

Inciting Architectural Radicalism and Experimentation

Interview with Mitch McEwen of SUPERFRONT

by Oscar Oliver Didier and Marcelo López Dinardi

Platform structural analysis
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Right: *Archeography III* at SUPERFRONT Brooklyn 2008. Photo laphotagrapheuse
Bottom: *Open House*

SUPERFRONT is a new space for architectural experimentation, located in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. SUPERFRONT's mission is to support, promote, and produce radically contemporary architecture, while fostering creative interdisciplinary exchange. This mission is achieved through exhibits, publications, panels, and projects that, while focused on architecture, may also concern art, performance, media and social science.

Polimorfo: *Your SUPERFRONT initiative promotes radically contemporary architecture while fostering creative interdisciplinary exchanges. What characteristics define this "radical" architecture? How not to get confused with architecture that seems "radical" just because of its formal expression and not its content, pertinence or purpose? What roles do other disciplines have in this definition of "radicalism"?*

M. McEwen: Regarding the question of radical in architecture, it seems very

important to differentiate between architecture that is radically contemporary and radical architecture. In the first case, which is the syntax I use, 'radically' is an adverb describing the adjective contemporary. There is a funny thing in English where an adjective describing another adjective becomes an adverb, as if it takes on action.

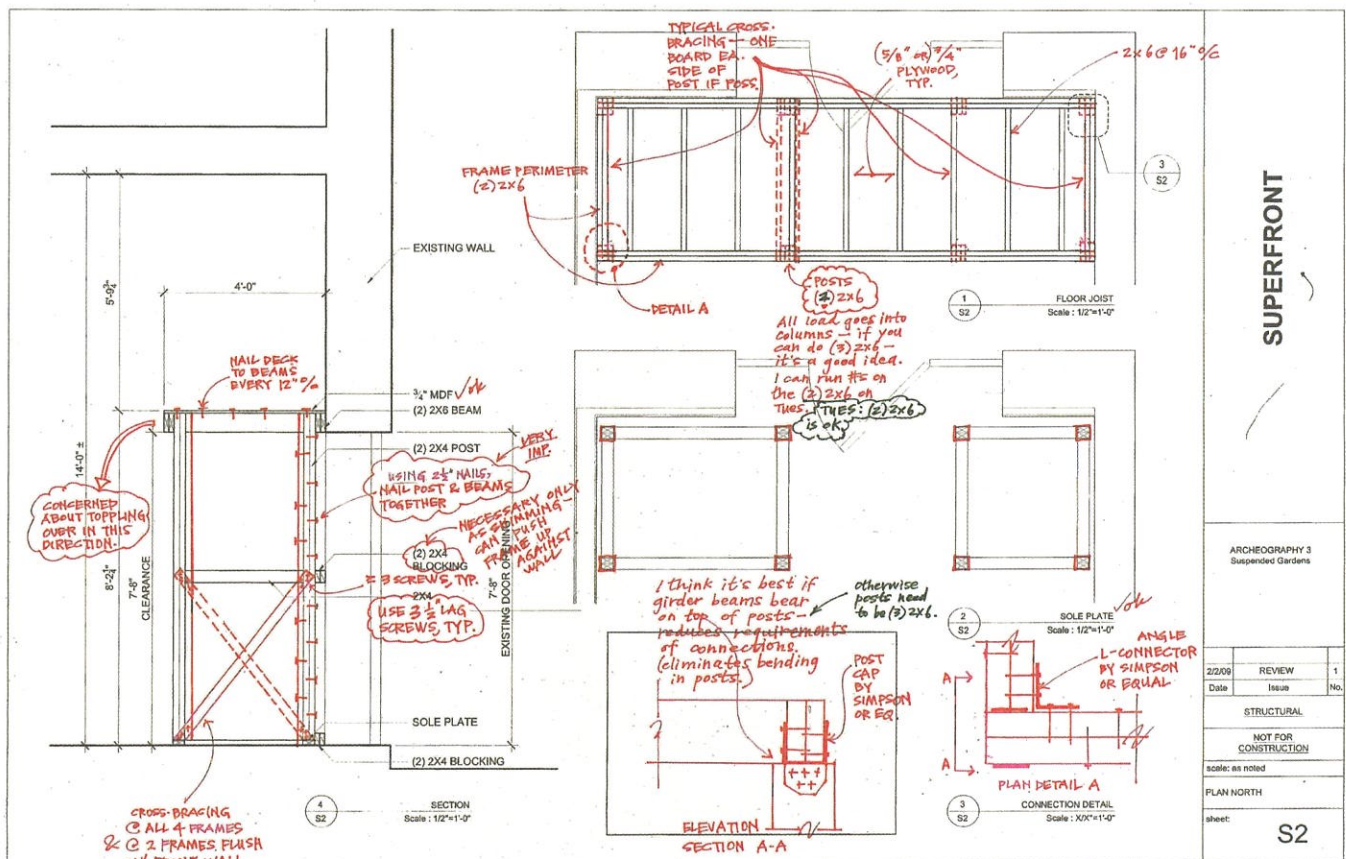
SUPERFRONT supports architecture that is contemporary in aspects that cannot be reduced to formalism or style. This is architectural production rooted in a contemporary discourse and concerns of the immediate present. These concerns are, perhaps, so immediate that they could never correspond to the timeline of a full-scale building. The Unplanned exhibition in LA, for example, collected contemporary criticisms of urban planning, from the more 'digested' (forgive the pun) concern for urban food production to more marginal experiments with smell, or post-Soviet analyses.

