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PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE

These Forum pages were produced under agreement between the Design History Foundation and Public Architecture.

Public Architecture acts as a catalyst for public discourse through education, advocacy, and the design of public spaces and amenities. It undertakes public-interest design projects and coordinates a national program called the “1% Solution,” challenging architecture professionals to allocate a percentage of their billable hours to pro-bono or public-interest work. Based on a 40-hour workweek, 1 percent represents a modest 20 hours per year per person. If all 240,000 architecture professionals in the U.S. were to contribute, the collective resources would be the equivalent of a 2,500-person firm (the largest in the world) working full time for the public good, totaling an estimated 5 million hours of work annually. Visit www.publicarchitecture.org for more information.

John Cary is the Executive Director of Public Architecture. He serves as a board member, advisor, or consultant to more than a dozen nonprofit organizations nationwide. He speaks and writes extensively on issues affecting young architects, public-interest design, and the future of the profession. **Zachary Heineman** has divided his time between journalism, politics and architecture, and served as a project coordinator for ScrapHouse. He is presently pursuing his Master of Architecture and Master of Business Administration from Yale University.



In the spring of 2005 our small nonprofit received a call from San Francisco’s chief building inspector asking for help building a demonstration house out of—well, garbage. What started as an invitation simply to be involved with the project quickly evolved into us taking a lead role.

For four days that June, the city would play host to World Environment Day, and the organizers were determined to offer the installation as the visual and thematic centerpiece of an otherwise intangible event. Our challenge was to design and build a demonstration house on Civic Center Plaza—immediately across the street from San Francisco City Hall—in just six weeks.

Thus was born the Public Architecture project now known as “ScrapHouse.”

Above and next page: ScrapHouse was assembled entirely from recycled materials in only six weeks. Photos courtesy of Public Architecture. © 2005 Cesar Rubio Photography.

Design and Construction

We began our involvement by assembling a team of architects, landscape architects, lighting specialists, and metal fabricators, each of whom agreed in advance to volunteer their time, energy and ideas. When asked later to describe the work environment, team leader John Peterson, founder of Public Architecture, noted: “It was more like Iron Chef...except there were ten chefs making one meal, and the secret ingredient was yesterday’s leftovers.”

To complicate matters, concern immediately surfaced that our project might not meet our audience’s definition of “scrap.” Approximately two hundred mayors from around the world would be participating in World Environment Day. We feared our effort might simply emphasize the wastefulness of life in the United States. In response, we decided to highlight how ordinary things could be reused to create an artful new approach to dwelling. As one tagline for ScrapHouse



read, “from waste, luxury” (instead of “from luxury, waste”).

As the design took shape, our volunteers scoured Bay Area dumps, salvage yards, and manufacturing and construction sites, looking for usable materials. The design team, which was both proactive and reactive in the collection process, gave new life to these materials.

Built off-site in eleven distinct panels, ScrapHouse was brought to Civic Center Plaza on a flatbed truck. The panels had to be no wider than 14 feet, the maximum allowable width for transport on city streets. Four steel window openings, welded on-site from columns salvaged from the Port of San Francisco, were erected—along with the wall panels—using a large crane. As a temporary installation, ScrapHouse was not allowed a permanent foundation; instead, it was built on a plywood platform, laid directly over the lawn.

Despite its temporary and experimental nature, ScrapHouse had all the

elements of a typical American home: a kitchen, a bathroom, two bedrooms, and a living room. Its L-shaped layout, with 980 sq.ft. of ground floor and a 180-sq.ft. mezzanine, created an open and flexible space that was simultaneously dramatic and comfortable. Retired fire hoses from the San Francisco Fire Department covered the bedroom walls; phonebooks served as insulation and created a bookshelf unit in the main space. Solid-core doors recovered from a school-improvement project were used as a floor material, their window and doorknob openings filled with quick-set concrete. Insulated glass units, left over from a large condo project in San Francisco, were arranged in a shingle configuration to let in an abundance of natural light

Going Public

ScrapHouse opened its doors June 1, 2005, six chaotic weeks after its design had begun. Over the course of four days, it received more than 10,000 visitors—from schoolchildren

to octogenarians, from the homeless to owners of multi-million-dollar homes. Judging from media coverage and the individual comments we received, ScrapHouse impelled a broad cross-section of people to think about the possibilities of building with salvaged material. It has already provided inspiration for a significant salvage component in a 25,000-sq.ft. community center to be built near Seattle.

ScrapHouse was a clear departure from Public Architecture’s typical project type and approach, and we would almost certainly never do it again—at least not under the same schedule and budget. But for all its challenges, it offered many important lessons about building outside the traditional practice of architecture. ScrapHouse also brought people together—design professionals, builders, city officials, and lay people alike—in ways we never could have imagined or choreographed.

Today, ScrapHouse lives on in print, film, and on the Web, and continues to attract inquiries from around the globe. A documentary about the project by Emmy Award-winning filmmaker, Anna Fitch (one of the initiators of the project), was shown on the National Geographic Channel in September.

Had there been more time, the project’s impact could have gone deeper—providing a more permanent contribution to the canon of green building, for instance. But in retrospect, the greatest value of ScrapHouse was that it created broad excitement around an issue typically mired in narrow practical and technical concerns. ScrapHouse also illustrated the value of truly public architecture.