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## Allan Wexler

### The Man Who Would Be Architecture

BY JOYCE BECKENSTEIN

Opposite: *Scenic Overlook* (detail), 2009. Granite, 60 x 8 ft. Above: *Gardening Sukkah*, 2000. Wood, wheels, gardening implements, eating utensils, and ritual objects, 108 x 108 x 120 in.



Above: *Drywall Drawing*, 2010. Drywall, screws, and pencil, 8 x 8 x 8 ft. Below: *Scaffold Furniture*, 1988. Plywood, drywall, 2 x 4s, paint, pine, leather, glass, cup, silverware, napkin, and bulb, 4 x 4 x 3 ft.



Two bird nests cradling speckled eggs sit in a glass vitrine in Allan Wexler's living room. Propped beneath them on the floor is his drawing *Positions of Plywood* (2007), six softly rendered planes afloat on ochre paper. The drawing points to the nest above. "I want to be architecture," he says.<sup>1</sup> Wexler, whose works defy easy categorization, makes architecture-inspired sculptures and installations that explore the meaning of this statement. He's less concerned with creating space, more concerned with the human spirit that dwells within it—something he locates in objects as ordinary as a screw head embedded in Sheetrock.

"I want to exploit the insignificant to generate something complex," he explains, as he discusses *Drywall Drawing* (2010), included in an exhibition at the University of Manitoba School of Architecture, in Winnipeg, Canada. Mission accomplished: he's squeezed a universe into an eight-by-eight-foot cube. The cube's Sheetrock interior is affixed with crosshead (Phillips) screws oriented in random positions. Using a pencil and straight edge, Wexler extended the + shapes to draw a disorienting web of intersecting lines across the walls, floor, and ceiling. The completed drawing, reminiscent of an astrological map, creates a dizzying space for the viewer who, upon entering, feels like an astronaut in a spacecraft, adrift in the cosmos. "When we cross a threshold, we change a space and it changes us," Wexler remarks. He intends this complex expansion as a metaphor for human conflict: Do we want the security of confined space or the uncertainty that comes with limitless freedom? After photographing himself inside the finished work, Wexler then digitally extended the vectors across his image, existentially trapping himself in that quagmire of his own devising, a finite speck in an infinite universe.

Ronald Feldman, director of Feldman Fine Arts, understood the ambiguities in Wexler's disarmingly simple constructions when he began to show them in 1984: "This non-practicing architect was brilliant about architecture as a medium for sculpture." Feldman recalls *Small Buildings* (1979), a collection of miniature deconstructed and reconstructed versions of a generic hut that presages one of Wexler's major themes, the home. Some buildings are strapped shut with woven wooden laths to keep out the elements and nosy bodies; others with pitched roofs and cement slabs suggest a child's concept of "my house"; and a cobble of sticks set with glass renders the house a vulnerable home and riffs on postmodern architecture gone awry. "Wexler loves to push, to see how much he can get out of a thing," Feldman says.

In the '80s, Wexler expanded what's become a lifetime process—deconstructing, reconstructing, and reinventing houses, tables, chairs, and utensils to

understand how and why a construction process works. His *Scaffold Furniture* (1988) includes a comically crisscrossed pedestal, an armature that supports a lowly cup. But this is not furniture. It is a sculptural diagram of the physical forces required to keep a cup level on the table. And where there are physical forces, there is psychological angst. Wexler serves up security and insecurity: Can we look at a vulnerable cup and not remember spilled coffee?

Next he asked if there is a sculptural or architectural equivalent to the ritual of drinking coffee. To find out, he invited four people to participate in an interactive performance piece, *Coffee Seeks its Own Level* (1990). They sat at a table covered with a white cloth and set with four coffee cups connected by tubes. Everyone had to sip in unison or the coffee would slobber all over the cloth.

Then, pressing the coffee stains for something more, Wexler traced the spills left on the cloth and used them as patterns for a series of ceramic vessels that he made to cover the corresponding stains. The result, *Coffee Stained Coffee Cups* (1990) casts the performance as sculpture and elevates the second-by-second miscalculations of human ritual to the level of timeless fine art.

The impulse to question assumptions about art and commingle sculpture, architecture, and performance grew out of the tumultuous '60s, when America was in the throes of the Vietnam War, as well as the feminist, civil rights, and sexual revolutions. A baby boomer who came of age during that era, Wexler studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he found role models urging him to blur the edges. His RISD mentor, Austrian architect Raymond Abraham, encouraged him to break the rules and "make art that irritates because it causes change." Another teacher, Michael Webb of Archigrams, belonged to an avant-garde architecture group that promoted hypothetical and fantasy projects. Wexler also admired Walter Pichler, whose architecture-inspired sculpture is more about the poetics than the function of architecture.

