

The War-hole Wall: Between the Ridiculous and the Profound

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This paper seeks to situate architecture between the ridiculous and the profound using pop art as a medium. Andy Warhol’s “piss paintings” also known as Oxidation paintings are the subject of study in this paper. A recent call to design a museum dedicated to the work of Warhol in New York envisioned the museum as a vital forum in which diverse audiences of artists, scholars, and the general public become galvanized through a ‘creative interaction’ with the art and life of Warhol. The controversial subject of Warhol’s work presented several critical inquiries and challenges as to what constitutes as creative public interaction? The author critically examined the relationship between pop art, architecture, and the ability to confront ridiculous realities that engage the public in a profound yet controversial act. This paper presents the design proposal as an act of ‘structured vandalism,’ which is supported by architecturally yet humorous illustrations.

INTRODUCTION

Seven decades have nearly passed since the British art critic Lawrence Alloway coined the term ‘pop art’ in 1954. A term referred to popular culture movement, which was influenced by mass media, mass-production and mass-culture [1]. Today it is almost inseparable to discuss pop art without mentioning Andy Warhol, the American artist who elevated the status of the pop art movement to a museum level. Warhol’s controversial life and ‘art products’ divided critics and the art community into two camps; one embraced the work and found it speak the language of our time, the other rejected it and became ultimately convinced that it contributed nothing to modern societies but more confusion among the public about the role of art in contemporary society. Among the profound voices of such criticism is the art critic Suzi Gablik. In her book, *Has Modernism Failed*, Gablik questioned the role of art in modern society and wondered if art is created for art’s sake, or is art for society’s sake? Gablik stated, “When anything becomes art, art becomes

nothing” and quoted Warhol admitting that artists ‘of his time’ made things with no meaning for people who didn’t need them. Gablik stated the following:

“Certainly the notion of things having no meaning outside themselves, of being valuable for their own sake, is relatively new, and we must see ourselves as light years away from the time, for instance, when art was used as a pedagogic tool for the church to illustrate religious stories, in an era when few people could read or write. Now, artists make things for people that they don’t need.” [2].

OXIDATION PAINTINGS

Andy Warhol’s “piss paintings” also known as Oxidation paintings are the subject of study in this paper. Warhol invited friends to urinate onto a canvas covered in metallic paint to cause oxidation. The experiments focused literally on a series of materials, chemical reactions, and body movement investigations for both the background medium and the variation of the maker’s fluid and food intake. Literature suggests that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Warhol focused for the first time on the exploration of abstraction [3]. While paintings he made in the 1960s with repeated blocks of imagery forming a patterned surface, and even some early experiments in the 1950s suggest a specific abstraction, his abstract works in the late ‘70s and ‘80s had no discernable representational imagery [4]. With these paintings, often created in large series that included mural-sized works, the artist dived into the beauty and mood of color and texture in a way he had not done before. Warhol’s delving into abstraction is not without references and plays between what’s real and what’s abstract.

Eli Anapur noted that Warhol’s piss painting production came after a rather dry period for the artist when his work was widely criticized as too superficial even for himself, After few unsuccessful exhibitions at the Whitney Museum, Stuart Morgan, a critic at Artforum announced that “In recent years his (Warhol) shows have been increasingly disappointing. Warhol’s work has always been empty, but now it seems empty-headed.” [5]. Surprisingly, One of Warhol’s piss paintings was sold at Christie’s in 2008 for an astonishing 1.9 million dollars.



Figure 1: One of Andy Warhol's Piss Paintings, aka "Oxidation Paintings".

LOWER EAST SIDE MANHATTAN REDEVELOPMENT

Timber in the City was the second national student's design competition that was organized by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) in the 2015-2016 academic year. The competition challenged participants to design a mid-rise, mixed-use complex consisted of affordable housing units, a New York City outpost of the Andy Warhol Museum and a new and expanded home for the historic Essex Street Market. The project site was in Manhattan's lower east side in the former Seward Park Urban Redevelopment Area. In 1967, New York City leveled 20 acres on the southern side of Delancey Street and removed more than 1,800 low-income mostly Puerto Rican families, with a promise that they would eventually return to new low-income apartments. Competing forces within the neighborhood and the development community long debated whether the area should be used to develop affordable or market rate housing, for commercial or cultural uses, or all of the above. This debate was waged in the community halls of local public school auditoriums and other city meeting places, in newspaper columns, co-op board meetings, and at private strategy sessions in individual homes, and eventually, a resolution was reached, leading to the currently planned Essex Crossing development [6]. The competition program was composed of three parts: the residential apartments units, the Essex street market, and the Andy Warhol Museum. The project presented many unique opportunities that were hard to find within a typical mixed-use project due to its incredibly complex program and its large footprint (approximately 300,000 square foot) on a limited site. That challenge provided opportunities to make substantial design decisions throughout our proposal.

