Indeterminate Facade (Best Products Showroom), Houston, TX, 1975

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SITE, Inc. (originally an acronym for Sculpture in the Environment) is a New York-based firm, chartered in 1970, and dedicated to the exploration of "new concepts for urban/suburban visual environments."

While there is a clear commitment to the collective identity and collaborative decision-making at SITE (in part, one suspects, to counter the rampant egoism that has been so much a part of 20th century architectural practice) each of the four principal partners has a distinct part to play in the organization. Alison Sky, co-founder, artist and poet, directs SITE publications and works on project development; Emilio Sousa, the only trained architect of the group, heads up the production staff and oversees project execution; Michelle Stone, with a background in sociology and photography, manages the growing business concerns; and James Wines, co-founder and sculptor, speaks for the group on the lecture circuit, and does most of the theoretical writing and project conceptualization.

In the publications and projects of its first decade, SITE has put forth a striking case for a new and engaging public art of ironic inversion which it calls "de-architecture"—neither sculpture nor architecture in the conventional sense, but somewhere between the two. Implicit in the goals of "de-architecturization" is an irreverent rejection of the sacred maxims of the modern movement in architecture. To counter the reductive purism of Mies van der Rohe's "Less is more," SITE offers an architecture of idiosyncratic diversity and enriched iconography, "suspended somewhere between less and more." To combat the functional determinism of Sulliyan's "Form follows function," SITE flaunts an architecture where facade and walls have a life of their own, often related to the life of the highway or the parking lot, an architecture conceived from the outside in, rather than vice versa. In opposition to the boundless "techno-faith" which gave us Le Corbusier's "A house is a machine for living," SITE introduces reminders of diminishing resources and the traffic jam. Images of delightful ambiguity blur the crisp and rational edges of International Style clarity, and a prevalent sense of humor, however black at times, pokes holes (at times quite literally) in the all-too-solemn facades of the universal order. Rejecting the hallowed notion of architecture as a series of formal and spatial relationships, SITE prefers to think of architecture as commentary and communication. Where many contemporary architects might agree with SITE's general criticism of the alienating legacy of the modern movement (it is, after all, a fashionable stance these days), few are in agreement with the methods proposed to remedy the situation.

A particularly sore spot among design professionals is the way in which SITE seems to side-step the problems of functional space by reducing the "architecture" of their projects to, basically, "found objects." Currently their concepts are based on a simple rectangular enclosure which comprises the standard, anonymous (and energy-efficient) prototype for supermarkets, showrooms, and department stores along every commercial strip in America. Such buildings, along with their environs, then become the raw material for transformation in the art process. (This is particularly irksome because history has lead us to expect that art will serve the purposes of architecture, not the other way around.) Each of SITE's projects expands upon some intrinsic ingredient already present in these esthetically neutral structures and settings. And it is precisely in the juxtaposition of the routine and the ambivalent in a place where we least expect departures from the ordinary that we encounter the wonderful magic of SITE's ironic commentary.
What communicates most directly with the viewer, of course, is the engaging imagery of SITE's fantastic facades—strong, bold statements meant to be legible from the highway at 55 mph. Their appeal is to the reflexive, subconscious responses of a public "distrustful of technology, economy and institutions" in a world of "contraction and short supply." James Wines has likened the appeal of these buildings which crack, peel, crumble and tilt to that of recent Hollywood disaster movies such as Earthquake and The Towering Inferno whose "fundamental attraction has been to provide a disillusioned generation, weary of political deception and technological folly, with a means of vicarious revenge." In contrast to the muscle-flexing of the World Trade Center, this is the anti-heroic imagery of the 97-lb. weakling with whom we can all sympathize.

A French reviewer has seen SITE's architecture of catastrophe as a response "to the unconscious desires of an America which has discovered pessimism..." but pessimism seems to play no part at all in the conceptualization of the work. To quote Wines once again, "It is the arbitrary, the fragmentary, the 'missing parts' that generate vitality in the city...In this age when the monolithic institutions seem doomed to crumble under their own weight, missing parts constitute the humanist questions that will replace autocratic answers. Missing parts are the positive interpretation of the negative, the search for less in a world obsessed by more." (And people smile as they drive by.)

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of SITE's work is the way in which the projects have captured the public imagination and have become instant landmarks, lending a sense of identity and even of proprietary pride to the communities in which they stand. Within a month after its completion, the Indeterminate Facade in Houston was a regular stop on the tourist bus route, and crowds gather faithfully in Sacramento every Saturday evening to witness the ritual of the closing of the notch. Architectural interpretations become factors in the local mythology ("That's the Alamo after it lost the battle," "Superman tried to leap this building in a single bound...he missed," and so forth.) The buildings are controversial, but the controversy gets people talking to one another.

Given the unconventional nature of these projects it may seem a marvel that they ever get built. But just as Gaudi had his Count Guell, SITE has its kindred patron in Sydney Lewis, president of Best Products (the largest catalog-showroom merchandiser in the country) and well-known collector of contemporary art. (Many a SoHo loft has been furnished with appliances picked from the Best catalog in exchange for an artwork or two.) Seven of the eight completed SITE projects have been for Best and others are in the works. The other completed SITE project, the Ghost Parking Lot in Hamden, was also commissioned by an art collector, David Bermant, president of National Shopping Centers.

