

Allan Wexler explores efficiency, community

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<http://www.sfchronicle.com/news/article/Allan-Wexler-explores-efficiency-community-11003969.php>

By Charles Desmarais

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Photo: Allan Wexler

IMAGE 1 OF 10

Allan Wexler, "Vinyl Milford" (1994). An off-the-shelf garden shed is modified so that unused furniture can slide into the walls.

Allan Wexler's new book, **"Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design,"** is mistitled. Most of the projects described in this heavy tome — thickly packed with photographs, texts and, above all, original ideas — are extremely sensible. With the emphasis on the extreme.

Why, for example, if an umbrella sheds rain in one orientation, can't it be used to collect water when turned upside down? Need communal seating on a **steeply sloped floor? Don't change the floor, change the seats and tables** to serve the need by trimming legs here, propping there — or live with tilted tables but shim the dinnerware.

Wexler, 68, has been tweaking the art world with variations on what he learned in architecture school (Rhode Island School of Design, Pratt Institute) **for more than 40 years. As a biography in “Absurd Thinking” describes his primary project, he “investigates eating, bathing, sitting, and socializing, and turns these everyday activities into ritual and theater.”**

His retrospective exhibition “Custom Built” traveled extensively, ending its tour at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2001. (I was director of a museum that brought the show to Cincinnati, and later commissioned a permanent Wexler installation there.)

Many of Wexler's ideas — often developed, as the book's title page acknowledges, **“with the close collaboration of Ellen Wexler,”** his wife — **celebrate the idea of community. “Coffee Seeks its Own Level” (1990) connects** four coffee cups with long vinyl tubes. In order for anyone seated at the table to raise a cup without causing the others to overflow, everyone must drink in **unison. “Co-Exist” chairs (2009) would topple if two people did not sit at the same time. To employ the “Four-Handled Broom” (1991), you must pull while we push. And “Four Shirt Collars Sewn into a Tablecloth” (1991) would surely** make for a lively party.

Efficiency is another common theme. For a 1988 project in Pittsburgh, **“Bed / Sitting Rooms for an Artist in Residence,”** he designed furniture that rolls between two rooms through openings in a wall. Parts of the same object can serve as a sofa in one room, a bed in the other; a single reading lamp swings through a hole to serve either room.

“Crate House” (1991) intricately packs all the elements of a kitchen, living room, bathroom and bedroom, each in a separate crate. A small, empty **“house”** has openings cut into its sides. Depending on the need of the moment, the correct crate is rolled in and the whole house serves a single function.

“Hat / Roof” (1994) is both substantial weather protection and a wearable rain barrel to collect runoff. In 1990, Wexler built **“A Chair a Day”** for 16 days, each a permutation of the previous day’s design. In 2007 he drew **“54 Studies for Chair Transformations,”** developing many of them into actual, three-dimensional objects.

Many of the 200-plus works documented here have a self-referential aspect, though few are as powerfully autobiographical as **“I Want to Become Architecture” (2002)**, for which he built a faceted wall niche, designed to precisely embrace his form.

“I never set out to make work that is humorous,” the artist writes. **“It is surprising when humor appears, a byproduct of looking so closely.”**

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The Designs of Allan Wexler, a "Radical Deconstructor of Habitation"

A new book celebrates the artist's unique vision, featuring more than 200 projects he has conceived since the 1980s.



Allan Wexler, "Interchange chair" (2008), from *Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design* (photo by Allan Wexler; image courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

How do the spaces we inhabit shape our daily rituals, and how does our behavior, in turn, help to inform the architecture of these spaces? These are the questions with which artist Allan Wexler has primarily grappled for the last few decades, endlessly creating projects that examine and restructure functional objects as well as routines that we may accept without

question. Celebrating his individual vision is a new monograph recently put out by Lar Müllers Publishers, the first that takes us deep inside his constantly searching mind.



Allan Wexler, "Crate House" (1991), from Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design (photo by Ben Burnhart)

Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design, edited by Ashley Simone, features more than 200 projects Wexler has conceived since the '80s, from sketches and drawings to fully realized sculptures and installations. Although a trained architect, he has been less concerned with designing entire buildings than with tinkering with their smaller components, namely their fixtures and furnishings, like tables and chairs.

As writer Michele Calzavara, who describes Wexler as "a radical deconstructor of habitation," writes in an essay in the book, "Inhabiting, for Wexler, is explored via the interrogation of

daily practices and rituals, and via the invention of devices that investigate and exhibit the body in space.”

Projects that exemplify this include his studies of chairs, such as “One Equals Two” (2007), for which he built alternative iterations of IKEA Stefan chairs, turning a seat representative of the simple and utilitarian into the foundation for something complex and experimental. His creations also often highlight the framing of social interaction, from “Tables of Content” (2000) — a series of picnic tables installed in a Santa Monica park, with benches reconfigured to disrupt the centuries-old gathering — to “Two Too Large Tables,” his 2006 public art commission at Hudson River Park, where passersby can stop and slide themselves into awkward seated sections sliced into a large table and then converse from determined distances. In “One Table Worn by Four People,” on the other hand, communication can only occur when all four participants, each wearing a section of a table, come together and figure out how their segments fit.



Allan Wexler, “Expansion” (2007) from Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design (photo by Allan Wexler)



Allan Wexler in collaboration with Ellen Wexler, "Tables of Content" (2000) in Douglas Park, Santa Monica, CA (photo by William Short)

Wearables, another fixation of Wexler's, are created as sculpture to improve the natural abilities of the human body, which he treats as another form of architecture. He plays with our control of smell with "Spice Box for the Havdalah Service" (2005), which attempts to turn the Jewish ritual of smelling sweet spices into a customizable experience: a mask equipped with tubes and valves allows its user to play with the flow of different fragrances according to personal preference. A more recent sculpture, "Cone of Vision" (2016), rests on the user's shoulders and attempts to magnify and focus vision through the low-tech: two huge, absurd-looking cones made of wood. These are unwieldy, inconvenient contraptions; intensifying a person's presence, they also speak to Wexler's interest in how bodies consume space.

His impressively designed “Crate House” (1991) is a larger exploration of this notion and a carefully calculated response to Le Corbusier’s concept of a home as “a machine for living.” As its name suggests, Wexler packaged the objects of a home’s various spaces — a kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, and living room — into four different crates, slim and tall like those made for paintings, which then slot neatly into one larger, eight-foot cube. Its dweller thus has to roll out a crate to use the room, so the architecture of the house depends on need and function. Envisioned as an always shifting structure, “Crate House” captures Wexler’s approach to his art in general, which is intentionally never focused but always fluid, searching to unsettle our accustomed environments.



