1970s Lebbeus Woods: Experimental Architecture

Jennifer Wong and Doh Young Kim

Architecture has reached a stasis in development. The last great revolution in architecture occurred with Louis Sullivan's representation of architecture as a mass to architecture as a volume.[i] Since then architecture has dabbled in transforming elements of the philosophy embodied by Sullivan's building but in essence, architecture has only succeeded in further modifying volume. In the 1970's, experimental groups such as Archigram and Experimental Architecture arose as a reaction to the static state in architecture: "The Archigram group came about through a succession of reactions to the boredom and obviousness of post-war English office blocks and local authority housing."[ii] Groups like Archigram dealt with hypothesizing about the future but still stayed within the realm of solving problems such as living space or dealing with the human condition in architecture. [iii] Lebbeus Woods exploration into architecture eschewed from even those practical concerns of quotidian human activities and became an organism that interacts, transforms and radically changes its environment.

Woods utilizes the language of architecture outside of the classical dialectic. It dispenses with the "actual" and does not require anything concrete to implement its philosophy. It delves beyond the physical act of building a building: "Architecture, we hope, is first of all a field of knowledge, and only then of action."[iv] His approach to architecture begins at an analytical level. Architecture is not defined by the conclusion of a physical structure but rather as a discourse. In this way his medium of drawings, models and sculptural installations embody the philosophy of experimental architecture: "Drawing, as the agent for the enactment of that action, is thus an act of building."[v] The process and act of executing a building become as important as the physical act of building a structure.

Lebbeus Woods' work does not aim to solve problems nor does it attempt any conclusion to questions: "It is a task without end, because changes of every kind continue, sometimes with completely unexpected effects. We must content ourselves with opening a few doors or windows that provide access to a new world."[vi] Architecture is about creating adaptations to a constantly evolving world. The traditional definition of architecture as a practice is redefined as a field of architecture an experimental process.

Woods identifies what he considers to be the particular characteristics of "experimentalist" in architecture as independence, mental dexterity and a willingness to forgo the rewards that the practice of traditional architecture might bring.[vii] Independence is required in the field of experimental architecture when no clients are involved and the work that is being produced requires a level of internal motivation to explore a topic. The capacity for mental dexterity allows the experimenter to tie in complex ideas in widely varied fields of knowledge; in Woods' case that knowledge ranges from cybernetics to philosophy. "It must be said: experimental architecture may or may not be of redeeming benefit to others, to society at large."[viii] Experimental architecture does not provide the traditional framework of architecture and one must understand those differences to truly free oneself to explore architecture. There is no final expectation, no conclusion, and no end to the exploration within experimental architecture.

The philosophy of experimental architecture deviates from conventional architecture because the goal is not a process towards a solution. "Architecture's quality might rightly be judged, not by the problems it solves, but by the problems it creates."[ix] The aspirations of "experimenting out of architecture"[x] strive to use a project and open new possibilities instead of concluding the project. There is no end. There only exists the continuous discourse on the possibilities of architecture.

He dispenses with the idea of the beginning of the end. It exists beyond the realm of the physical or the tangible and beyond the realm of time itself. One does not begin with a question or end with a conclusion. Peter Eisenman in *The End of the Classical* describes the end of the end and the end of the beginning as it pairs everything down to a text. "The 'not-classical' merely proposes an end to the dominance of the classical values in order to reveal other values. It proposes, not a new value or a new zeitgeist, but merely another condition – one of reading architecture as a text."[xi] Architecture is a text. It works against the ideas of living. That is why Eisenman's buildings aren't meant for living in, such as House VI, and Lebbeus woods work doesn't even attempt it. It is about using the language of architecture to articulating ideas rather then form. If an architect attempted to create a building that looked like no precedent you would get Frank Geary. With Lebbeus Woods, you get forms other then what can be physically built, what cannot exist and has no intention to exist yet continues a dialogue about architecture.

Eisenman's Holocaust memorial is in the realm of experimental architecture. How do people relate to each other, how do people interact between the structure and the city and the threshold? You cannot take the ideas and experience of the memorial and turn it into a commercial structure or an office building. It is about an experience, about the ideas that the individuals experience through the structure. The form does not allow itself to be co-opted by commercialism, or by residents, it just is. Eisenman works in the space between installation and architecture. The holocaust memorial is created for the sole purpose for people to experience it on a human level.

Woods's interest in experimental architecture is about where the architect can insert himself into the larger social context of current events. "Can architecture play a role in negotiating the dramatic changes already underway?"[xii] In his series *Taking on Risk: Nine Experimental Scenarios*, Lebbeus Woods chooses nine cities that are currently in a crucial turning point in history. Woods hypothesizes architectural interventions that would influence and change the historical course of these cities.