"I didn't become an architect, because I preferred experimenting with architec-



Above: *Coffee Stained Coffee Cups*, 1990. Assorted ceramic cups on table with white cloth, 34 x 38 x 48 in. Below: *Sukkah with Furniture Made from its Walls*, 1990. Plywood, wood, and paint, 8 x 8 x 12 ft.



tural forms and materials as a studio artist," Wexler says. In the '90s, his experiments shifted from works focused on part-to-whole relationships to installations, including a series of sukkahs probing relationships between humans and their settings.

The sukkah, a ceremonial outdoor hut, is traditionally used to celebrate the harvest during the Jewish festival of Sukkot, when worshippers adorn its open roof with seasonal foliage. They share meals and often sleep inside it. *Sukkah with Furniture Made from its Walls* (1990), exhibited at the Israel Museum, Tel Aviv, in 1990, is built from a cube, a form Wexler likes because it's "basic, bland...like Tofu, it will absorb any flavor." He built the cube from plywood, then cut table and chair parts from its walls. The openings left by the cutouts form odd, whimsical windows. When assembled and placed inside the sukkah, the table and chairs provide a dining ensemble for use during and after the harvest. Nothing, aside from the title of the work, suggests a religious function. The secular is deliberately contiguous with the spiritual.

*Gardening Sukkah* (2000/09) also shelters secular and spiritual functions under one (non) roof. Most of the year, this useful gardening shed-on-wheels holds rakes, planters, and a box of Miracle-Gro—a teasing segue to its one-week ceremonial use during Sukkot.



Above and detail: *Crate House*, 1991. 8-foot cube, wood, household furniture, appliances, utensils, and 4 wooden crates, crates: 65 x 22 x 43 in. Right: *Desk*, 2009. Wood, concrete bricks, latex paint, and wax, 105 x 27.25 x 27.25 in.

Then, the roof slides open to be arrayed with a canopy of foliage and fruit. Dishes, wine glasses, and candles replace flowerpots, spades, and gardening gloves. "It's a provocative space," Wexler says. "When the roof is open, one is vulnerable, no longer protected by an architectural element, but protected by something larger." Each object within the shed, given its special station, is similarly invested with meaning and memory. The spade is as noble as the wine glass.

Describing the influence of Zen thinking on John Cage's famous 4'33", Kyle Gann writes, "if you can turn toward the whirr of the wind...or the pulse of the ceiling fan...[you] realize that the division you habitually maintain between art and life, between beautiful things and commonplace ones, is artificial...[it] deadens you to the magic around you."<sup>1</sup> No composed music is played during this four-minute, 33-second concert, which begins when a performer opens the lid of a grand piano. The audience listens and savors the background sounds—coughs, creaks, outside traffic—then the performer closes the lid and exits. Wexler, much influenced by Cage, similarly finds metaphysical juice in humble everyday experience, something he learned to do as a child.

He grew up in an observant Jewish family where the flow of ritual, from the scrambling of morning eggs to the restocking of cupboards in preparation for the Passover Seder, closely quartered the sacred and the profane. Crossing from one realm to the other was as natural as walking from the kitchen to the bedroom. As an artist, Wexler recognizes that the imprint of home is the architecture of childhood, the armature for adult memory, following Gaston Bachelard's belief that "all really inhabited space bears the essence... of home." For Bachelard, home embodies the "thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind."<sup>2</sup> Wexler extends this idea, perceiving domestic rituals and their trappings as the bones, and the relationships associated with them as the heart, of who we are.



When the University Gallery of the University of Massachusetts commissioned Wexler to contribute to an exhibition encapsulating what life would be like in the final decade of the 20th century, he wanted to imbue his piece with reverence for how people might live that life. On the premise that Americans would ultimately need to economize and pare down their technology-driven existence, he created *Crate House* (1991). Taking a 20th-century leap over Henry David Thoreau's no-frills cabin at Walden Pond, Wexler wondered, "Can I fit four functional rooms into an eight-foot cube?" He did it by assembling a kitchen, bedroom, living room, and bath in four ship-style, plywood crates-on-wheels.

