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The Reality of Experimental Architecture: An Interview with Lebbeus Woods

By Lorrie Flom

Lebbeus Woods in his studio,
New York City, January 2004.
Photo: Tracy Myers

In July 2004, the Heinz Architectural Center will open a surprising new exhibition/ installation called Lebbeus Woods: Experimental Architecture*. Woods is a graduate of the Purdue University School of Engineering and the University of Illinois School of Architecture. Since 1976, he has concentrated on theory and experimental projects. He has exhibited, lectured on, and published his projects worldwide, and written numerous articles about architectural practice and theory. He is the co-founder and scientific director of the Research Institute for Experimental Architecture and has been a visiting professor at several schools, including The Bartlett in London and Harvard and Columbia Universities. Currently he is professor of architecture at The Cooper Union in New York City.*

Wherever Woods exhibits his drawings, models, and engulfing architectural installations, his work generates both discussion and controversy. To help set the stage for this fascinating exhibition, which is being organized by Tracy Myers, curator of the Heinz Architectural Center at Carnegie Museum of Art, CARNEGIE *magazine interviewed the architect.*

CM: Most people think of architecture as thoughtful design resulting in buildings. How do you define architecture? LW: I think architecture is about ideas in the first place. You don't get to design until you have an idea. That idea has to be somewhat comprehensive. There's always a client asking for a building. If you're an architect, you'll design the building. But if you're a dutiful architect, you first have to question why the building is required. The architect has to take responsibility to participate in the rationale of the building and not just to design. The architect can either say we don't need this building and walk away, or maybe we need a different kind of

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building. That's why I don't have a lot of clients. [Chuckle.] Architecture requires the critical questioning of many things—it's not just a thoughtful carrying out of a client's wishes.

CM: What do you hope the general public will get out of this exhibition? LW: I hope they enjoy it and that it stimulates them to think about their experience of space and design. This exhibition, more than most architectural exhibitions, is designed as a spatial exhibition. The design is an architectural experience—it's not just looking at artifacts. Also, I hope they are able to understand the point of view that architecture has an experimental dimension. Changing society requires us to do things differently, and we can only find out by experimenting. Happily, architects can do this with drawings and models. They don't have to build 200 million dollar buildings that are disasters to test an idea. We can try ideas out on a different scale and medium.

CM: Before you went fully into experimental architecture, you were working for a traditional architectural firm and designing buildings that were built. You just said that when things are changing dramatically, architects have to view things differently. Did some dramatic event change your way of thinking, or did this evolve for you? LW: I was in my 20s in the 1960s. I wasn't a politically oriented person. I was married and had two children. I worked for a big corporate firm on the east coast. The '60s were a time of questioning and instigating change. One of the things that happened was that the idea of "normal" as it related to modern architecture—square buildings and curtain walls and so-called "functional planning"—began to be challenged by people like Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. It was a time during which the best architects were beginning to look at architecture differently than they had for the last 30 to 40 years.

Then there was the whole social revolution of the '60s, which had to do with equal rights, making a better society. I wasn't political; I wasn't marching; I wasn't demonstrating; I didn't have long hair. But intellectually, I realized that architecture had to be more than just a kind of service provided to people who wanted to build standard things.

In the '70s I began to make my own moves in that direction. I was looking for an architecture that embodied spontaneity, unpredictability. It doesn't have to be radical like people marching in the streets. So-called "normal life" was no longer normal, and I was trying to determine, "How do you give it its space? How do you give it its architecture?"

CM: Some of your works, such as the Havana and Sarajevo projects, seem to be political statements. Do you view your work as a way to express your politics? LW: My work is political, but it is not party politics, not ideology. I view politics as the kind of machinery by which we change our lives. In that sense, these projects make a political statement. Both Havana and Sarajevo have political histories beyond my ability to analyze, but I felt obligated to respond as an architect.

In Sarajevo and Havana, the whole fabric of society was changing. These may be extreme cases, but they also present a chance to see ourselves. We're now facing the same problems they were facing. The siege of Sarajevo, the destruction of the city in the early '90s, was a kind of prelude to what happened in New York to the World Trade Center towers. It's similar in the sense that terrorists were attacking civil life...attacking a way of life. By looking at extreme cases such as these, we have a chance to

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understand our own situations better. At the edge, we can see the forces of change where the normal has broken down. When normal reaches its limits, we have to, as architects, think differently about what buildings do.

