Reflections on Installations

Architecture does not limit itself to buildings. Lately, it has been finding its way into very tight places like galleries or even parking spaces, affecting people's experience and soon disappearing without a trace. Conditions of contemporary culture, together with recent trends in architectural discourse, have caused many architects to embrace the small, temporary medium of installation as a vehicle for new statements in design. This is a role to which installation is well suited. It is not merely an inferior replacement for building commissions that won't come. Free from many of the contractual and economic complications that come with building commissions, installations provide the architect with opportunities for unique types of engagement with the world. Architects need to utilize the creative license enabled by installation in order to expand both the communicative and affective potentials of architecture. The installation exists at a critical distance from the normative powers that shape the built environment. This critical distance enables the installation not only to project new visions for the future, or produce unique perceptions in the present, but also to provoke new questions about contemporary life and its historical situation.

The rise of the installation as a mode of architectural production has been widely recognized in recent years, as evidenced by a symposium held at the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning in January 2012. Although this event aimed to provide a much-needed theoretical discussion around an important body of work, many questions were left unanswered or insufficiently posed, particularly questions about the meaning and ends of architectural installation. The genre of installation has been a fitting outlet for the imaginative use of computational geometry and fabrication technology, and many practitioners understandably have ambitions to transfer geometric and tectonic knowledge from the scale of a pavilion to the scale of a realized building. However, to theorize installation as a mere prototype or mock-up for future buildings is to overlook the expressive potentials inherent in the medium of installation. The reduction of installation to a role of test or prototype has been widely circulated in practice and pedagogy. This idea has been decisively formulated by the architect Nick Gelpi for example, who believes that installations are for architects what experiments are for scientists.1 This analogy posits an empirical approach to architecture, in which small-scale design is instrumentalized towards the production of innovations that may be applied to buildings.

Not only does this position reduce installation to a merely supportive role without any value in itself; it also contains an inherent fallacy. To assume that architectural techniques and effects may be simply transferred from an installation to a full-sized building is to overlook the fact that architecture's
psychological effects and semiotic meanings are dependent upon scale and context. A similar architectural technique will have a different cultural relevance when applied to a building rather than to an installation, because of its different conditions of production and reception. An analysis of Dan Graham’s 1978/2001 installation, *Two Adjacent Pavilions*, will clearly illustrate this point. Graham’s background as an artist does not render his pavilions less relevant to architectural discourse. The installation to be discussed is based on architectural precedents, and has inherently architectural attributes such as enclosure and structure. For the purposes of this essay, it will be considered an architectural installation.

In 1978, as part of the Documenta 7 exhibition in Kassel, Graham produced a pair of small, glass pavilions, sited side-by-side in an outdoor park setting. Each pavilion was constructed of a metal frame with large panes of mirrored glass, a palette of materials that had come to dominate buildings in urban contexts after the middle of the twentieth century. The two glass boxes could be occupied, and were completely identical except for this difference: one had a ceiling made of completely transparent glass, while the other was capped with an opaque surface. Mirrored glass tends to reflect light from one side, while it appears transparent from the other side. When viewed from the side of more intense lighting conditions, the glass becomes a mirrored surface. The different roof conditions of Graham’s *Two Adjacent Pavilions* resulted in an experiential asymmetry—in conditions of full sunlight, one pavilion appeared reflective from the exterior, while the other appeared transparent and revealed its interior to the viewer. The box with the opaque ceiling was dark on the inside, so that an occupant could look out without being seen by those looking in. In the glass-roofed box, the opposite was true: occupants were confronted with an infinitude of their own reflection, while being subject to the gazes of outside viewers.

From the vantage point of an exterior viewer, it is unknown whether the mirrored pavilion is occupied or empty. Visitors are confronted with the anxiety of being watched by an unseen observer, regardless of whether such an observer is present. This situation is much like the one described by Michel Foucault, in which “surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action.” The mirrored viewing pavilion implies an asymmetrical power relation, even if no one is actually inside looking out. In contrast, a person inside the other, glass-roofed pavilion knows that he or she is on display to exterior viewers, but the relentless mirroring of this glass container alienates the occupant from the outside world. Here, the properties of glass do not produce an open, extroverted relationship to the world as promised by the utopian aspirations of modernity. Rather, the occupant feels as though under scientific observation, while trapped in a private, hallucinatory *mise en abyme*.
These two-sided properties of glass are by no means exclusive to this installation. By 1978, the mirrored glass curtain wall was already ubiquitous in high-rise construction. The glass wall, although accompanied by a rhetoric of openness and honesty, actually produced an overbearing sense of authority. According to Jeff Wall, “the city becomes an object of surveillance for the building, and this specular relationship expresses what the city knows of its real social relationship with the building: the building rules the city.”

By repositioning the glass curtain wall from the realm of urban buildings to that of a small installation in an art context, Dan Graham made a critical statement about a prevailing trend in architecture, and its impact on contemporary human experience. The shift in scale and context worked to emphasize the anxiety of surveillance and division of power produced by glass-walled architecture. Free from the pragmatic rhetoric associated with a building, the installation became clearly legible as a critique of Modern architecture’s psychological and social effects.

Architects’ installations, because of their situation, size, and conditions of reception, can provoke critical interrogation of architecture’s role in contemporary life. To view installation as merely a full-scale test for building techniques is to miss the crucial point that the same techniques produce different meanings in an installation than they do in a building. In this way, installations show that the meaning and effect of architecture is always dependent upon context and scale.