Allan Wexler, “Spice Box for the Havdalah Service” (2005) from Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design (photo by Allan Wexler)



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Allan Wexler, "One Table Worn by Four People" (1991) (photo by Allan Wexler, courtesy San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art)



Allan Wexler, "Cone of Vision" (2016) from Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design (photo by Allan Wexler)



Allan Wexler, "Hat/Roof" (1994) from Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design (photo by Allan Wexler)



Allan Wexler, "Bucket House" (1994) (photo by Allan Wexler)



Allan Wexler, "Crate House" (1991) (photo by Allan Wexler; courtesy Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum, Hagen, Germany)



Allan Wexler in collaboration with Ellen Wexler, "Tables of Content" (2000) in Douglas Park, Santa Monica, CA (photo by William Short)



Allan Wexler in collaboration with Ellen Wexler, "Two Too Large Table" (2006)

Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design is available from Lar Müllers Publishers.

Staff. "John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 2016 Fellows - United States and Canada," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2016.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 6, 2016

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JOHN SIMON GUGGENHEIM MEMORIAL FOUNDATION 2016 Fellows - United States and Canada

Since 1925 the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation annually has offered Fellowships to artists, scholars, and scientists in all fields. This year, after considering the recommendations of panels and juries involving hundreds of distinguished practitioners in the competition fields, the Board of Trustees granted 175 Fellowships. Guggenheim Fellows are appointed on the basis of impressive achievement in the past and exceptional promise for future accomplishment.

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April 24, 2014



ALLAN WEXLER'S BREAKING GROUND AT RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

Allan Wexler, Sheathing the Rift, 2014. Hand-worked inkjet prints on panel, 64 x 80 in.



[Allan Wexler: Breaking Ground](#) from [Allan Wexler](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Questioning the reality of photography, Wexler digitally and physically manipulates his images. He then adds more depth and texture to his printed compositions with graphite pencil, matte and wax finishes, so that they hover somewhere between photography and drawing.

For over 40 years, Allan Wexler has combined the languages of fine and contemporary art, architecture, and drawing to create highly inventive work that wryly pulls apart and reconstructs the edifices of our everyday life. Reducing the built environment into archetypal structures that are simple in form, yet rigorous, conceptually and compositionally, Wexler excavates uninhabitable spaces within a realm we thought was already defined, and invites our imaginations to wander.

Through May 3, 2014

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GALLERIES

Breaking the Ground Between Art and Architecture

by Robert C. Morgan on April 25, 2014



Allan Wexler, "Sheathing the Rift" (2014) (all images courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York)

In recent years, the connections between architecture, art, and design have, in many cases, become inextricably bound to another in a kind of symbiotic relationship. For some observers, architecture appears relevant to the twenty-first century only when it emulates an abstract sculptural presence. But for architecture to unite with sculpture in this way, the balance between its respective function and non-functional components requires the formative clarification of design. What is often lost or missing from the equation is the overriding technical authority of engineering, which has gradually been given less attention than the overall, external appearance of the building. Does this mean engineering still resides in the Industrial Age with no relation to the present? I would disagree — primarily because engineering is what gives attention to detail, and detail is what signifies the manner in which things are made to work coherently even when not visible on the surface.

Where architecture merges with art, and consequently, art with design, the structural joints and modular units that contain aspects of the structural whole and thus hold things in place may become too far-sighted, which means that attention to such functional details begins to move outside the central idea of architecture rather than being integrated with it. This appeared evident to me upon visiting three architectural sites over the past decade: Frank Gehry's [Disney Concert Hall](#) in Los Angeles, Zaha Hadid's [Opera House in Guangzhou](#), and Rem Koolhaas' [Casa da Música in Porto](#). In each case, a faltering attention to details included problems with proportions in scale relations, unmatched seams between walls, acoustical distortions, and stress points near window mullions that result in leakage. These and other related problems tended to interrupt my perception of the whole. When such details are overlooked or are taken for granted or misunderstood in terms of the necessity of balance, my sense of comfort within and around the space of the building is diminished. The balance between function and non-function literally depends on engineering, which serves as a fundament for all existing genres of architecture + art and design, even when highly imaginative, software-ridden forms are present.



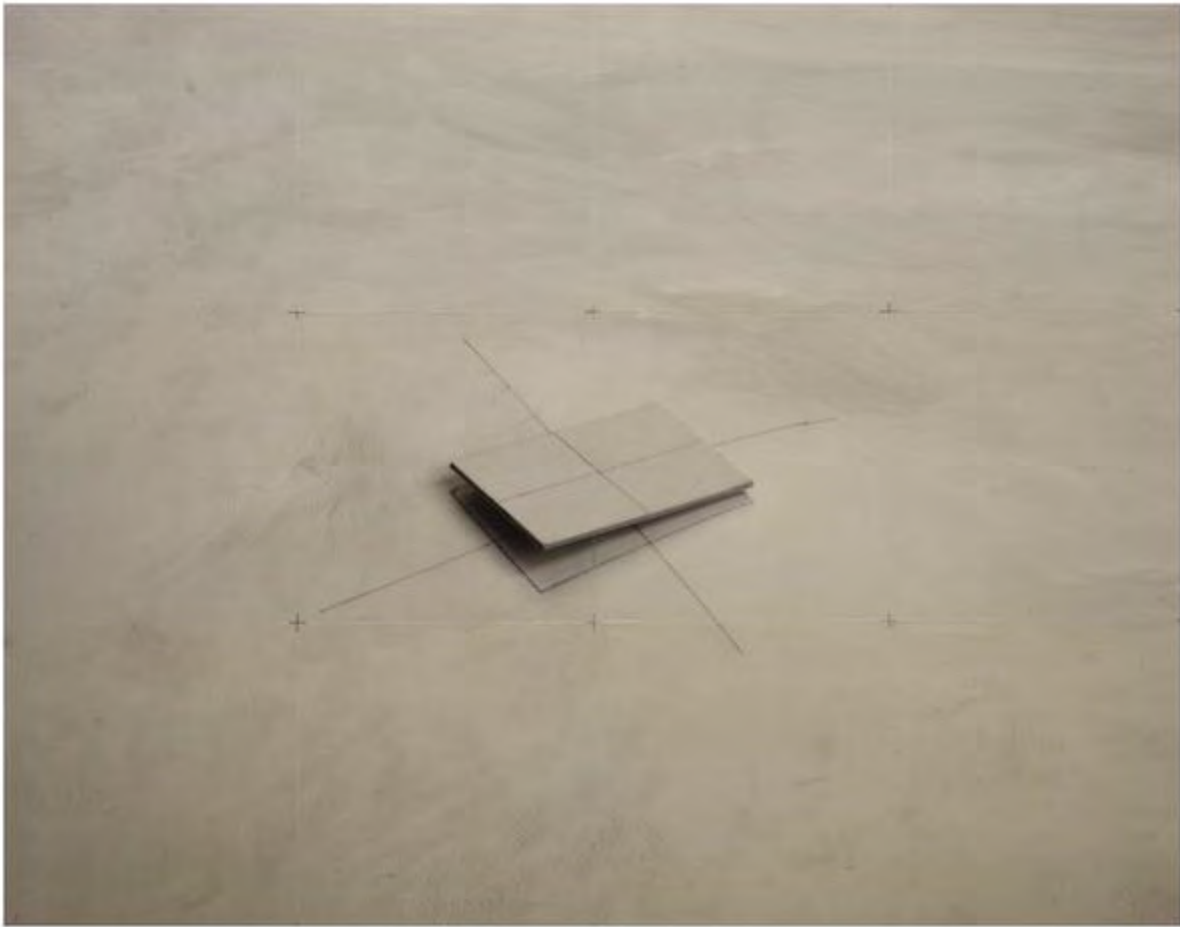
"Adams House in Paradise" (2014)

