

In Advance of an Undone-Redone World

Dennis Maher

“In the fusion of place and soul, the soul is as much of a container of place as place is a container of soul, both are susceptible to the same forces of destruction.”

Robert Pogue Harrison

Our Most Maligned Mask

We can no longer deny that the myth of economic recovery is the elusive agent of architecture's mainstream modus-operandi. The global market instabilities that we have witnessed in the recent past, the consolidations of wealth into the hands of the very few, and the slow and steady disappearance of the middle-class, have revealed to us the tremendous divide that exists between social, everyday realities and the warm and cozy provisions of architecture's security blanket. According to Donald Kunze, it is the nature of the system to place us in an impossible position. The abyss that we must confront, Kunze argues, is the unconscious ideology of architecture itself; “Post mortem is that historical moment wherein architecture's symbolic contract with capital is put on stage, naked to all.”¹ For the past ten years, while I have been living and working in Buffalo, New York, the terms of this symbolic contract have become ever-more clear to me.

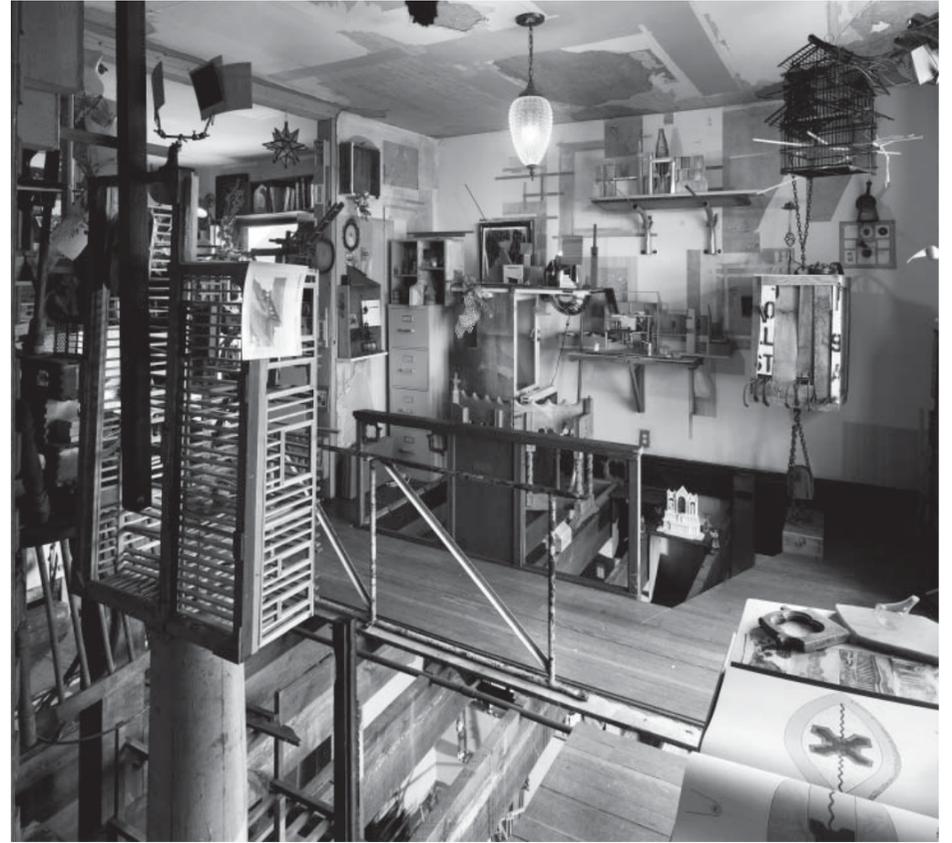
Buffalo is the second-poorest city in the U.S. It is the site of wide income gaps and exacerbated racial divisions. The population is half what it once was. The public school system is a disaster. There are 20,000 vacant properties. Demolition is a growth industry. There are those who joke that Buffalo is thirty years behind the times, and others who sardonically prophesize that it is thirty years ahead. And yet, I have never seen the city more optimistic than it is at this moment. Beneath the cloak of illness, there is a body that breathes the air of its own exigencies and lives out the fantasy of its recuperative will. Buffalo is clearly not Detroit, but even if it was, it would not know it. The mask that it wears is that of an unwitting ghost, so life-like and yet so malleable that it can convince even the wearer of innumerable other incarnations. Beneath such artifice, the city suspends its disbelief. The same disguise is worn by other similar cities, promulgating nothing other than capital's need to destroy itself. The old myth gives way to another: failure will open the way to better social and material conditions and will find the world anew. This is the message of Andrew Herscher's *The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit*, which identifies, amid the shells of industrial ruin, the seeds of propitious social and cultural orders.² In Herscher's field guide, decay, collapse and dis-function instigate a fantastic, imaginary realm of utterly real possibilities. In my own work, the shape of such territory is glimpsed through layers of accumulated transformations: erasures, re-coverings, un-doings and re-doings. I work with the residue of lost places and cast-aside artifacts in order to accelerate our passage through an ethereal endgame. The vignettes that emerge in my projects can at times be mistaken for new protocols, the aspirations of places shifting in and out of crisis. As the built and the un-built are continuously reformulated, subterranean currents carry a city toward its next iteration.