TOP: COURTESY KYLE GANN; BOTTOM: ERNST GÖTTHEUS MUSEUM, HAZEN, GERMANY / BOTTOM: COURTESY RONALD FEJERMAN FINE ARTS

Not too far adrift from Le Corbusier's notion of a house as a "machine for living," these crated rooms contain pots and pans, a refrigerator, and a table for two; a fold-down bed, a desk, and a TV. Each crate slides into the cube through one of four openings, though the eight-foot space accommodates only one room at a time. Wexler wants viewers to slow down and think about the rituals that define each "room"—making coffee, setting the table, readying for bed—and to engage the transient joys in the stuff of life, just as Cage absorbed its sounds. Michael Fehr offers a practical interpretation of *Crate House*: "One can understand it as a blueprint...a survival unit that makes civilized life...fit in the smallest conceivable surface area."<sup>3</sup> But, as Wexler points out, "this architecture gets in its own way. It's really sculpture."

As sculpture, *Crate House* recalls Pop Art. Wexler even nods to Andy Warhol by placing a Campbell's soup can on the kitchen shelf. But unlike Warhol's fine art renditions of mass-produced products, which popped the question, "What is art?" Wexler's real-life props ask, "What do these things reveal about life?" His careful framing of tomorrow's relics in dioramas of our own time urges us to view banal necessities in a higher context: the soup spoon is about nourishment, a meal shared, a family.

It's not easy being architecture, something Wexler learns anew whenever he confronts the plywood plane as a platform for architectural and human relationships. "I want to float the plane, but I must deal with gravity," he laments. His solution, *Desk* (2009), recalls the armatures of his *Scaffold Furniture*. Like a puppeteer, Wexler here constructs a crossbar from a tangle of 3/4-inch wooden struts. It appears to float in the air, though it is attached to the desktop and chair facing it. Sitting in the chair, Wexler provides the counterweight that keeps the desk afloat. Two heavy bricks must substitute for him when he is elsewhere, or the entire contraption will collapse. Nevertheless, while seated, the puppet is one with the puppeteer and Wexler can physically fulfill his wish to "be architecture."

Wexler's whimsical experiments do not seek whimsy as an end, though humor is essential to the double-entendres that enliven his work, elevating basic structural elements to the role of silent actors in a performance. This is especially true of the public installations that he creates in collaboration with his wife, Ellen Wexler.<sup>4</sup> Of Wexler's many works that integrate the plane, *Two Too Large Tables* (2006), located at Hudson River Park in Chelsea, New York, is among the most spectacular. These table and chair arrangements invite visitors to chat, read, meditate, or simply enjoy the beautiful view. One tabletop made with jigsaw puzzle cutouts creates an asymmetrical seating arrangement.

COURTESY THE ARTIST



*Two Too Large Tables*, 2006. Stainless steel and lpe wood, 2 elements: 16 x 16 x 3 ft.; and 16 x 16 x 7 ft.

In the second construction, the chairs stay chairs but assume a structural role: their backs extend to support the tabletop, which now functions as a roof.

Here, as in *Gardening Sukkah*, the Wexlers play with dynamic interactions between forms and get people to think about using them in different ways. One tabletop is open and exposed; the other provides shelter. The irregular—almost capricious—arrangements of chairs offer choices: sitting here, one makes easy eye contact; there, it's not so easy. The visitor can engage the architecture, become one with what it offers physically and socially, or walk away as evanescently as the shifting light.

"Let's meet by the big canyon": *Scenic Overlook* (2009) may well be the next sexy place for a New York City rendezvous. The Wexlers' public commission for the Metropolitan Transit Authority/Long Island Rail Road Atlantic Terminal in Brooklyn again involves a platform plane. Here, it symbolically rises from underground bowels to greet the light of day.

*Scenic Overlook* is public art on a monumental scale. Configured to suggest the outcroppings of the Grand Canyon, it projects between two staircases and the void that separates the street level entrance from the platform below. Made of geometric, cut granite shapes, it unites technology's pixilated gridded city with an epic landscape that recalls those of the 19th-century Hudson River School. "This is a sculpting of natural forms, nature as architecture," says Wexler. We're reminded of the orthogonal planes reaching toward the bird nest in the living room. We're back home with the man who would be architecture.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Authors of *Plywood* come from a series of light paintings, "On the Art of Building in Ten Books" (2007), based on Albert and Vitruvius, which Wexler began as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome. All quotations from the artist are from an interview, October 10, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 144–45.

<sup>3</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1958]), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Fehr, *Structures for Reflection*, exhibition catalogue, (Hagen, Germany: GKM Ernst Osthaus Museum, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Ellen Wexler is an artist and art educator who collaborates with James Wexler on public and private commissions. She has created independent projects for the New York City Board of Education, Whitney Museum of Art, Bronx Arts Center of Henry Street Settlement, and Chase Bank.

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