Truth and Lies

ARCH 384 Research Essay
Rosanna Ho
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"The works of the past always influence us"

- John E. Hancock

      Both art and architecture are shaped by the works of the past. Whether as inspiration, point of departure, or source for rebellion, precedents are employed by artists and architects during the process of design. They provide examples of visual and spatial languages that critique the current political, cultural and geographic contexts. A pavillion design competition for Calgary's ArtCity Festival has provided a unique opportunity to explore the important role of precedents in both art and architecture. The design also aims to examine the element of interaction between these two visual forms of artistic expression. The pavilion design is thus, a resultant of lessons gained through precedental studies, and a framework to encourage interrelationships between the built environment and the artwork that it contains.

      The Peepshow pavillion aims to create a dialogue between the viewer and the artist in an urban condition. This year, the pavilion is designed to explore the theme "Truth and Lies". It becomes

".. a forum for critical discourse surrounding ideas of replication, illusion and fiction. The opposing concepts of "Truth" and "Lies" invite a redefinition of how art, design, and architecture reside within a personal dialogue. "Truth and Lies" are concepts and conditions which express a clear and undeniable relationshp with their context. It is an intriguing theme through which to explore art and design. Opinion, individual perspective, and intention can be reexamined through values of fiction, interpretation and clarity of concept."

-ArtCity Website (http://www.art-city.ca)

The Pavillion

The pavilion challenges how art relates to urban space and the individual's perception of accepted truths. The design is a simple box that shifts and unfolds. At first glance, the pavilion is a simple wooden structure. Situated on a corner lot, its main façade runs parallel to sidewalk traffic where an angled mirrored surface subtly reveals hints of its interior to the passerby. Once inside, art and the exterior context are reflected and juxtaposed with one another through a series of mirrored surfaces. The position of the visitor, the lapse of time in a time-dependent art piece, the changing exterior light conditions, and the street traffic all become involved in the ever-changing dialogue between art and city context. This pavilion offers a framework to explore the shifting dynamic between reality and illusion; the perception of the "art", the "city" and the "reflection; and finally, the interrelationship between "truth" and "lies".

The artwork to be displayed in the pavilion has not yet been chosen. For this reason, the pavilion was designed with flexibility in mind. As many contemporary artists work in the field of New Media, the pavilion is configured to accommodate multimedia equipment. New Media artwork offers new ways to explore new concepts and challenge old preconceptions. Artist such as Nam June Paik use moving images to explore ideas of temporality and image making. Artists that use Paik as a precedent will find that the Peepshow Pavilion offers the opportunity to juxtapose the fictional "image" of the artwork with another "image" – the reflection of a dynamic city.

The Precedents

Site Context

The competition requirements state that the pavilion must be contained within the size of one parking space. Within this limited dimension, the pavilion frames a reflection of Calgary's city context in its interior. The angling of the mirrored surface that creates the reflection draws its inspiration from New York City's Whitney Museum. In the museum, several angled windows create unusual views of the city. Both the Whitney and the Peepshow Pavilion subverts the standard orthagonal view of the city grid.
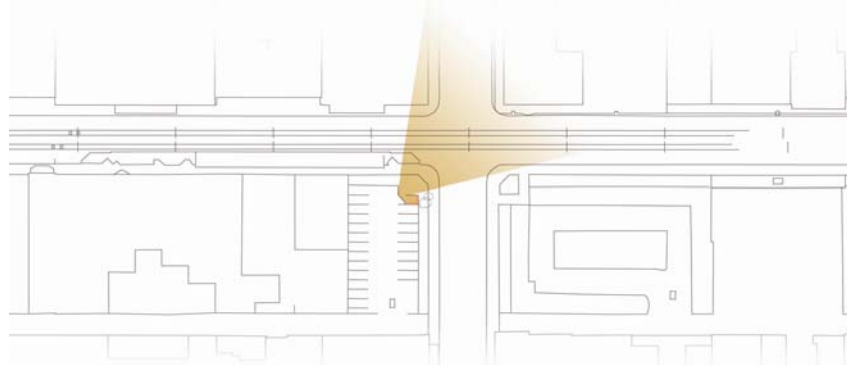

Whitney Museum   PeepShow Pavilion Site Plan

The pavilion is sited within a parking lot of downtown Calgary – a city bustling with new construction. The pavilion's aesthetic is originally derived from the simple wooden shacks that are commonly seen in construction sites. As parking lots are often development sites awaiting construction, the Peepshow pavilion is designed to reflect the ephereral nature of these simple shacks, while offering the surprise of contemporary artwork within.