While tactile theorists may strive for a greater conceptualization in designing their buildings, they may understate the lingering demands of specialization that will not diminish in importance. For example, the height of a ceiling is not incidental to the acoustics in a room, the plumbing fixtures in the basement require clarity of access, and the slope of a ramp for the handicapped cannot be too steep in relation to the entry. Conversely, the kind of specializations that engineering provides become necessary once the concept has been clarified through art and design, and once the continuity of the proposal is clearly established through the integration of material software. In other words, clarity of concept precedes specialization, not the other way around. But without specialization, it is unlikely the concept of a building will succeed on functional terms.



"Shelter" (2014)

In this respect, the concepts of artist/architect Allan Wexler intrigue me as they continue to flourish and evolve in all their fundamental permutations as revealed in his current exhibition at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in lower SoHo. Titled *Breaking Ground*, Wexler's exhibition makes clear the connections between architecture + art and design, together with engineering. For my eye, it is all persistently clear, as in two major installations: one titled "Adams House in Paradise" and the other "Shelter" (both 2014). Here as in his remarkable hand-worked inkjet prints, which constitute the overwhelming majority of the exhibition, Wexler reverses the terms of his practice. Although trained in both fine arts and architecture, he opts for the former that includes a bevy of knowledge, insight, and wit that he perceives in the latter.



"Level" (2012)

Both "Adams House" and "Shelter" focus on tree branches in which he transforms the negative spaces between the branches and twigs of a tree into an assortment of abstract planar modules. In "Shelter," he uses plywood, while in "Adams House" the inextricably poetic construction is assembled with durable cut-paper. Both of these constructions relate to two sources: one, an early Tree painting by Mondrian from 1911 in which the negative spaces between the branches are foregrounded; and two, a series of work by Wexler from 1975 involving small cut-branches that are thematically mounted together in two equidistant rows, each of which is attached to a flat corrugated cardboard backing. Prime examples would include "Tree Transformation Cut" and "Tree Transformation Becoming I-Beam" that describe the passage from nature to becoming a unit of construction that eventually will emerge as architecture.



'Breaking Ground' inkjet print series (2014) (install view of South Gallery)

Wexler's inkjet prints, *Breaking Ground* (2012–14), further suggest thematic and sequential relationships that contemplate the origins of the built world. They appear as a retraction or return to the source of physical structures in which one dwells, works, moves through, or simply occupies. These works carry a certain oblique logic, not unlike the work of German sculptor, Franz Erhard Walther, whose current exhibition at the WIELS Museum in Brussels focuses on the positions of the body that reveal a proto-architectural space. Wexler's work deals less with the positions of the body than with a lexicon derived from spatial thinking, specifically in relation to decision-making processes that ultimately effect the manner in which architecture begins to coincide with art + design. In order to achieve this, Wexler works with a clay model of an empty landscape on a worktable in his studio.

As he manipulates the terrain of his model, various architectonic permutations begin to emerge. Often these will occur sequentially, as for example in early works, such as "Level" and "Up Lift" (both 2012), where, in each case, a square slice of earth is cut out from the center of the "landscape" and slightly raised. In another work, "Footings" (also 2012), a windowless cube with an open door is positioned on a slight incline with arrangements of stones to stabilize the foundation. Despite their primary technology, the engineering details in each model are precise. Once the structure on the "landscape" is complete, it is photographed and then printed in sections that are later reassembled on a panel. Eventually the artist will rework the surface of the printed image using paint and protective binders.



"Footing" (2012)

Two of the most remarkable work from *Breaking Ground* are titled "Interior" (2013) and "Sheathing the Rift" (2014). In each work, the emphasis is given to elongated cuts within the landscape. In the first, the surface of the print is dark, suggesting desert nightfall. The incised elongated cut in the center has light emanating from the interior with a ladder at one end.



"Interior" (2013)

In "Sheathing the Rift," the cut is even longer. Flat rectangular plates line the side of the crevice that offers stabilization to this linear interior form. In either case, the tactile connection to architecture is felt both on a literal and figurative level. The wisdom of these works takes us back to basics where, in spite of the new advances in architecture being made possible through state-of-the-art software, we are confronted with the fundamental engineering that makes these structures functional and habitable.

With art and design rapidly entering into advanced forms of architecture, Allan Wexler reminds us of what remains essential. What comes from nature and the physical properties of the universe cannot be neglected. Rather our understanding of these principles will prove increasingly indispensable if the architecture in coming years is going to function not simply as a virtual phenomenon, but on the level of practicality and comfort in order to meet our fundamental tactile and psychological needs.

[Allan Wexler: Breaking Ground](#) continues at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts (31 Mercer Street, SoHo, Manhattan) through May 3.



