

Ephemeral Art + Architecture: a modest proposition

A Collaborative Symposium

Hosted by the I-Park Foundation and Ciudad Abierta (Open City)

The word *ephemeral* comes from the Greek *ephemeros*, meaning 'lasting just one day.' This perhaps brings to mind the short life of the mayfly, and indeed the ephemeral can be defined as the brief existence of transitory things. Sand sculptures, chalk drawings and works of land art such as Richard Long's famous *A Line Made by Walking* (1967) are all ephemeral, as they will eventually be washed or blown away and disappear. Similarly, ephemeral architecture is defined by its eventual submission to the forces of nature or its disassembly, demolition or abandonment.

The ephemeral is a fertile ground for artistic and architectural inquiry. It holds and conveys a delicacy, a tension and an immediacy that mirrors that of life itself. Raw materials go from chaos to order and back again – one state giving way to another. Within the fleeting moment of the ephemeral, new ideas and attitudes can germinate outside the confines of defined disciplines.

As an outgrowth of the spirit underpinning the environmental art and Thanatopolis programs at I-Park, and as an homage to the creative process behind the poetically expressive architecture of Open City, this symposium will reconnoiter the frontier between ephemeral art and architecture.

While the limited durability and life span of structures, installations and materials distinguishes the ephemeral from other kinds of art and architecture, the term also implies a mindset and a process that might allow projects to:

- better feed off the raw energy and excitement of their conception, making them *bold*
- evolve, through ongoing creative involvement and in response to new insights, making them truly organic and more *elegant*
- be brought to life within an accelerated time frame, making them fresher and more *relevant*

The intent is not to rush half-baked projects to completion before their time, or in any way to belittle the absolute need for careful development and testing of concepts within a tight visionary framework. It is, however, an argument for allowing that vision to be more abstract than specific, and for altering the design/construction sequence so as to ensure ongoing creative intervention.

The case for ephemeral (site-responsive/environmental) art is rather straight-forward. It is tender, in the moment, typically created within a specified time frame and subject to certain programmatic, practical or artistically-imposed constraints. It is engaging because it celebrates

spontaneity and ingenuity. It often involves an exploration, fraught with risk, where the outcome is unknown. It works with an expansive palette, from the microbial to the monumental. It is generally accessible, as it is often less formally rigorous than fine art, while embracing the universally familiar (the natural or urban landscape) in unusual, improbable ways. Since the work is essentially non-commercial and inherently vulnerable, it evokes aesthetic sympathy, making it morally precious.

Ephemeral art and architecture is a study in modesty: a modesty of scale and ambition, purpose and longevity. It imposes itself lightly in, on and above the land. It makes its point *en soto voce*. This is in stark contrast to the ultra-conservative codes for durability and redundancy that define much of contemporary architecture. These standards cannot be justified on economic grounds as we cannot conceivably predict the purposes to which these spaces will ultimately be put. After all, a client's program is but an imperfect prediction of his actual needs and an architectural design is an imperfect interpretation of this imperfect prediction. The result is a wholesale waste of resources, with precious real estate being locked up for insufferably long spans of time. It also punishes the future with the burden of sunk costs.

Some theoretical outcomes of adapting, if not adopting, the creative approach of those working in the ephemeral arts might include: a lessened risk aversion and greater appetite for experimentation (due to the compressed time frame and the introduction of lighter materials), a more egalitarian availability of creative architecture (due to rapid innovation and greater affordability) and a deeper site responsiveness and purpose-specificity (as would follow when buildings are viewed as works in progress).

At the risk of immodesty, might we suggest that a creative survey of the intersection of ephemeral art and architecture could identify a path toward a holy grail of architecture: the creation of profoundly sacred, mysterious or rhapsodic spaces – ones that swallow or ennoble or embrace one's spirit – spaces that are yearning, yielding, intimate, raw, beloved and, perhaps even literally, *alive*. This proposition constitutes a practical and philosophical appeal for an architecture that is more process- than product-driven, that is derived more closely from an abstraction or an idea than in response to a specific program – and that is more in the character of a thesis or an investigation than a declarative statement.

The questions we set out to discuss during the symposium will circle around how such a scheme might be defined theoretically and carried out practically, and how the new architecture residency program at I-Park might serve to deliver an onsite project in this vein – in its role as creative laboratory. We are interested in learning whether Open City is already fulfilling this promise in its own unique way, and how this might inform our efforts going forward. Finally, we are eager to be surprised by the insights of our invited guests, speakers and artists, who will help tease out the essence of these provocation during an event that will run a bit longer than 'just one day,' but short enough to claim the spontaneous and liberating realm of the ephemeral.