity, creating synergy with but not necessarily in service to the performance.

PROCESS



Figure 2: Architecture students installing their work in the theatre the week prior to the performance; clockwise from top: The "Perch" by Paul Reynolds; the "Choppa" by Jay Weeks and Austin Lucari; the "Beater" by Eric Jensen and Ben Greenberg; and "Strata" by Mark Vanden Akker, Brad Wanek, and Luke Haas

The architecture students began their investigations by researching the history of the building through an analytical analysis of past uses, history of modifications and so on, but also through an emotional analysis of how the building existed in the present. The students were asked to understand the history of the place as it was embedded in the patina of the walls; to understand and appreciate the smells, textures and rhythms of the theatre as they existed in the moment. Students were challenged to respond to these cues and to propose built interventions designed to reveal and amplify these existing conditions.

Since access to the theatre was limited, all projects had to accommodate a one-week window for installation and removal, a significant constraint. In addition, salvaged fabric from the recently demolished RCA dome was made available to the students, material investigations interrogating the fabric informed student proposals and lent a coherence to the collective.

The initial design ideas generated by the architecture students were then shared with the Butler students on a facebook site set up for the project. The

theatre students, in turn, videotaped movement studies and dialogue in response to the images, and linked these to the same site. As the architecture students developed their designs, process models and full-scale material investigations, these studies continued to be posted for review and comment by the Butler students and other interested parties. The theatre students posted their work as it evolved in a similar manner, using video and recorded dialogue. In this way the students entered into a remote collaboration (the two schools are a little over an hours drive apart), each group informing and influencing (but neither dictating) the activities of the other. Throughout the project the students at the two Universities used a variety of media to interact and collaborate on the project, including Skype, Facebook, YouTube, and SoundCloud.

PERFORMANCE

Some of the architecture student proposals, such as the "Choppa", by Jay Weeks and Austin Lucari (*fig. 2 btm. right; fig. 3 left*), were derivative of the conditions of the theatre but existed as discrete objects in the space. The Choppa scrapes on the bare concrete floor as it rotates, periodically tensioning



Figure 3: The Theatre students interact with the architecture students, work during the performance; from left to right; Joe Esbenshade with the "Choppa"; Stephanie Gray and Amanda Miller interact with and project through and onto "Tensioned Layers" by Greg Hittler

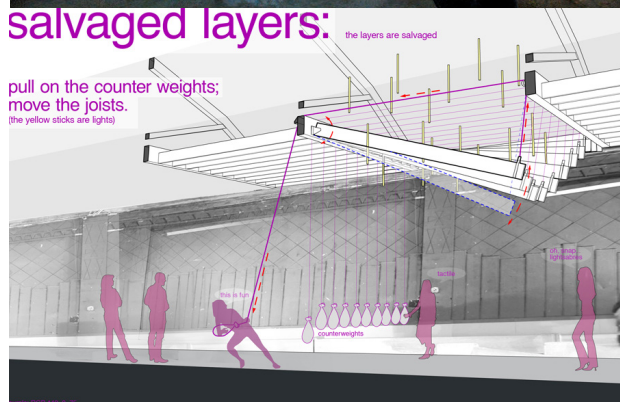


Figure 4: "Strata", by Mark Vanden Akker, Brad Wanek, and Luke Haas, allows the performers to actually manipulate the base building condition.

and releasing with a sharp bang. In this piece, the tensioning of the rods as they rotate against a fixed steel plate also completes a circuit which triggers a short burst of intense light from the center of the apparatus (the effect similar to a strobe). The Choppa calibrates the scale of the space both

through sight and the reverberation of the sound.

Other student proposals directly engaged the existing conditions such as the "Perch" by Paul Reynolds (*fig 2 top*), which discretely attaches itself to an existing opening, celebrating the moment of penetration through the wall while simultaneously respecting the integrity of the theatre by attaching through an elaborately contrived compression system, requiring no physical connection (violation) to the existing wall. The uncomfortably dramatic cantilever of the perch confronts and amplifies the audience members' understanding of the existing condition.