Beckenstein, Joyce. "Allan Wexler: The Man Who Would Be Architecture." *Sculpture Magazine*, (January/February, 2012): 53 - 57.



Allan Wexler The Man Who Would Be Architecture

BY JOYCE BECKENSTEIN

Opposite: *Scenic Overlook* (detail), 2009. Granite, 60 x 8 ft. Above: *Gardening Sukkuli*, 2000. Wood, wheels, gardening implements, eating utensils, and ritual objects, 108 x 108 x 120 in.



Above: *Drywall Drawing*, 2010. Drywall, screws, and pencil, 8 x 8 x 8 ft. Below: *Scaffold Furniture*, 1988. Plywood, drywall, 2 x 4s, paint, pine, leather, glass, cup, silverware, napkin, and bulb, 4 x 4 x 3 ft.



Two bird nests cradling speckled eggs sit in a glass vitrine in Allan Wexler's living room. Propped beneath them on the floor is his drawing *Positions of Plywood* (2007), six softly rendered planes afloat on ochre paper. The drawing points to the nest above. "I want to be architecture," he says.⁴ Wexler, whose works defy easy categorization, makes architecture-inspired sculptures and installations that explore the meaning of this statement. He's less concerned with creating space, more concerned with the human spirit that dwells within it—something he locates in objects as ordinary as a screw head embedded in Sheetrock.

"I want to exploit the insignificant to generate something complex," he explains, as he discusses *Drywall Drawing* (2010), included in an exhibition at the University of Manitoba School of Architecture, in Winnipeg, Canada. Mission accomplished: he's squeezed a universe into an eight-by-eight-foot cube. The cube's Sheetrock interior is affixed with crosshead (Phillips) screws oriented in random positions. Using a pencil and straight edge, Wexler extended the + shapes to draw a disorienting web of intersecting lines across the walls, floor, and ceiling. The completed drawing, reminiscent of an astrological map, creates a dizzying space for the viewer who, upon entering, feels like an astronaut in a spacecraft, adrift in the cosmos. "When we cross a threshold, we change a space and it changes us," Wexler remarks. He intends this complex expansion as a metaphor for human conflict: Do we want the security of confined space or the uncertainty that comes with limitless freedom? After photographing himself inside the finished work, Wexler then digitally extended the vectors across his image, existentially trapping himself in that quagmire of his own devising, a finite speck in an infinite universe.

Ronald Feldman, director of Feldman Fine Arts, understood the ambiguities in Wexler's disarmingly simple constructions when he began to show them in 1984: "This non-practicing architect was brilliant about architecture as a medium for sculpture." Feldman recalls *Small Buildings* (1979), a collection of miniature deconstructed and reconstructed versions of a generic hut that presages one of Wexler's major themes, the home. Some buildings are strapped shut with woven wooden laths to keep out the elements and nosey bodies; others with pitched roofs and cement slabs suggest a child's concept of "my house," and a cobble of sticks set with glass renders the house a vulnerable home and riffs on postmodern architecture gone awry. "Wexler loves to push, to see how much he can get out of a thing," Feldman says.

In the '80s, Wexler expanded what's become a lifetime process—deconstructing, reconstructing, and reinventing houses, tables, chairs, and utensils to

understand how and why a construction process works. His *Scaffold Furniture* (1988) includes a comically crisscrossed pedestal, an armature that supports a lowly cup. But this is not furniture. It is a sculptural diagram of the physical forces required to keep a cup level on the table. And where there are physical forces, there is psychological angst. Wexler serves up security and insecurity: Can we look at a vulnerable cup and not remember spilled coffee?

Next he asked if there is a sculptural or architectural equivalent to the ritual of drinking coffee. To find out, he invited four people to participate in an interactive performance piece, *Coffee Seeks Its Own Level* (1990). They sat at a table covered with a white cloth and set with four coffee cups connected by tubes. Everyone had to sip in unison or the coffee would slobber all over the cloth.

Then, pressing the coffee stains for something more, Wexler traced the spills left on the cloth and used them as patterns for a series of ceramic vessels that he made to cover the corresponding stains. The result, *Coffee Stained Coffee Cups* (1990) casts the performance as sculpture and elevates the second-by-second miscalculations of human ritual to the level of timeless fine art.

The impulse to question assumptions about art and conning sculpture, architecture, and performance grew out of the tumultuous '60s, when America was in the throes of the Vietnam War, as well as the feminist, civil rights, and sexual revolutions. A baby boomer who came of age during that era, Wexler studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he found role models urging him to blur the edges. His RISD mentor, Austrian architect Raymond Abraham, encouraged him to break the rules and "make art that irritates because it causes change." Another teacher, Michael Webb of Archigrams, belonged to an avant-garde architecture group that promoted hypothetical and fantasy projects. Wexler also admired Walter Pichler, whose architecture-inspired sculpture is more about the poetics than the function of architecture.

"I didn't become an architect, because I preferred experimenting with architec-



Above: *Coffee Stained Coffee Cups*, 1990. Assorted ceramic cups on table with white cloth, 34 x 38 x 48 in. Below: *Sukkah with Furniture Made from Its Walls*, 1990. Plywood, wood, and paint, 8 x 8 x 12 ft.



tural forms and materials as a studio artist," Wexler says. In the '90s, his experiments shifted from works focused on part-to-whole relationships to installations, including a series of sukkahs probing relationships between humans and their settings.

The sukkah, a ceremonial outdoor hut, is traditionally used to celebrate the harvest during the Jewish festival of Sukkot, when worshippers adorn its open roof with seasonal foliage. They share meals and often sleep inside it. *Sukkah with Furniture Made from Its Walls* (1990), exhibited at the Israel Museum, Tel Aviv, in 1990, is built from a cube, a form Wexler likes because it's "basic, bland...like Tofu, it will absorb any flavor." He built the cube from plywood, then cut table and chair parts from its walls. The openings left by the cutouts form odd, whimsical windows. When assembled and placed inside the sukkah, the table and chairs provide a dining ensemble for use during and after the harvest. Nothing, aside from the title of the work, suggests a religious function. The secular is deliberately contiguous with the spiritual.

Gardening Sukkah (2000/09) also shelters secular and spiritual functions under one (non) roof. Most of the year, this useful gardening shed-on-wheels holds rakes, planters, and a box of Miracle-Gro—a teasing segue to its one-week ceremonial use during Sukkot.