THE PROPOSAL: CITY, BUILDING, AND JOINERY

The project proposal embraced the tectonics of joinery on three different scales of interventions: the city, the building, and the detail. Joinery with the city was envisioned through establishing a series of connections between the structure and the context to improve the conditions between the lower east side of Manhattan and the city. This relationship was conceived in the project through addressing significant characteristics of the neighborhood within the building parts, layout and massing. Joinery within the project examined how the project's three parts program was interlocked together. And

finally, joinery on the detail scale occurred at the critical moments when the tectonic of joining wood and steel were expressed throughout the building. The building's occupant observes the elaborated details, which enhanced the tectonics language of the building structure and construction systems. It was determined that the structure of the building would focus on using mass timber construction in an attempt to promote the idea of wood as a sustainable and naturally beautiful material. With the use of Cross Laminated Timber (CLT) construction systems, the opportunity arises to use unique joinery techniques to increase the visible tectonics of the structure. The structural joinery that was used to hold the building together performed similarly as the building does within the context of the city: as a joining element.

THE ANDY WARHOL MUSEUM

The call to design a museum dedicated to the work of Warhol in New York envisioned the museum as a vital forum in which diverse audiences of artists, scholars, and the general public become galvanized through a 'creative interaction' with the art and life of Warhol. The controversial subject of Warhol's work presented a set of difficult challenges as to what constitutes as creative public interaction? It was critical to explore the relationship between pop art, architecture, and the ability to confront ridiculous realities that engage the public in a profound yet controversial act. The museum proposal, although part of the mixed-use building, is profoundly integrated with the public and the urban context. The limitation of the site area required hiding part of the museum underground to fit the program on site. The museum then was wrapped around the northwest edge of the residential building and rise five-stories above the ground. The stacked five-stories gallery spaces faced northwest towards the Williamsburg Bridge. This intersection is the most heavily trafficked portion of the site reached by car; therefore capturing the travelers' attention with the gallery tower at the edge of the building and the northwest corner of the site. To further engage the public, the exterior wall of the five stories galleries was elevated above the ground to provide a covered entry plaza for pedestrians. The façade was pixelated into projected rectangular boxes conceived of copper, illustrating Andy Warhol's famous painting of Marylyn Monroe and projected onto the building using a fritted glass pattern and a stepped curtain system. The wall, playing the most important interactive role of the museum is named the 'War-hole Wall.'

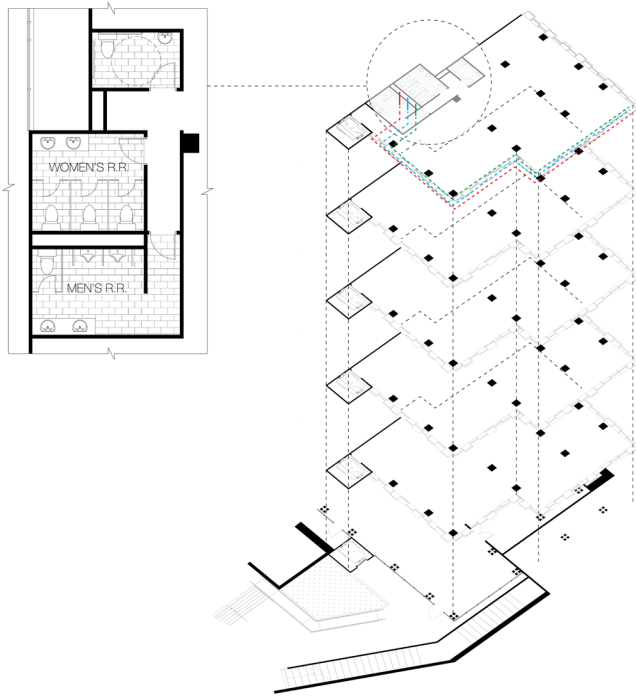


Figure 2: The Warhol's Museum Five Stackable Gallery Rooms with the top Public Creative Interaction Restrooms (Plumbing Network Shown in dashes).