Structure and Skin

The pavilion shifts and slides closed during the night to create a sturdy storage box. In its open position, the visitor is drawn into the pavilion through its only opening. Inside, artwork is displayed against the two walls that provide a 600mm cavity where electrical wiring, sound systems, etc, can be hidden from view.
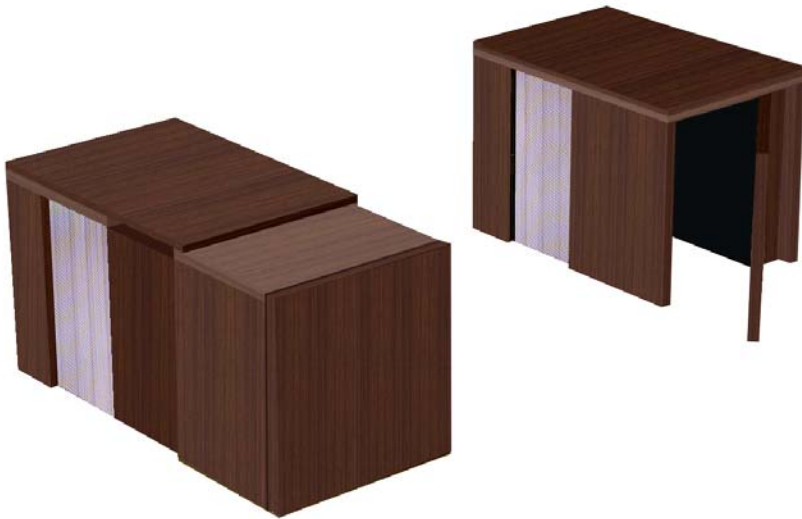
Maya Lin's house in the Colorado Rockies is a project that reflects a similar attitude of simplicity and shifting assembly. Both Lin's house and the pavilion are unassuming wooden constructions. Her clients wanted their house to express a reserved character, while still capturing the grandness of the Rockies. In Lin's intervention, she sites the house in a valley instead of the typical hilltop. Screens open up to reveal light and view into the house. Both projects are quietly sited and also open and close through the utilization of shifting elements. Through the art of "unfolding", spatial relationships between the interior and exterior are revealed.

Maya Lin: Colorado Box House   Bernard Khoury: B018

Bernard Khoury's B018 project in Beruit provided the inspiration for the use of mirrors to create a dialogue between the interior and exterior. Khoury's nightclub is situated in a emotionally charged zone where memories of political unrest are still fresh in the minds of its citizens. His intervention is a sunken building where the roof is the only exposed element on the surface. During the night, when the club is in use, the giant roof is lifted to reveal a mirrored surface on its underside. The mirror reflects the interior activities of the club to the partygoers arriving from the surface level. From within the club, visitors have a reflected view of the exterior context. Though the political conditions of Calgary are dissimilar to Beirut, both projects untilize the same mirror technique for its simplicity in converying complex conditions. The mirrors create illusions of the interior and exterior – juxtaposing what is seen and what as actually experienced when one physically crosses the threshold between the "interior" and "exterior". In the Peepshow pavilion, reflections "replicate" artwork. Long thin strips of mirrors reflect the art into broken fragments. The viewer stands in a space sandwiched between the orginal artpiece and its distorted twin.

Terragni: Casa Del Fascio

The Casa Del Fascio in Como, Italy, illustrates many of Terragni's architectural preoccupations. The façade is, at first glance, a simple grid. However, upon closer inspection, one will notice that each square differs in its arrangement of horizontal and vertical elements. Terragni also utilizes the technique of sandwiching florescent fixtures between his panes of glass – creating the constant effect of light emanating from the exterior walls. During the day, natural light penetrates into the interior while artificial light provides illumination during the night. On the Peepshow Pavilion's north wall, florescent lights are sandwiched between two pieces of polycarbonate panels. It borrows Terragni's lighting technique to create an illusion of lighting consistency through artificial means of light replication.

dRMM is a London firm that specializes in designing buildings that use "off the shelf" components. Each of their designs are innovative and site specific, yet using the most common of materials. The Peepshow pavilion's aesthetic, price limitations, and need for ease in assembly neccecitated that its materials be easily found and affordable. Thus, all pavilion components can be purchased at any Home Depot. In this project, ordinary construction materials play the role of artistic mediator.

Closing Remarks

The Peepshow Pavllion is an exploration of architecture's role in creating a dialogue between site, art, and its viewers. The theme "Truth and Lies" is an excellent illuminary in which to challenge these relationships through questioning the role of "reality versus art" and "image versus reality". The pavilion design makes a critical site intervention through carefully considered techtonics - with the help of certain precedents drawn for their aesthetic and architectonic qualities. Critical designs, through the help of precedents open the

"… possibilities for conversations, debates and realizations about how and what artists, architects and designers do and how they see and shape the world around us. By programming underused, neglected and temporary spaces, the [pavilion] enters into environments where the public live and work, re-shaping and re-defining Calgary's - and Calgarians' - everyday landscape."

-ArtCity Website (http://www.art-city.ca)

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