TOP: COURTESY THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART; BOTTOM: COURTESY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

TOP: COURTESY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART; BOTTOM: COURTESY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART



When the University Gallery of the University of Massachusetts commissioned Wexler to contribute to an exhibition encapsulating what life would be like in the final decade of the 20th century, he wanted to imbue his piece with reverence for how people might live that life. On the premise that Americans would ultimately need to economize and pare down their technology-driven existence, he created *Crate House* (1991). Taking a 20th-century leap over Henry David Thoreau's no-frills cabin at Walden Pond, Wexler wondered, "Can I fit four functional rooms into an eight-foot cube?" He did it by assembling a kitchen, bedroom, living room, and bath in four ship-style, plywood crates-on-wheels.

Wexler's whimsical experiments do not seek whimsy as an end, though humor is essential to the double-entendres that enliven his work, elevating basic structural elements to the role of silent actors in a performance. This is especially true of the public installations that he creates in collaboration with his wife, Ellen Wexler.¹² Of Wexler's many works that integrate the plane, *Two Too Large Tables* (2006), located at Hudson River Park in Chelsea, New York, is among the most spectacular. These table and chair arrangements invite visitors to chat, read, meditate, or simply enjoy the beautiful view. One tabletop made with jigsaw puzzle cutouts creates an asymmetrical seating arrangement.

Here, as in *Garden of Sukiala*, the Wexlers play with dynamic interactions between forms and get people to think about using them in different ways. One tabletop is open and exposed; the other provides shelter. The irregular—almost capricious—arrangements of chairs offer choices: sitting here, one makes easy eye contact; there, it's not so easy. The visitor can engage the architecture, become one with what it offers physically and socially, or walk away as evanescently as the shifting light.

"Let's meet by the big canyon": *Seemt Overlook* (2009) may well be the next sexy place for a New York City rendezvous. The Wexlers' public commission for the Metropolitan Transit Authority/Long Island Rail Road Atlantic Terminal in Brooklyn again involves a platform plane. Here, it symbolically rises from underground bowels to greet the light of day.

Scenic Overlook is public art on a monumental scale. Configured to suggest the outcroppings of the Grand Canyon, it projects between two staircases and the void that separates the street level entrance from the platform below. Made of geometric, cut granite shapes, it unites technology's pixilated gridded city with an epic landscape that recalls those of the 19th-century Hudson River School. "This is a sculpting of natural forms, nature as architecture," says Weiser. We're reminded of the orthogonal planes reaching toward the bird nest in the living room. We're back home with the man who would be architecture.

1. *Portrait of a woman* from a series of digital artworks. Part of the art installation 'The Clinic' (2009) based on history and research into the life of a woman who refused to have a hysterectomy in 1909. The questionnaire resulted in 1000 answers from women. London: 2010.
2. *Blue Lines*, 2010. *Blue Lines* by Joyce Beckenstein. *Johns Hopkins Art Project* at the Johns Hopkins University, 2010. <http://www.jhu.edu/~artproj/>
3. *Portrait of a woman*, The series of digital artworks. *Beckenstein Joyce*. 2009. <http://www.jhu.edu/~artproj/>
4. *Portrait of a woman*, the exhibition, with digital artworks. *Project: The Clinic* by Joyce Beckenstein. Museum, 2009.
5. *Blue Lines* is a series of digital artworks in collaboration with John Beckenstein, artist and curator of the series. The series is based on research into the life of a woman, *Portrait of a woman*, *John Beckenstein*, *John Beckenstein*, *John Beckenstein*, and *John Beckenstein*.



COURTESY RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

Artist, architect, and designer Allan Wexler has long brought the thinking and strategies of an artist to bear on the richness of architectural ideas. His works are frequently exhibited here and abroad, and his solo show *Overlook* is on view at the Ronald Feldman Gallery through October 24.

Could you talk about your background and what has most influenced the kind of work you do now?

I graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1971. Because of an economic recession, some architects began to work more theoretically and conceptually. I wouldn't consider the work really anti-architecture; it was a type of meta-architecture. The strongest influence on me then was [Austrian architect] Raimund Abraham. As my teacher, he encouraged me to work on the edge. I enjoyed being a troublemaker. I wanted to become the Andy Warhol of architecture, pushing and redefining the definitions of architecture.

I work alone in my studio, where I can control the variables of a particular project. I reduce the complex issues of architecture to basic and primary ideas. Many pieces in my current exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Gallery look back at these basic principles. I feel I am reinterpreting and perhaps updating Vitruvius' *The Ten Books on Architecture* and Alberti's *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*. I title a series of manipulated digital prints/paintings/drawings *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*. Some of the basic issues explored ask how to excavate into the earth, how to float a horizontal plane or how to position a chair on a surface. I feel as if I am an architect trapped in an artist's body.

Can you expand on that?

I love the actual making of physical objects and environments. I thrive on the smell of wood, the texture of stone; I love tools. I will buy a tool and invent a project in order to justify its purchase. I need to touch, smell, saw, drill, and chisel. I need to become physically exhausted at the same rate that I become intellectually exhausted.

Did you ever want to build buildings?

Yes, but I need to be able to physically construct them myself. Many of my early works were small pavilions, sheds, and gazebos. I believe that a little building can have as much impact as a large building. The conceptual and theoretical content can be the same as a big building.

Menking, William. "Allan Wexler's Ways." *Architect's Newspaper* 7, no. 16, October 7, 2009, p. 9.

The luxury of working small is that there is less delay between idea and reality. Small buildings are inexpensive and I could take more risks. But even these relatively small buildings became cumbersome, so I began to explore the generic chair as a model for architectural ideas. I could work even more rapidly in an almost subconscious way. The chair has become an armature for many ideas over many years of work.

Have you always been drawn to construction?

In the '70s, my wife and I rented a floor-thru on Abingdon Square in the West Village and removed some of the interior walls, as "loft living" was in vogue at the time. I stockpiled the two-by-fours and began to use them to build what I called then *Temple Buildings*. I never considered them to be models for larger structures, but they had that possibility. I established rules through which I would manipulate the materials to construct these "buildings." A time limitation, a particular tool, size of lumber, an overall dimension. I was influenced by John Cage. I've always enjoyed exploring that line between the model and reality. You might look at the *Temple Buildings* and see them as proposals for buildings; at another glance, you would see them as small ritual objects.