THE WAR-HOLE WALL

Literature suggested that Warhol supported the idea of “reproduction” and believed that others should be able to produce his work. Reproduction is defined as ‘the act of making a copy of something.’ In the world of art, reproduction is associated with making a print of a masterpiece painting. Warhol developed techniques so others can be able to produce his work for him. Gablik et al., noted in their book, *Pop Art Redefined*, that in November 1963, Gene Swenson interviewed Andy Warhol as part of a series of interviews with eight painters titled “what is pop art?” In that interview, Warhol referred to the ability of anonymous reproduction with silkscreen prints and noted “I think somebody should be able to do all my paintings for me” He seemed to be in favor of the idea that no one would know whether his picture was his or somebody’s else” [7]. The War-hole Wall is a profound yet provocative proposition where visitors of the museum are allowed to leave an act of ‘structured vandalism’ on the work of Warhol. A paradoxical moment of the visitor’s experience occurred towards the end of their visit and at the top gallery space of the museum, which is dedicated to Warhol’s oxidation paintings. If the visitor admires the work of Warhol, he or (she) can contribute to his oxidation paintings by urinating on the wall, which is conceived of copper cladding, if the visitor rejects the work of Warhol, he or (she) can use the same act of structured vandalism before leaving the museum. The walls of the extruded window boxes are conceived from three parts: an inner Cross Laminated Timber (CLT) box, an outer copper box, and an envelope of a transparent glass box. The four sides of the exterior copper cladding are connected to a system of a network of piping that provides oxidation to the surface.

Pipes and plumbing systems are hidden in the cavity between the wood box and the copper box. Urine is collected from both men and women’s restrooms waterless urinals at the top museum gallery space and then treated before releasing it to fine sprayers at the top of the copper cladding. A mechanical ventilation system is installed in the gap between the two interiors and exterior boxes to keep the undesired smell away. The wall copper patina continually changes based on the frequency of visits to the urinals, resulting in a dynamic façade of the museum exterior wall.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between art and the public is of critical discourse, especially when the subject of art often challenges the perception of the public’s taste such as pop art. Architecture as the container of art plays a profound part in framing the role of art in societies, however, with the controversial nature of pop art, architecture has done little to none. The architecture of museums for example, whether neutral or expressive, often leaves a narrow room for the public to interact with the art being displayed. Art becomes disconnected and out of touch even with sincere attempts from artists for interactions such as Anish Kapoor’s work. Warhol’s piss paintings provided a basis to bring back the role of architecture in interacting with art. As Anapur said, regardless of the multiplicity of interpretations or their experimental potential, “*the importance of Oxidation paintings is in their engaged rapport with the world, where deeper meanings are uncovered through the obvious.*” The attempt to utilize the architecture of museums as a catalyst for the public interaction is the mediation between the ridicules and the profound. This proposal brings a great deal of controversy, provocation, and criticism, yet it is believed that pop artists such as Warhol would welcome the idea which uses the same act of structured vandalism to address both reactions of admiration and rejection. Warhol referred to the ability of anonymous reproduction with his silkscreen prints and thought that somebody should be able to do all his paintings for him. Beyond promoting curiosity and interaction through public art, this proposal allows for a ‘critical review process’ of the life and work of Andy Warhol through the public. The resulting product from that review process is indeed an art in itself by the measures of pop art, contributing to a public live painting, which acts as an indication of the general public opinion and perception.