There would seem to be a clear contradiction between much of SITE's populist-humanist rhetoric and the promotion of big-business consumerism which is the ultimate effect of their work. Without adding significantly to the cost of construction, SITE's modified showrooms have consistently attracted record volumes of customers. And while some may take a certain delight in the idea of the crumbling corporate image, Best clearly knows what sells.

Judith C. Rohrer
Guest Curator
Manchester Center, Vermont
Peeling Facade (Best Products Showroom), Richmond, VA, 1972

Best Products Notch Showroom, Sacramento, CA, 1977
PLEASE NOTE: James Wines will deliver a MATRIX Evening Lecture on Thursday, May 8, 1980 at 7:30 p.m.

Works in MATRIX:

PHOTOGRAPHS OF COMPLETED PROJECTS

Peeling Facade (Best Products Showroom), Richmond, VA, 1972.
Color view of facade from SE, 10 1/2" x 13 3/4".
Black & white detail of brickwork, 10 1/2" x 13 1/2".

Indeterminate Facade (Best Products Showroom), Houston, TX, 1975.
Color view of facade from SW, 10 1/2" x 13 3/4".
Black & white view of W facade from neighboring houses, 10 1/2" x 13 1/2".

Color view of entrance corner, open from SW, 9 1/2" x 13 3/4".
Black & white view of entrance corner, closed from SW, 9" x 13 3/4".

Color view looking W toward Dixwell Ave., 9 1/4" x 13 3/4".
Black & white detail of buried car, 9" x 13 3/4".

Best Products Tilt Showroom, Towson, MD, 1978.
Color view of W facade from across highway, 9 1/4" x 13 3/4".
Black & white view of facade from the S (elevated) end, 9" x 13 3/4".

Best Anti-Sign (Best Products Distribution Center), Ashland, VA, 1978-9.
Color view of completed "anti-sign" from the SW, 9 1/4" x 13 3/4".
Black & white view of work in progress, 9" x 13 3/4".

Color view of W facade, close-up, 9 1/4" x 13 3/4".
Black & white photograph of technical drawing, facade details, 9" x 13 3/4".

Color view of facade from S showing all 4 stages, 9 1/4" x 13 3/4".
Black & white detail of facade, from between 2nd and 3rd stages, 9" x 13 3/4".

MODELS OF PROJECTED WORKS

Forest Building (split building), 1978, cardboard and wood, 27" x 25" x 6".

Forest Building (alternate proposal), 1978, cardboard and wood, 27" x 25" x 6".

Packing Lot Building, 1978, cardboard, wood and plaster, 25" x 25" x 6".

Terrarium Building, 1979, cardboard and wood, 25" x 24" x 6".

DRAWINGS

Indeterminate Facade Project, 1975, ink on mylar, 25" x 64".

Notch Project, 1977, ink on mylar, 30" x 42".

Packing Lot Project, 1978, ink on paper, 14" x 17".

Forest Building (two views), 1978, ink on paper, 14" x 17".

Forest Building (three views), 1978, ink on paper, 14" x 17".

Forest Building (overview and details), 1978, ink on paper, 14" x 17".

Forest Building (facade), 1978, ink on paper, 14" x 17".

Terrarium Project, 1978, ink on paper, 14" x 17".

Terrarium Project (detail), 1979, ink on paper, 14" x 17".

Metamorphosis Project, 1979, ink on paper, 14" x 17".
Selected solo exhibitions:
Columbia University School of Architecture, NYC '73; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery, NYC '80.

Selected group exhibitions:
Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC Biennale '74; XL Venice Biennale: A proposito del Molino Stucky '75; Centre Pompidou, Paris Architectures Marginales aux U.S.A. '75; Australian National Gallery, Sydney Illusion and Reality '77; Rosa Esman Gallery, NYC Architecture—Service, Art, Craft '78; Amerika Haus, West Berlin The Automobile Exhibition '78; Pallazzo Grassi, Venice, Italy Venerezia '78; Cooper-Hewitt Museum, NYC Ornamen in the 20th Century '78; La Fondation Nationale des Arts Graphiques et Plastiques, Paris L'art et la ville '78; Hudson River Museum, Yonkers One Thousand Boxes '79; Hochschule der Kunst, West Berlin Metropolis '79; Denver Art Museum Reality of Illusion '79; Museum of Modern Art, NYC Buildings for Best Products '79-'80; Vancouver Art Gallery Architectural References '80.

Selected bibliography by James Wines:


SITE has published a series of magazines and books on art and the environment under the collective title ON SITE. There have been six ON SITE publications since 1972. The most recent, ON SITE 7, was published by McGraw-Hill in 1976 as Unbuilt America: Forgotten Architecture.

Selected bibliography about SITE:


Special thanks to Patti Phillips of SITE for her help in preparing this exhibition.

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