Some of your models are done on a computer now. Do you still make handmade models?

Even the digital photography in this show is manipulated with my hands. The photographs are made as a group of 8x8 prints and are glued together with the registration marks revealed. I let the glue ooze out between the individual panels, and I use graphite to draw into the image. I want them to be handmade, constructed images, so they are ambiguously digital and physical simultaneously. They are buffed, polished, and waxed, since the surface is as important to me as its photographic content. The scars and the glue stains are intentional.

How has your work changed in the 24 years you have shown at the Feldman Gallery?

I've used the chair, the table, and the archetypal peak-roofed building for many years as a reference and as an armature for attaching ideas. I think of it as a type of tofu. You can add content to the chair or "typical" building and it picks up that particular flavor. I've always been very interested in serials and transformation. Perhaps an early interest in pursuing a career in the sciences led me to the scientific method as a means to explore architectural ideas.

I was exposed to minimalist composers like Steve Reich and artists like Sol Lewitt, who both worked in serials. With the combination of axonometric drawings of chairs and peaked-roof buildings, I could add in series a line, another line, another line, a bend, a warp, a twist, a slice, a cut, a dissection, a rearrangement, a realignment. At the show, there's a group of transformed axonometric drawings called *54 Studies for Chair Transformations*.

I am trying very hard to not introduce any new ideas to my work. I am trying to go deeper and deeper while keeping constant the same issues.

Bahrampour, Tara. "An Artist's Inspiration Lives On in His Mind."
The New York Times, September 30, 2001, p. CY7.

An Artist's Inspiration Lives On in His Mind

By TARA BAHRAMPOUR

ALLAN WEXLER, architect and conceptual artist, moved to New York in 1973, just as the World Trade Center was being completed. At the time, the twin towers were controversial among architects and urban critics, many of whom objected to the oversize, blocky structures that had so radically altered the skyline.

But Mr. Wexler admired the buildings, and in the mid-1970's, through his conceptual art projects, he mounted a series of projects in their defense. His work included renditions of the skyline with three, four or more towers, as well as depictions of the towers as canvases upon which images could be drawn by manipulating the pattern of lights in the windows at night. Mr. Wexler was also interested in how the towers changed faces over the course of a day, their striated aluminum sides reflecting nuances in light and weather.

"I always saw it as a sort of Tower of Babel or Jacob's Ladder," he said in an interview earlier this year, "an attempt to penetrate through the cloud layer and attempt enlightenment."

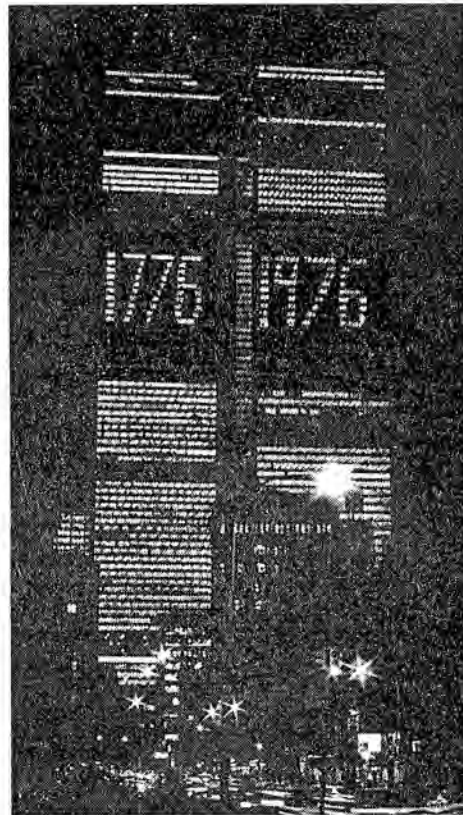
Here are excerpts from a conversation with Mr. Wexler, who now teaches architecture at Pratt Institute in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, one day after the attack on the towers:

"I was looking at the buildings not at face value, but as a reflection, an image of how the sky affected the skyline. It absorbs the sky; it reflects the sky."

"Most people saw it as a static, bland structure. But it was so neutral that it became a barometer that transformed minute by minute by minute. By photographing it four times a day, it radically changed each time. The day was what transformed the building. Whereas when buildings are complex they don't have the ability to do that."

On a project that involved manipulating the lights in the windows in patterns that could depict messages or pictures:

"I was interested in the idea of binary surfaces. But originally, before the energy crisis, the World Trade Center had been built so there was no way to turn off the lights. So my plan would have involved pulling a window shade down on



Allan Wexler

Allan Wexler imagined the trade center as a giant bicentennial billboard.

certain nights to block the light. Every office would have had a calendar of when to pull down their shades, a cataloging of various images that the World Trade Center could then turn itself into."

"I would tell my students that it was really the urban stage of the world. People used it as a forum, and now, unfortunately, politically as well."

"It is now stronger as a monument. We'll never forget it. It will live in our memories. It's like the grassy knoll. It becomes a physical structure at this point."

PRO AND CON

When They Were Young

Some of the early appraisals of the twin towers:

"These are big buildings but they are not great architecture. The grill-like metal facade stripes are curiously without scale. They taper into the more widely spaced columns of 'Gothic trees' at 10 lower stories, a detail that does not express structure so much as tart it up. The Port Authority has built the ultimate Disneyland fairytale blockbuster. It is General Motors Gothic."

(Ada Louise Huxtable, *The New York Times*, April 5, 1973)

"The only way to grasp the enormity and the ugliness of New York's controversial World Trade Center is by air. From up there, flying across the Hudson River from New Jersey, the eye perceives the center's two aluminum, steel and glass towers standing like maidens of innocence against the grimy landscape of Lower Manhattan. The World Trade Center is an esthetic failure, a classic attempt to compromise too many motives and ideologies at once, soured further by a dose of hubris."

(*Newsweek*, July 2, 1973)

"Seemingly defying the elements, the twin towers pierced the low-hanging clouds and rain to rise majestically over a city of skyscrapers. No greater monument could attest to the will of man than the towers of the World Trade Center themselves."

(*New York Daily News*, April 5, 1973)

"As presently designed this fearful instrument of uricide will be not only the tallest, but unquestionably one of the ugliest buildings in the world. . . . Worse, these incredible giants just stand there, artless and dumb, without any relationship to anything, not even to each other."