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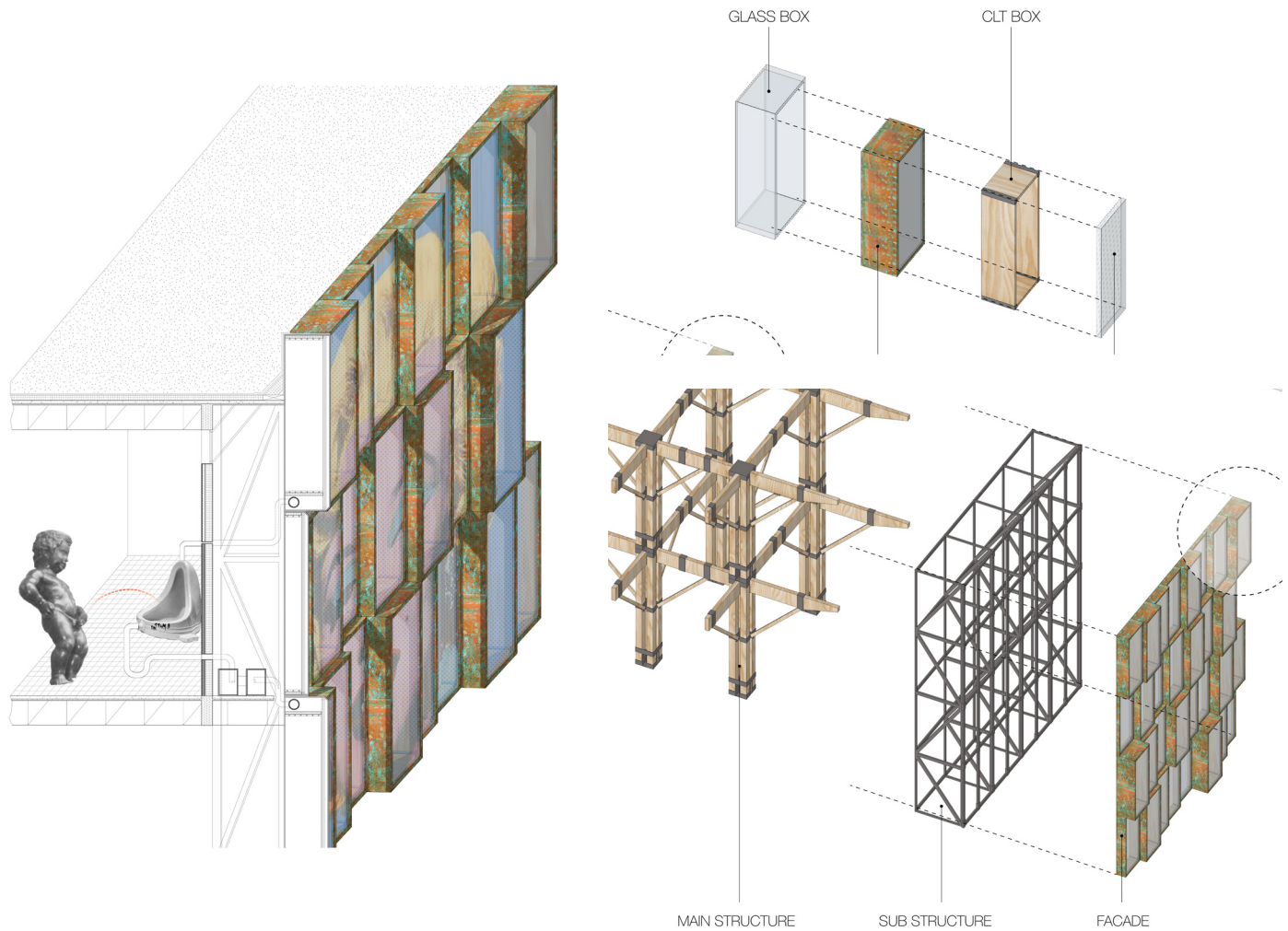


Figure 3: Elements and Assembly of The War-hole Wall. Substructure Cavity houses Mechanical Systems for The Treatment and Ventilation of Urine.

ENDNOTES

1. Alloway, L. *Topics in American art since 1945*, (1975).
2. Gablik, Suzi. *Has modernism failed?* (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1984).
3. Rosenblum, Robert, Christine Daulton, and Brandwine River Museum. *Factory work : Warhol, Wyeth, Basquiat*. (Rockland, Maine: Farnsworth Art Museum and Wyeth Center, 2006.)
4. The Andy Warhol Museum. 1998. "Art & Activities / Oxidations & Abstractions." accessed November 06, 2017. <https://www.warhol.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Oxidations-and-Abstraction.pdf>.
5. Anapur, Eli. *How Experimental were the Andy Warhol Piss Paintings Actually?* (2017).
6. "2015-2016 Timber in the City Design Competition," accessed November 06, 2017. <http://www.acsa-arch.org/programs-events/competitions/competition-archives/2015-2016-timber-in-the-city>. (2016)
7. Russell, John, Suzi Gablik, and Hayward Gallery. *Pop art redefined*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969).



Figure 4: The War-hole Wall as it stands to greet the travelers approaching the site from the Williamsburg Bridge.