Matter in Motion

From 2004-2009, I earned a significant portion of my living by working as a demolition laborer in Buffalo. During that time, tensions between creation and destruction saturated the urban landscape with material, social, and psychological effects. In an environment of such intense unmaking, the movements of matter can splinter the mind's perceptions. On demolition sites, I came to know a strange, even perverse, sense of freedom. As materials were indiscriminately pushed and pulled, the world acquired an elastic quality. There was a lightness implicit in destroying that which we ordinarily regard to be solid, in setting change in motion, and in sensing irreversibility. When spaces were opened beyond previously perceptible limits, broader horizons beckoned.

Today, within my house on Fargo Avenue in Buffalo, echoes resound from my work on demolition sites. At any given moment in the house, the stored energy of matter is released, upsetting the apparent stability of the house's walls, floors and ceilings. Simultaneously, somewhere in the surrounding city, the divider separating one space from another is forcefully undone. Among acts of cutting and re-cutting,

layering and re-layering, the entropies of house and city collide. The breakages of one become the repairs of another. If we look closely at the fallen shards, we can behold a network of city-wide circulations. We can see the places where residual objects accrue—thrift stores, flea markets, estate sales, antique shops, salvage yards and curb sides—the coordinate points of an invisible network of flows. In my house, I reinvent and intensify movements from point to point. The house's interior elements—furnishings, adornments, and surfaces—are transitional objects which bridge the divide between the city that we see and the city that we can only imagine.



Enter the Fargo House

I founded the Fargo House with the goals of opening the door to an alternative city image and of building a shared space for our collective imagination of house and city. The environment of the Fargo House is defined as much by the objects and materials that are aggregated inside as it is by the boundaries of the structure. I invite people to the house to realize projects and to actively participate in envisioning the world within and beyond the house's walls. This work has engaged tradespeople, students, teachers, artists, architects and others. Contrary to the self-conscious determinism that pervades the design professions, design within the house is a matter of assembling and re-assembling disparate, even contradictory, pieces of information. The house is both a real and symbolic locus for creative synthesis. Incompleteness and indeterminacy are the house's strengths. I do not look for simplification or efficiency but for heterogeneity. Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver have identified the many ways that invention proceeds through the assembly of pre-existing things.³ The openness that they have embraced is increasingly important for architecture today, as the discipline has become overly concerned with input/output relationships through computational design and with the unfulfilled promises of new material fabrication. It is my conviction that the landscape of late-capitalism provides a fundamentally different opportunity for architecture to engage. Within this context, the imaginative faculties of individuals, combined with the special knowledge embedded in existing materials and objects, hold the greatest potential for the production of new architectural forms and spaces. The specificity of artifacts—their surfaces, textures, joints, edges, components and contours—in addition to the use values and memories laden within them, intensify our awareness of the non-measurable aspects of aesthetic experience. We must learn to regard such existing things as initiators of change and as building blocks for as-of-yet unseen organizations.

¹ Donald Kunze, David Bertolini, and Simone Brott, eds. *Architecture Post Mortem: The Diastolic Architecture of Decline, Dystopia, and Death*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2013.

² Andrew Herscher. *The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012.

³ Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver. *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*. New York: Doubleday, 1972.