One of the hypothesized scenarios takes place in Zagreb, Yugoslavia where forty-six years of a united state have just ended and Zagreb is coming out of a period of stasis and into a period of civil discontent. Woods questions if architecture can play a role in negotiating the current changes.[xiii] Helicopters into public spaces and act as nodes in a dialectical grid will transport the intervention of free space in Zagreb. The intervention of "free space" is a prominent theme that proposes the idea of a "city within a city, where types of experimental living that characterize a dynamic city can be freely invented."[xiv] For better or for worse, they are visual symbols of change and become sites of transition.[xv]

If everything is falling apart already and disaster is already predicted the intervention of these socially risky structures asks questions regarding the current situation instead of idealistically attempting to solve the situation. "My work has been largely concerned with social transformations, the crisis they create, and the particular role that architecture plays in the crisis and their resolutions. Earthquake. War. Economic collapse. Political struggle. Technological revolution."[xvi] Much of Woods work deals with situations that have already fallen apart or on a path of destruction whether it's due to natural disasters, socio-political disasters. However to Woods, the greatest disaster is stasis, complacency. Architecture not only serves to inject itself into an unstable situation but Lebbeus explores the idea of architecture disrupting a static environment. The project of System Wein aims to disrupt the stasis of the city. Instead of seeing architecture as a solution to a question the project begins with questioning the benefits and downfalls of stability in a city.
[xvii]

Stability is a result of stagnation, when a city has developed a solution for living that allows peace and complacency. From the vantage of Experimental Architecture, stagnation is a fatal condition that not only prevents further explorations into probability, but also allows for vulnerabilities in the face of future disasters through a lack of preparation.

Lebbeus Woods' proposal anticipates the destruction of the city in hopes of re-construction. A city without crisis is a city without a future. We should hope that the tremor emanating from System Wein will lead to an imminent collapse so that Vienna can finally be resurrected from its past.[xviii]

Through the intervention of the System Wein project, Lebbeus Woods envisioned the destruction of a beautiful peaceful equilibrium in hopes of rousing the city out of its slumber and into an action. System Wein is about rousing the passive into action. It is anticipatory of the destruction sure to come to this peaceful state and

theorizes that by analyzing Vienna the project will preemptively stir the city into action. There is beauty and hope in the idea of destruction of peace and stability. The beauty is the possibility for the awakening of the slumbering city and the hope is the advent of a new creation once the city is activated.

System Wein becomes architecture of action. It is a praxis that has the potential to transform the stasis of the city and people through the re-negotiation of the site. The physical intervention of the System Wein project disrupts the order inscribed by the public spaces of the city. The presences of Woods' architectural interventions are risky in both form and concept. "Wherever there is a risk, something may go wrong, even terribly wrong. But then, something in the whole situation might go wrong, terribly wrong, and the city and country will be consumed in the mechanisms of war. Which poses the greater risk?"[xix] It creates a force field that is activated by the energy of the denizens inhabiting the tangential sites. The placements of the vectors are determined by initially mapping out the vector of human movement.[xx]

They are left for an hour to disrupt certain junctions in Vienna. These force fields delineated by vectors redirect the flow of traffic, establish new networks, re-align axes and transform existing site lines.

The System Wein project demonstrates the various applications of architecture upon a city. It transforms idea of architectural intervention in a space from a tangible form into an intangible concept. "Once the performers are gone and the stages taken down, there are no permanently visible traces of them – only the residue of ideas, the most powerful things in the world."[xxi] The concept drives the form of the project and the result of that form sets the stage for future possibilities. The idea is the end product of the experimentation, and the end product is "System Wien is intended neither as an antidote to nor a cure for Vienna's malaise, but as a more critical form of thought and action, looking optimistically at what promises to be a difficult future."[xxii] There is no measure of success regarding the project. Whether the actual project accomplishes it goals of intervention is of little concern to Woods. The success of the project is measured not in terms of accomplishing its goals but by the mere fact of its existence and execution.

