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STRUCTURES FOR REFLECTION  
Allan Wexler's "Crate House"

In 1990, the New York artist Allan Wexler received a commission with a budget of \$ 4,000 from the University Galleries of the University of Massachusetts to develop a living space "that would articulate issues that might define the nineties" To solve this task, Wexler designed an entire house, the "Crate House". It consists of, for one, an empty structure in the form of a white cube, each of the four walls has a door opening and a movable crate which can be rolled into the structure independently of one another through the doors. These crates contain, like a cockpit, all the furniture and utensils necessary for a two person household, according to western standards: If necessary, the "bedroom", "bathroom", "kitchen" and "living room" can be rolled into the empty structure, where they then become a correspondingly functional room.

If one takes Wexler's "Crate House" literally, one can understand it as a blueprint of a design for a 'survival unit' that makes 'civilized life', according to western standards, possible in the smallest conceivable surface area (90.5" X 90.5"). As such, it can be taken as a practical suggestion for a solution to housing problems. In fact, with the "Crate House", Wexler refers to the cabin in which the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau lived from 1845-47 at Walden Pond in New England where, in a practical attempt, he tried to find out just what and how much one really needs in order to live outside of society.

But in contrast to the fundamentalist Thoreau, Wexler does not want to reinvent civilization. Rather, he formulates his critique of the present through an ironic commentary based on the historical model by developing a cabin via the "Crate House", the practical use of which draws the user into complex contradictions: If, for example, one pushes all four "crates", in other words the entire living system, into the central structure, one could in fact still be in the "Crate House" but not dwell in it because one is virtually wedged into place by the individual functions. But if three of the crates were pushed out of the structure, then the fourth crate could be accessed and used easily and conveniently. What then becomes strikingly obvious is that "the bedroom would only exist when sleeping, the kitchen when eating" (Wexler). In other words, a normal apartment, even in this most simple form, is a complicated machine which locks the user into specific patterns of behavior. This is precisely what is important to the artist, namely a reflection on the factual constraints we ourselves create: "I want to monumentalize the everyday. The knife. The spoon. The pot. The pan. The flashlight. The screw. Salt. These things I isolated; turning them into sculpture, their use into theater, making each day's existence into a dance" (Wexler).

"Crate House" is the high point to date in the work of the artist born in 1949 in New England. He was trained as an architect and began to work as an artist in the late 70's. According to his statements, his conclusive turn to fine art had a prosaic reason: there was no work for architecture school graduates. But this inclination had already been established long ago in fundamental dislike of buildings and the early-gained insight that "making more buildings was not going to change the world". In this situation, which at once blocked him yet was also completely liberating, he was thrown back onto himself and the available resources. In the contemplation of craftsmanship, Wexler discovered a way to solve his problems.

The "Temple Houses" created in 1977/78 marked the turning point. With these works, he succeeded in making the decisive step into the barely touched field which was torn between a separation of intellectual and manual work, plan and reality, design and execution. By setting certain conceptual and material conditions for himself - that is, not just designing, but rather determining in advance the type and quantity of building material as well as the tools - Wexler forced himself to integrate the rational allocation of functions normally distributed to many different individuals and evolved from architect to artist.

This step cannot be overestimated. As an architect who only designs that which he can build himself, Wexler not only avoided the hubris of architects who only design, but also the dilemma of many artists who, being ever the craftsmen, tend to evade being judged by the rules of their craft through 'mixed media' techniques and frequently show off new techniques

as art. With the "Temple Houses", Wexler achieved a fundamental position that allowed him to reflect on architecture, design and our relationship to them in artistic works which could not be (mis-) understood as either architecture or design, but would question art without an obvious purpose. In doing so, it was the artist's referred manner of working that he, ever aware of his limited means, did not give in to direct criticism of architecture, building and society. Instead he supplied the system with ironic objects and let these exert their influence like homeopathic doses.

