10-2011

Bemis Gardens: Reconceptualized Grounds

Peter P. Goché

Iowa State University, goche@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/arch_conf

Part of the Architecture Commons

Recommended Citation

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Architecture at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Architecture Conference Proceedings and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Bemis Gardens: Reconceptualized Grounds

Abstract
This presentation discusses the role of design in the provocation and construction of rehabilitated environments

Disciplines
Architecture
Bemis Gardens: Reconceptualized Grounds

History
The territory that would eventually become the city of Omaha, Nebraska, was acquired as a part of the Louisiana Purchase, which was completed by Thomas Jefferson in 1803. The open plains of the central United States were, at this time, uncharted lands that held significant potential for the developing nation. On July 21, 1804 William Clark and Meriwether Lewis passed through the area and, consequently, the territory was developed as a trading and fortification outpost.

The development of the warehouse district in the 1800's mirrored Omaha's emergence as a central hub in the United States transportation system. As “Gateway to the West” the district housed several warehouses, grocers and other dry goods outfitters for merchants throughout the Old West. The Bemis Bag Company Building [Figure 1.2] is located at the intersection of Leavenworth and 12th Street. Constructed in 1887, it was one of several warehouse facilities owned by the Bemis Company. The Bemis Company (founded in 1858) was a national leader in the manufacturing and sale of bags and sacks for flour, grain, and other commodities.

The building is now home to the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts. As an artist-centered organization it was founded for artists by artists. All related programs seek to perpetually support developing artist through the gift of time, space and support.

Exhibition Brief
Bemis Gardens was an exhibition and design laboratory that sought to consider the urban condition of the contemporary art center and its relationship with downtown Omaha through the transformation of the Bemis Center's exterior into a public art site and urban garden. In the midst of the Building | Bemis construction process, a project that resulted in a significant expansion of the artist-in-residence program, renovated fabrication facilities and a restored front dock — this exhibition and project series served to initiate a holistic reconsideration of the Center's land use and exterior relationships with the public.

In recent years, artists, architects, ecologists and social designers have formed new hybrids between food production and social space, urban ecologies and public art, forgotten space and material ingenuity, and public spectacle. Bemis Gardens was structured as an open laboratory and interactive exhibition. Throughout its three-month run the exhibition hosted a series of workshops consisting of professionals from diverse fields in effort to consider urban land use futures and speculate on specific actionable possibilities for the Bemis Center's site. Participants included Ruth Dusseault (Photographer), Jeff Day (MinDay Architects), James Woodfill (Sculptor), Josh Shelton (El Dorado Architects), Michael Beitz (Sculptor), Anne Trumble (Landscape Architect), [Author's Name] (Installation Artist and Sculptor), Sarah Thomas and David Karle (Landscape Architects), Bryan Kliewer (Organic Farmer), Sean Ward (Artist) and Colin Smith (Artist).

Workshop
The installation of the Water Hutch [Figure 1.1] designed and constructed by [author's name] is one such actionable proposition. Reminiscent of the many waterways that meander through the Midwest, the work
consists of a sinuous line made up of three oxbows. The constituent forms are constructed of built up dimensional lumber. The set of parts serve as an ambiguous measure by which people situate themselves. It might best be understood as an object or trace that indicates the presence of, and makes clearly recognizable, its context as referent rather than source or setting. It operates metaphorically as an open set of shelves onto which people, and thereby, memories accumulate. This set of parts served as provocateur for the subsequent design strategies developed as a result of this open laboratory and interactive exhibition. Our hope was to consider the socio-spatial effects of this form as it relates to the new space of the dock.

The exhibition of this work included a performance-based workshop conducted by [author’s name]. This interdisciplinary performance was staged on the Water Hutch in Gallery One at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art [Figure 1.4 & 1.5]. The participants were Elizabeth Zimmerman (musician), Annie Binder (Poet), Scott Ricketts (Novelist), Jassim Al Nashmi (Design student, ISU), John Kerner (Design student, ISU) and Jasmine Singh (Design student, ISU). The workshop included a series of oratories presented by [author’s name], Annie Binder and Scott Ricketts and a musical performance by Elizabeth Zimmerman. As an introduction to the social phenomenon associated with the hutch, the following literary abstract was presented.

In addition, a video [Figure 1.6 & 1.7], developed in collaboration with Cameron Campbell (photographer and multimedia production) and score composed by Elizabeth Zimmerman, was presented in effort to document and study the situation of people with respect to the set of oxbows.