Inversely, projects deploy

architecture as a discipline and medium for critiquing contemporary society. This has happened in both summer exhibits, OPEN HOUSE STATE SECRETS and ARCHITECTS WHO PLAY WELL WITH ARCHITECTS, where architecture becomes, among other things, a tool for discussing personal narratives of political economic crisis or analyzing institutional apparatus of control.

The radicalism of the work at SUPERFRONT happens at the level of immediacy in time and space. I do not believe in radical architecture. Architecture is, by definition, always complicit with reality and authority. This is, for me, part of what makes it so fascinating.

Polimorfo: *Contrary to more traditional architectural practices, you suggest that SUPERFRONT allows one to make "mistakes". What do you mean by this and what virtues do "mistakes" have in all of the processes related to SUPERFRONT?*



SUPERFRONT

ARCHEOGRAPHY 3
Suspended Gardens

2/2/09	REVIEW	1
Date	Issue	No.
STRUCTURAL		
NOT FOR CONSTRUCTION		
scale: as noted		
PLAN NORTH		
sheet: S2		

M. McEwen: I think it is worth pointing out here that SUPERFRONT does not qualify as an architectural practice. It has contributed to my development as an architect, and, hopefully, to the development of the hundred plus people who have been exhibited or collaborated, wrote, or engaged in dialogue here.

But part of what gives SUPERFRONT the ability to provide a malleable platform, a space, a framework for architectural experiments is that it is not a practice. Occasionally other organizations have paid the costs associated with collaborations, but we do not have clients. We do not make submissions to competitions. The responsibility for both the work and the purpose of the work, the agenda behind the work, always rests with SUPERFRONT.

If an experiment is really an experiment it will involve mistakes. A laboratory without mistakes is a laboratory conducting only the 'control' aspect of the experiment. A false hypothesis is, in some sense, a mistake, a productive mistake. The architectural field has used the notion of the laboratory for some time to fetishize the mutation or the unexpected, unauthorized, outcome. I think it is important to develop a way of learning, more than a method for producing new variants, more spectacles. We often speak of experiments, but the avant-garde of architecture has produced factories of spectacles.

Polimorfo: *You explain that "intelligence" is reduced in architecture. What kind of "intelligence" are you referring to and how does this affect academia, professionalism and our relationship to other fields and audiences?*

M. McEwen: No, no, I don't think intelligence is reduced in architecture! Even when we are only generating new spectacles for conspicuous consumption we do it with such overwhelming intelligence. No, no, quite the opposite.

I am saying, rather, that the intelligence of architects is routinely wasted. Wasted by our clients, wasted in our autonomic purity, wasted through the architectural ignorance of the public.

Before architecture I worked in financial services in Silicon Valley, studied philosophy and political economy at Harvard, worked briefly at the Federal Reserve and a Washington DC think tank. When I started architecture I did not