Still other student proposals, such as "Strata" from Luke Haas, Mark Vanden Akker and Brad Wanack (*fig. 4*), were site specific in the most literal way, actually manipulating the base building condition. In this group proposal, a bay of ceiling joists was painstakingly removed then re-attached to a series of water jet fabricated hinges, then counterweighted and allowed to pivot vertically through a series of cables and pulleys. Mirroring the realities of practice, the student's design needed to be modified to address some concerns raised by the building owner, and to accommodate some of the existing base building conditions discovered throughout the process. Fluorescent tubes suspended between the ceiling joists completes this installation, which confronts one's understanding of the space as a static, rectangular volume, celebrating and revealing the previously concealed depth defined by the roof trusses overhead.

Just as the history of the theatre was embedded in the patina of its walls, the students sought to celebrate the iterative nature of their process by re-introducing the process back into the finished work. In one instance, the Ball State students kept a digital log of recorded sounds from the actual fabrication of the work, and using Garage Band software mixed the sounds (of chop saws, drills grinders etc.) into an abstracted sound track used at the beginning of the performance, played as a background as the performers interacted with the installations. In another instance, a student salvaged sheet goods that had been used as a jig and work surface during the fabrication of another student's work, and digitally processed the material and re-introduced them as a finished product complete with screw holes, burn marks and paint splatter marking its previous use (*fig. 5*).

Likewise, the theatre students performance became a collage of the stories the students developed through their research, one overlapping another, like peeling paint revealing bits and pieces of the past. The interaction with the installations provided form, texture and inspiration for their movement. This interaction allowed the history to become more abstract, the movement less literal and helped to ground the performance in the immediacy and the experiential qualities of the space.

REFLECTIONS

Throughout the process, the activities of the architecture students differentiated themselves from that of preparing a stage set because they led rather than followed the choreography of the performance. While students were encouraged to think of installations that could define space, or were kinetic and ripe with potential for interaction, there was no narrative to which they were responding. By the same token, the theatre students were allowed to react / interact with the work on their own accord, and engaged the installations in bold and unexpected ways, amplifying the potential of the architecture student's projects. There was a very real excitement and synergy between the two groups, and there was great consensus among those involved in the project that the collaboration resulted in a whole that was in fact greater than the sum of the parts.

The semester culminated in a two night performance at the Irving Theatre in Indianapolis that was well attended, close to three hundred tickets were sold over the course of the two shows, and the performances met with an enthusiastic response by the audience. After the first performance on Friday night, one neighborhood resident posted the following entry titled SEE THIS SHOW on a neighborhood blog site:

"it is rare that I find something that excites me so that I want to *go door to door telling all my neighbors*""this is not amateurish in any way"...*"it is energetic, aggressive and not to be missed"*.⁹

The next night's performance was even better attended as word of mouth spread, but regrettably the installation had to be removed on the following day as the performance came to an end after a short but bright life. The following is an excerpt from a newspaper review of the performance:

"the imaginations of these talented architectural artist ran wild.....

*their flawless presentation places them among the most innovative scenic designers I have seen all year"*¹⁰

There was a great synergistic relationship between the two groups who shared a mutual respect. On many occasions the architecture students were overheard commenting that they "could not do what the performers do" and thoroughly enjoyed and learned from the way their work was brought to life through performance. The theatre student's were both appreciative and impressed by the work made available to them by the architects. A quote from one of the performers, Steph Gray, which appeared in the school newspaper, referred to the architecture students as "so talented it's crazy".¹¹

Despite these successes and a real shared sense of both accomplishment and ownership on the part of the students, in retrospect some structural constraints limited the full potential of the project. First, the schedules of the two groups did not align nor was the expectation of work equivalent. The architecture students were undertaking the project in the context of six credit hour design studio, meeting three full afternoons a week with significant expectation of work outside class. In short, it was their primary activity of the semester.