(Wolf von Eckhardt, *Harper's Magazine*, May 1966)



Allan Wexler, *Water Storage Unit*,
1994, plastic, plumbing, hardware, wood,
50 x 17 x 18".

ALLAN WEXLER

RONALD FELDMAN FINE
ARTS

Allan Wexler's brilliantly inventive oeuvre, which consists of variations on and mutations of something far older than the novel or the easel painting—domestic architecture—should give hope to anyone suffering from the anxiety of influence. Perhaps the key to Wexler's inventiveness lies in his description of himself as an architect trapped in an artist's body. In architecture, the realm of the possible is often fenced in by practical exigencies (everything from the constraints of construction to the demands of clients) that can be swept aside when working on a smaller scale. Thus, in applying his architectural imagination to artistic means, Wexler is often able to produce ingenious variations

on the house and its appurtenances.

In previous exhibitions, Wexler explored the dialectic between domestic space and social functions such as dining or watching TV, but in his recent show, "Buckets, Sinks, Gutters," he investigated how people consume or dispose of water, how a building itself directs the flow of water or is, in turn, transformed by it. A small wooden model called *Building for Water Collection with Bathroom*, 1994, demonstrates how different means of rain collection might alter the structure of a house. The roof of a hypothetical bathroom is punctured by three large funnel-shaped structures that drain directly into a bathtub, sink, and toilet. The model is typical of Wexler's works, in that it responds to a very practical problem—how to utilize natural resources like rainfall—with an imaginative but potentially absurd solution: what happens to your toilet during a dry spell?

Because scale tends to impose more limits in architecture than in art, it is precisely by working at the level of models, maquettes, and prototypes that Wexler is able to try out a number of different solutions, even ridiculous ones, to a given problem. *Parsons Kitchen: Sink Unit*, 1994, stands out as a lifesize exception. Commissioned by the Parsons School of Design, this crate about the size of a coffin or small shower stall houses a washtub, a bucket for waste water, a bottle of Ajax—all on castor wheels. In effect, it's a portable unit containing nothing but the kitchen sink. Seeing one of Wexler's designs realized, however, leads you to wonder whether his works are models and modules or something else altogether. While *Parsons Kitchen* may answer to a specific need at Parsons, how many people could really use a portable kitchen sink? Works like *Parsons Kitchen* don't appear to be intended for mass reproduction, like Bauhaus furniture, any more than *Building for Water Collection with Bathroom*, 1994, is intended for large-scale construction. They may have the appearance of architectural models, environmental proposals, and design objects, but if anything they're really conceptual models—thought experiments pointing in the direction of architectural possibilities, environmental absurdities, and design *rarae aves*. They make it easy to think of Wexler as an architect less trapped than freed in an artist's body.

—Keith Seward

ELLEVATIONS

"View from the Teahouse: Allan Wexler's Transformation Scenes." *Elle Decor* 1, no. 7 (September): 42.

VIEW FROM THE TEAHOUSE ALLAN WEXLER'S TRANSFORMATION SCENES

Though New York sculptor and architect Allan Wexler has never been to Japan, he has taken the traditional Japanese teahouse as a model for much of his work. For as long as he can remember, he has been fascinated by its Spartan construction, at once a background to Zen contemplation and a stage where a social ritual is routinely reenacted. A sitting platform, a room, a house all in one, it is the most rustic of spaces, yet provides a backdrop for the most highly sophisticated of cultural regimens.

In his own work, Wexler explores the implications of the teahouse. Obsessed by wood and carpentry, fascinated by the social aspects of dining, he turns out objects and installations that in scale and symbolism resemble the teahouse. Yet Wexler's work doesn't look Japanese. It is very American in its focus on American construction techniques. "I've always admired Shaker design," he says, "its simplicity, directness, and articulation of function."

Allan Wexler's significant projects look simple but raise questions about the links between furniture design, architecture, and landscape and their relation to man. His *Chair Building #2* (1988), made of teak, is representative. It resembles an Adirondack chair, but it's roofed to provide shelter from rain or sun. Yet seated in it, you experience total connection to the landscape.

In a show held last winter at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York, Wexler exhibited a small painting of Le Corbusier's mass-produced building prototype, the *Maison Dom-ino*, juxtaposed with a simple straight-legged table. The *Dom-ino*, proposed in 1915, became a paradigm of modern architecture. Consisting of concrete slabs between a grid of columns,

it was architecture reduced to basics. Windows, walls, and doors could be added, but the skeleton alone fulfilled the function of shelter. "Le Corbusier stripped away decoration from architecture to create a bare chassis," says Wexler.

"The minimalist table completes this picture of domestic essentials. It serves its function without excess. Like the concrete house, if enlarged in scale it can represent a new model for basic shelter; reduced, it becomes a stool or bench. The tables and chairs I create are social and ritual building units. Four people around a table represent the family, the beginning of community. Coming together at table to talk and eat is rare today."

In his first woodworking class as a student at Rhode Island School of Design, Wexler cut his finger on a table saw—and lost interest in furniture-making until much later. But now, as a teacher at Parsons School of Design in New York, he encourages his students to build furniture or small shelters in wood. Occasionally he will ask them to do a full-scale project and explore details. He tells them, "Often the detail can act as a model for the entire building."

His attention to craft, to the actual making of the object, is perhaps the most remarkable feature of Wexler's work. He constructs almost everything himself. Unlike most architects or furniture designers, he doesn't produce construction documents. "I'm too impatient," he says.

His finished work is therefore uniquely spontaneous. He notes that when The Jewish Museum in New York commissioned him

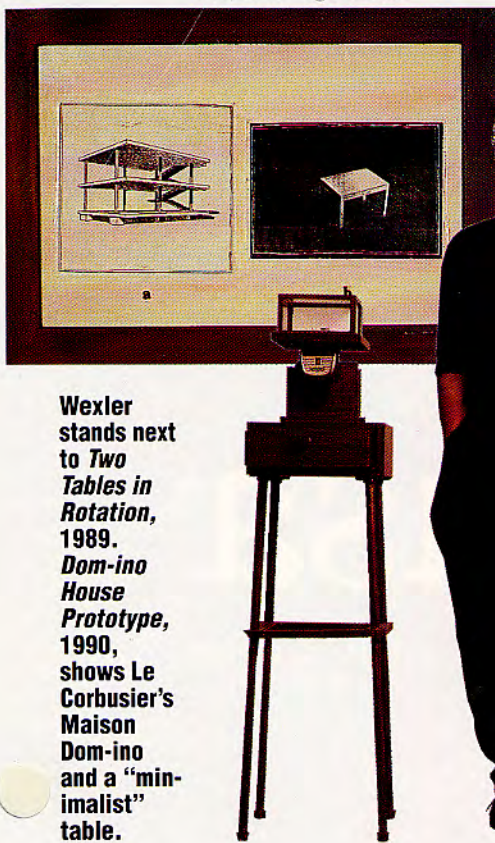
to create a sukkah (a ritual dining hut used during the Jewish harvest festival), "I began by building a series of models, all exploring the idea of a portable, temporary shed for eating."