> "Living experimentally means living continuously at the limit of received knowledge."[xxiii]
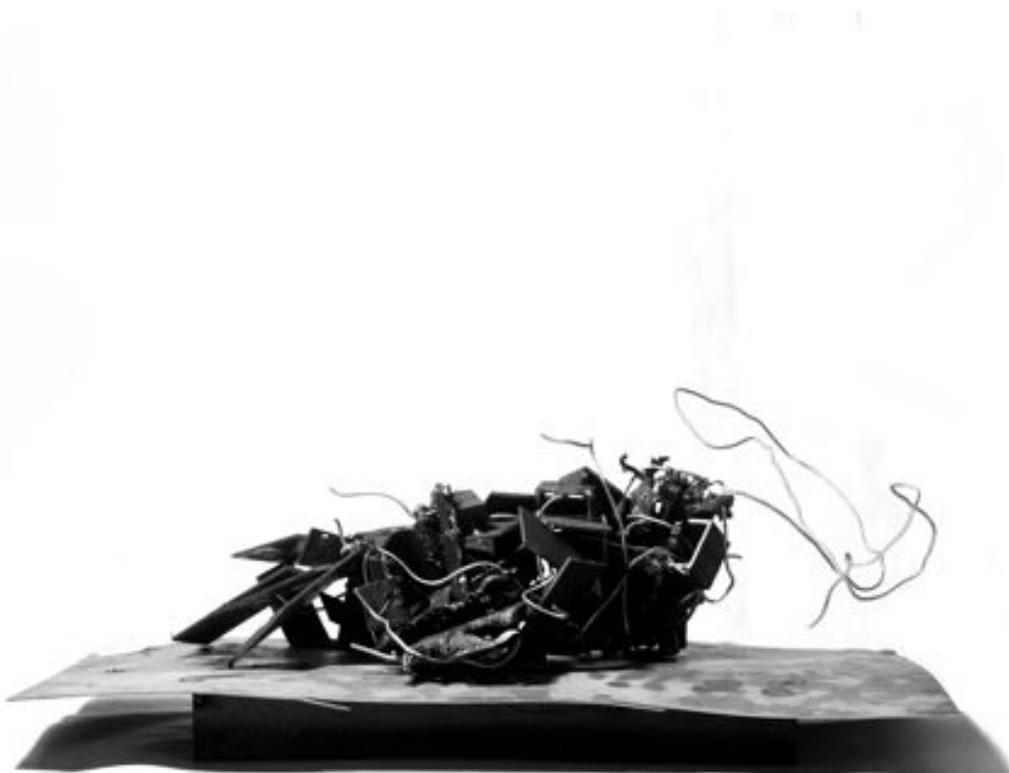
To work with the philosophy of experimental architecture is to continue to push the envelope of existing situations. "Whether [the experimental works I have made] lead ultimately to architecture that participates fully in the present and future

depends on whether others can apply them to the problems and challenges confronting them."[xxiv] Perhaps System Wein did not radically transform Vienna into an unrecognizable state, but within the definition of success as a part of experimental architecture the idea of System Wein laid the foundation for subsequent explorations into the idea of disruption (what other ideas?)   Would Einstein have achieved his Theory of Relativity if the Michelson-Morley experiment had not laid the foundation? And perhaps experimental architecture has not radically transformed the face of architectural history but it has fulfilled its purpose of setting the foundation for future thinkers to approach architecture outside of the conventional mindset.

[i] "The effect of mass, of static solidity hitherto the prime quality of architecture, has all but

[ii] Peter Cook, *Experimental Architecture* (New York: Universe Books, 1970), 90.

[iii] Woods, Lebbeus. *RIEA: First Conference*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996. Print.

[iv] Manuel DeLanda and Anthony Vidler, *Lebbeus Woods: System Wein* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 2005), 16.

[v] Richard Armstrong and Karsten Harries, *Lebbeus Woods: Experimental Architecture* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 2004), 6.

[vi] Manuel DeLanda and Anthony Vidler, *Lebbeus Woods: System Wein* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 2005), 9.

[vii] Richard Armstrong and Karsten Harries, *Lebbeus Woods: Experimental Architecture* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 2004), 6.

[viii] RIEA, p 2

[ix] Lebbeus Woods, *Of a Human Nature*, http://lebbeuswoods.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/of-a-human-nature, (November 2010).

[x] Peter Cook, *Experimental Architecture* (New York: Universe Books, 1970), 7.

[xi] Peter Eisenman, "The End of the Classical: The End of the Beginning, the End of the End," *Perspecta* 21 (1984): 167.

[xii] Lebbeus Woods, *Carnegie MoA - Taking on a Risk*, http://lebbeuswoods.net/carnegie.pdf, (November 2010).

[xiii] Manuel DeLanda and Anthony Vidler, *Lebbeus Woods: System Wein* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 2005), 26.

[xiv] Lebbeus Woods, *Carnegie MoA - Taking on a Risk*, http://lebbeuswoods.net/carnegie.pdf, (November 2010).

[xv] Lebbeus Woods. *Zagreb Scar*.

[xvi] Manuel DeLanda and Anthony Vidler, *Lebbeus Woods: System Wein* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 2005), 10.

[xvii] Lebbeus Woods. *System Wein: Vienna*.

[xviii] Manuel DeLanda and Anthony Vidler, *Lebbeus Woods: System Wein* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 2005), 7.

[xix] Ibid, 26.

[xx] Lebbeus Woods. *System Wein: Mapping Human Movement*.

[xxi] Lebbeus Woods, *Carnegie MoA - Taking on a Risk*, http://lebbeuswoods.net/carnegie.pdf, (November 2010).

[xxii] Manuel DeLanda and Anthony Vidler, *Lebbeus Woods: System Wein* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 2005), 10.

[xxiii] Lebbeus Woods, *One, Four, Five.* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press), 3.

[xxiv] Lebbeus Woods, *Carnegie MoA - Taking on a Risk*, http://lebbeuswoods.net, (November 2010).