The theatre students, on the other hand, were taking the class as a three unit elective in the context of fifteen and in some cases 18 unit loads, meeting only once a week. Although a constant stream of information was made available to them via the methods previously discussed, due to the multiplicity of demands of their schedules they did not always have time to fully digest or track the information. Skype sessions where the two groups collaborated in real time were helpful, but needed to be limited as the minimal class time of the theatre students could not all be given over to conferences with the architects. As a result, on more than one occasion theatre students moved forward developing characters or actions based on architectural proposals that had been modified or abandoned altogether.

A second and perhaps more significant limitation stemmed from the inherent abstraction of virtual representation of ideas. Although the architects went to great length to represent their ideas using a variety of media previously discussed, there was no substitute for actually allowing the theatre students to interact with the finished installations in place. The Theatre students were able to make one trip as a group approximately three weeks be-



Figure 5: Actor Chris Ziegler interacts with “Extracted History” by Veronica Eulacivo; this project processed digital images and used a CNC router to create a series of panels generated directly from images of the base building condition.

fore the event to see the work being fabricated, which was extremely helpful, but with the work in various states of completion and remote from the site, still limiting. Since access to the building was restricted to six days prior to the event, and it took considerable time to transport and install the work, the ability of the theatre students to rehearse and develop movements with the finished pieces was minimal, and this understandably proved frustrating to the performers throughout the course of the semester. With the notable exception of the SWOPE piece previously described (fig. 1), the performers had very limited access to the installations prior to the event.

With that said, there was a tremendous energy in the theatre the week before the event as the architecture students were working (installing) alongside the theatre students (rehearsing) well into the

night. Much came together in the final week, but in some cases there remained a disjunction between the narratives generated by the theatre students and the physical qualities of the installations. In retrospect it would also be interesting to re-visit a similar project as a collaboration between architects and a dance company, who’s movements and choreography might tend to stem more freely from the qualities of the built work, as opposed to the theatre students who develop characters and narrative as part of their approach.

It’s interesting to note that despite the conceptual nature of the exercise, when asked to reflect on the project many of the architecture student’s comments centered around gaining “practical” skills and “real world” knowledge. We take this as a reflection of the complex logistics required to design, detail, build transport and install built work while simultaneously managing a fixed budget and schedule, rather than a reference to the conceptual framework provided the students at the outset of the project. One of the interesting potentials of a project such as this is the ability to bridge between the pragmatic and the abstract in ways that are very tangible and provide valuable lessons to the students involved on many different levels.

With all that said the intensive semester for all involved was a great success and a good learning experience. In general, the students were very positive and pleased with the semester, proud of what they had accomplished and grateful to have gained some insight into another creative discipline. The architecture students came away with a host of new skills and an understanding of the implications of their designs realized at full scale. The architecture students were reminded that buildings do not exist simply as objects, but instead are environments defined by human activity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Tschuni, Bernard; “Space and Events”, *The Discourse of Events* (London : Architectural Association 1983).
- 2 Kahn, Omar; Hanna, Dorita, “Performance / Architecture”; An Interview with Bernard Tschumi; *Journal of Architectural Education* 61 n.4 (May 2008) pp.52.
- 3 Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance*; The Lapis Press, Larkspur, CA, 1985, pp.27.
- 4 Kaye, Nick. *Site-Specific Art*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

- 5 Pearson, Mike and Michael Shanks. *Theater/ Archaeology*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.
- 6 Shank, Theodore. *Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Excerpt from the project description; group show *small/BIG* curated by Dr. Wes Janz, Terre Haute SWOPE Museum of Modern Art '10.
- 9 Excerpt from <http://foursquare266.blogspot.com> accessed April 23, 2010.
- 10 Review from "Indianapolis fun city finder" 4-27-2010.
- 11 Excerpt from "BSU DN On Line"; 4-22-2010.