CM: Do you believe any of your works will ever be built? **LW:** I believe they're built as soon as I draw them. It's a form of constructing the idea. If there is no idea in the drawing, there is no idea in the constructed project. That's the expression of the idea. Architects make drawings that other people build. I make the drawings. If someone wants to build from those, that's up to them. I feel I'm making architecture. I believe the building comes into being as soon as it's drawn. Obviously, every architect would like to see most of their designs built, including me.

CM: Your work is driven by real world situations, yet to most viewers, the results are far from reality. How can visitors close that gap? **LW:** I want to provoke questions. I've never felt that I provide a definitive, conclusive answer to anything. But there are some very important questions, neglected usually in the architectural discourse, and they have to do with the volatility of contemporary life. And, buildings of stone, steel, glass, and concrete don't answer those questions.

Maybe it's temporary architecture. A lot of my work is about questioning the stability and permanence of architecture, and, in turn, the stability of society. In a sense, life is a kind of dance. Life is a kind of performance. We have to loosen up and be freer and more adaptive.

I'm trying to bring people in rather than saying, "Here is another product offered by another architect." I'm trying to say, "Here is a set of conditions…what do you think?" The gap is important. If there's not a gap, there's nothing left. The gap is what you're supposed to think about. Over the years I've had many exhibitions of my work, and there are people who are willing to go along with it. If something grabs them, it's because there's something in the work that is authentic. It comes from a struggle with ideas.

CM: Is there a way for viewers to appreciate what you do without fully understanding your philosophy? **LW:** A range of reactions is expected and good. There will be people who will shake their heads and say, "Architecture should be functional. This isn't functional." They may hate it.

In any creative medium, there has to be substance for the work to hold up. For example, a piece of music is not an answer. It's a stimulus. It leads you to thinking and feeling a certain way, which you wouldn't have done without that particular experience.

If you go to a concert, and there's something genuine in the music it will grab you. You can listen to Schubert's *Ave Maria* and it's a beautiful, lyrical melody. It may be the type of music you are most familiar with. Or, you could listen to Pierre Boulez and other electronic music and wonder whether it's truly music. But if you really listen to it, to the structure of the music and the playfulness and the interplay of all the parts, that requires a higher degree of perceptiveness than a more familiar piece. The work has to hold up. There has to be something there that is immediately present.

People who come to this exhibition are going to see the tremendous effort that was made to bring them in. They will experience visual and spatial energy. They'll see things they

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haven't seen before. They'll be engaged. And then they can draw their own conclusions. No one will go away thinking, "That was a dull exhibition." They won't forget it. It will stay with them, and that's the goal.

World Center (project for the World Trade Center site, New York City), 2002, Pencil and crayon on illustration board, Collection and copyright Lebbeus Woods

For the World Trade Center site, Woods proposed a massive mixed-use building that is perpetually under construction. Its principal feature is a vertical memorial park, "The Ascent," rising continuously within the building and providing "Stations" for reflection on the twin towers' complex life and death.

Meditation, 1993, from the series War and Architecture, 1993–94, Pencil and pastel on bristol board, Private collection, copyright Lebbeus Woods

Right, In addressing conditions in Sarajevo after the siege of 1992-96, Woods argued that cities devastated by crisis should not simply restore buildings or erase the evidence of their devastation. The rebuilt city should incorporate "scabs," "scars," and "insertions" that acknowledge the damage and

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create “new tissue.”

Meta-Institute, from *Havana Sketchbook*, 1994-95, sewn linen book with ink and pencil on paper, Carnegie Museum of Art, Purchase: gift of the Drue Heinz Trust

Right, In late 1994 and early ‘95, Woods was one of a group of architects who gathered in Havana to study the city’s dire physical condition and propose architectural solutions. One of Woods’ proposals was for a Meta-Institute: a place in which “to devise principles, practices, and the ‘rules’ by which institutions continually revise and reform themselves.”

Sketch of initial design for installation at the Heinz Architectural Center, 2003, Ink on tracing paper, Collection and copyright Lebbeus Woods

Right, Woods likes to create spaces that allow the individual to break free of custom, take risks, and embrace unpredictability. At the Heinz Architectural Center, Woods will re-shape some of the spaces

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by inserting large panels carrying enormous photos of some of his drawings, creating a unique spatial experience for the visitor.

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