Proposition
Concurrent with the development of our comprehension specific to bodily occupations, [author’s name] worked with Hesse McGraw (Chief Curator), Anne Trumble (Landscape Architect) and Thomas Printz (2D Artist) to develop a mock proposal for the semi-permanent installation of the Water Hutch in a void within the recently reconstructed dock. Located at the north end of the dock, this void measured 20 by 60 feet [Figure 1.3]. Bounded by new concrete retaining walls and the Bemis warehouse, the space is accessed from the dock proper on the south. A pair of windows and a door with sidelights looks out onto this space from inside the Center’s information shop. It is adjacent to an alley on the north and 12th Street on the east. The top of the retaining wall system is 48 inches above street level. The structural components of the original building canopy remain above the void and dock. Resident artist are housed in the second and third floor spaces of the Center overlooking the dock.

Our intention regarding the placement of the Water Hutch within this new garden setting [Figure 1.8 & 1.9] was to provide seating in a manner that would support multiple social configurations amidst a new topography and planting scheme and thereby negotiate the condition of the contemporary art center and its relationship with downtown Omaha. Therefore, we sought to engage those associated with the Center and the neighborhood passersby. In addition, we wanted to develop the space in a way that was differentiated from the level plane of the dock by depressing the plane of entry into the garden and locating two components of the Water Hutch so that the seating surface was level with the retaining walls and dock plane. The remaining component was located along the sloped entry plane to accommodate multiple seating heights.

The door and sidelight configuration was to be built up in such a way that the sill block (at dock height) was extended into the garden and created a cantilevered seat or speakers platform. The placement of the Water Hutch with respect to this hyper-extended sill block provided a concentric seating pattern. The door was to be replaced with a fixed panel in effort to promote access from the dock and corresponding cross circulation path leading to the main doors of the Center.

Conclusion
The insertion of this type of line sets up a necessary visual and spatial tension between the rectangular void and the ambiguous form. This kind of misfit allowed for the communities of people to simply linger within the
leftover volume within the void. It is a spatial configuration that, by abstraction, attracts and supports everyday social engagements.

Within this new setting, we imagined routine causal encounters between the local people and artist-in-residence. We were delighted with the reciprocal possibility that the fellows and neighbors might find their own narrative in the story of others. In this way, we understood the Water Hutch not only as provocateur in the evolution of this space and everyday human encounter, but as a type of cultural attendant that, like waterways, serves as line by which people situate themselves.

Over time, as per the design narrative, we envisioned the burial of this work in effort to provide a new ground to be developed into ‘garden’ by another artist or group of design professionals. In this way, we sought to provide an exterior rotating venue for the production of space within the void. Each arrangement would cultivate a new spatial configuration or set of changes that is an extension of the evolution of micro urban spaces within the contemporary landscape of downtown Omaha.

Even though the work presented and developed for this effort was not actually installed, it engendered a sustained interdisciplinary workshop focused on use and meaning of public space specific to human occupation. Based on this, we sought to re-construct the cultural landscape of the dock and void as a historical site of labor in a manner that would accentuate its recreational potential through a new form of spatial development. Accordingly, our speculation of the Water Hutch within the void served as an alternative approach to the analysis of this place and its spatial manifestation.

Subsequent proposals and the actualized proposition for the inaugural installment within the void were developed by Min|Day Architects. In addition, Michael Beitz was commissioned to develop a separate system of seating that was placed on the south end of the dock. The full compliment of seating represents a logic that stems from an extended physical and dialogical engagement with the Water Hutch. Consequently, it is an approach that engages strategies of scale and configuration as it relates to identities and has the potential to recalibrate such a site in a way that can reconnect with the fertility of its host surroundings.

Design workshops often face their most awkward, difficult moments during the initial phases of development, where the generative motives of each participant are suddenly confronted. There is, inevitably, a temptation to withdraw and seek out those of similar operational methodologies. The Bemis Garden’s open laboratory served a number of functions, but we suspect its most important may well have been to provide a host of artists and designers a structured excuse to engage each other in a public arena and, thus, reflect on our own, strongly held, individual agenda and strategies of pursuit. We continue to debate and argue of the project’s real significance—is it a public garden, what is the role of pragmatism and compositionists theory in the production of urban landscapes, do the actualized projects constitute a set of configurations conducive to social occupancies and sense of place that is boundless yet serves as its own totality—but we recognize that its most meaningful significance may well have been as a simple introduction to place logic agendas that set up our subsequent practices well for a broader series of explorations specific to the re-conceptualization of existing environments.

References:

Figure 1.2 Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, Nebraska

Figure 1.3 Void in newly constructed dock of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts
Figure 1.4  Performance-based workshop with Water Hutch in Gallery One (Photo by Chris Mochian)

Figure 1.5  Performance-based workshop (Photo by Chris Mochian)
Figure 1.8 Line drawing of proposal
Figure 1.9  Model of proposal