With this subtle strategy, Wexler tapped a rich field of work in recent years. The changes of scale and media and a related pursuance of his do-it-yourself principle so typical for the artist, proved to be particularly fruitful. For whether his works are realized as "Little Building" or as full-scale project, they always thematize the conditions of their production, thus revealing their concept ever more clearly. This is especially true of the exterior work "Building Using 400 Uncut 2" X 4" X 8's" (1979) in which a standard board became the basic idea of a construction, as well as of "Picket Fence Furniture" (1985) where a fence and laths dictate the furniture's formal and material conditions, or, to give another example, the "Mattress Factory Project" (1988) where the artist plays the given space and the concept of 'Artist in Residence' off each other in an absurd and practical installation. The 'honest craftsman', who presents his materials and neither embellishes nor bungles, is evident in the work - but not as a professional carpenter whose labor is revealed by the finished product, rather as a designer who only designs and builds as much as he has conceived and can become recognizable and functional.

Through the practical creation of that which he conceived, Wexler increasingly recognized the performative aspect, not only of his own activity but of architecture and installations in general and began to make this the topic of his work. An attempt to understand Wexler's buildings, interior installations and furniture from this point of view suggests seeing them in conjunction with those works of sculpture that Manfred Schneckenburger summarized under the term "Sculpture as a Form of Action". For Wexler's works do not just correspond to this concept because they exist and are perceived in everyday reality, real space and real time, but also because they have an instrumental character by virtue of the fact that they address the viewer as a user, by permitting interaction or at least making interaction conceivable. After all, Wexler's works elude the traditional terms of material, mass, negative volume, rhythm and composition and are more likely to be described with terms such as path, location, axis, interior and exterior, like the works Schneckenburger was once considering.

However, when considering the issue of whether or not Wexler's works must also be considered as autonomous, the differences to the concept developed by Schneckenburger become apparent. Because there can be no doubt that, for example, chairs only make sense as practical objects; it remains to be answered whether or not they really need to be used in order to understand how one would feel if one were to sit on them. In other words the examples Schneckenburger uses to establish his concept - Alice Aycock's "Far Hill Project", George Trakas's "Union Pass" or Bruce Naumann's "Corridors", just to name a few - only resolve themselves when they are used in a physical sense. As objects of contemplation, they offer relatively little and thus invite doubt as to whether or not they allow a dialectic between perceptive and a physical experience of space to develop. For their primary effect resides in increasing or estranging corporeal experiences and not in a structuring of behavior beyond the spaces created by the works themselves. To this extent, these works are instrumental in a very specific sense - apparatuses that always change a certain input to a certain output - and not in the sense of tools or devices whose function is revealed through their form. Therefore, it seems appropriate to speak of "Structures of Behavior" in Wexler's works. At the same time, it should be noted that they cannot only define behavior in a specific manner but also are 'tableaux' of certain forms of possible behavior.

That is why I suggest the term "Structures for Reflection" to characterize Allan Wexler's works. This serves to reduce to an abbreviated formula the fact that Wexler creates objects that do not merely store certain forms of behavior and structure behavior but induce a reflection upon them. In a continued development of Marcel Duchamp's ready-made concept, Wexler produces objects that record certain forms of action, structure behavior and induce corresponding

desires for use that they cannot fulfill or fulfill only in an unexpected manner. As an explicit affirmative reconstruction of certain functional demands, Wexler's buildings and interior installations refuse practical use to the extent they are addressed normatively, namely for practical use, and for precisely this reason, they initiate the reflection of the ready-made of social behavior which is objectified in them. The goal of Wexler's work is to render conscious these inter-subjective, communicative ready-mades, such as dwelling, eating, watching TV or dealing with certain rituals. He not only succeeds in grasping self-evident things such as the relationship to a bed in such a distancing manner that we can understand sleeping in bed as a specific cultural action. Moreover, this artist's objects reveal the refined sense of irony of who has understood that in order to feel good we need objects adapted suitably to our habits while we live dreaming of being able to simply push them aside.

In this sense, the "Crate House" is also an ironic commentary on the museum. Because like Duchamp's ready-mades the concept of this work does not require a museum and thus can function like a demolition charge. In the end, it does this as a white cube, giving rise to a reflection of Brian O'Doherty's "White Cube": The "Crate House" can only be viewed or used when the boxes are pushed out of the cube, that is, according to the terminology of O'Doherty, pushed out 'into life'. But because the "Crate house" only functions in an interior space, this 'outside' or 'life' can only be an 'outside' of 'life' inside a larger "White Cube" which in turn just might be enclosed by an even larger cube. Thus it becomes evident that life only exists between white cubes, and the "Crate House" is its museum, a museum of a civilization, the logic of which one can learn to admire through Allan Wexler.

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