The full-scale sukkah Wexler eventually built is composed of four cedar-walled sheds on wheels. The four can be joined. Like Japanese teahouse carpenters, Wexler imbues a simple idea with a wealth of detail. Each shed stores the components for its ultimate transformation, including maple saplings stored on the walls like pool cues. They are meant to criss-cross the rafters to make a kind of trellised roof.

The sides of each shed swing open to become the walls of the larger sukkah. Wooden joints interlock to secure the final structure. The extent of closure and exposure is carefully orchestrated to preserve community and frame the diners' view of nature.

Wexler once noted that teahouses are built only the height of a stepping stone above the ground. The true distance between the mundane and the spiritual is psychological rather than physical. As he puts it, "Architecture doesn't need to be big to be significant, to transform our state of mind." Thus Allan Wexler employs the most ordinary materials to produce "ordinary" fences, chairs, tables, and dining pavilions of extraordinary spirit.

Lynne Breslin teaches architectural design and history at Princeton University and has lived in Japan, where she has worked for Arata Isozaki.



Wexler stands next to *Two Tables in Rotation*, 1989. *Dom-ino House Prototype*, 1990, shows Le Corbusier's *Maison Dom-ino* and a "minimalist" table.

ANDREW ECCLES (PORTRAIT); PAINTING COURTESY DENNIS COWLEY; RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

LYNNE BRESLIN

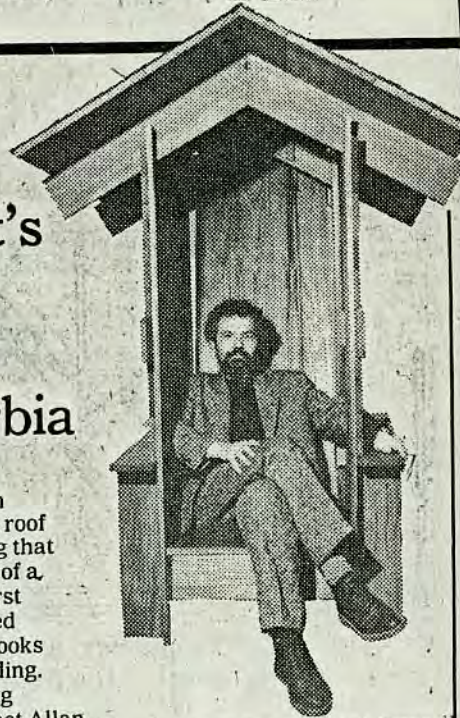
Architect's Vision: Pyramid To Suburbia

A CHAIR with an asphalt shingle roof and wood siding that resembles the facade of a house; tables that burst apart into four cracked pieces; lighting that looks like a piece of scaffolding. Such are the intriguing designs by the architect Allan Wexler, in a show at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

The body of Mr. Wexler's work also includes 25 models of the typical house. Some resemble the quintessential two-bedroom suburban home; others take on different visual references: an airplane factory, an Egyptian Pyramid, the prow of a ship. Often household materials like flooring become furniture.

"The A-frame house is the archetypical American home," said Mr. Wexler.

He has also examined the office building. His "Little Office Building No. 2" looks like a doll's house. It is of primitive wood construction



The New York Times/Jack Manning

Allan Wexler

with the elements of an office, like a worktable, shelves and a chair. "I've explored different variables for this symbolic form," he said.

The architect has also explored variations on chair design. Forcing himself to make a chair a day, he has produced 15 chairs. A toy designer early in his life, he said he sees everything as a puzzle.

The show, at 31 Mercer Street, runs through March 12.

Exhibit: Movable Building Models

By JOSEPH GIOVANNINI

"DINING Building With Window Chairs" — one of 50 hand-built architectural models now in "Small Buildings," a show of the work of the New York architect Allan Wexler at the Ronald Feldman Fine Arts gallery in SoHo — appears to be a wooden garden shed, but, in fact, the structure shelters a wall-to-wall table inside and might be called a dining folly.

Small and modest even by doll-house standards, the structure has six windows on its four sides; each of the windows, when it is pulled out from the model, reveals itself to be the back of a dining chair belonging to the miniature table inside. The dining building is only slightly wider than the dining table.

The pavilion is one of a number of fantasy structures that take a simple, everyday activity like eating and surround it by the smallest of buildings.

While each model may pass for a whim, each in fact contains a humorous or serious idea; together, the models blur the distinction between furniture and architecture. In some cases the furniture is a small building, but in others, the small building is furniture. For example, the walls of "Building With Doors and

Giovannini, Joseph. "Exhibit: Movable Building Models." *New York Times* 7 Feb. 1985: C7.

Drawers" are completely made up of drawers, and the whole building is a type of chest. The four walls of another small pavilion, "Slide Away Wall Building No. 3," all slide in separate directions to reveal a dining table inside, almost an outdoor armoire.

Mr. Wexler is designing architecture that makes a feature out of its operable parts — entire walls slide, windows pull out, roof gables flap up, shutters open and close, and awnings collapse. If, in the show, there are signs asking viewers not to touch the models, it is because so many parts move, and the fragile models invite handling. The architect is proposing participatory architecture within arm's reach — buildings that respond to the human touch.

In the center of the show is a full-size structure made up of operable parts that combine in clever ways for different uses. Designed and built by Mr. Wexler for last summer's "Art on the Beach" program in Manhattan, the structure is made of four separate fabric and metal sheds, 8 feet high and 2½ feet square, which, when they are attached, form one large 5-foot room. Mr. Wexler notes that it can be used in many ways, among them, "four toy boxes that become a playroom; four lockers that become a changing room; four closets that become a guest room."

Taking the simple idea that it is in some way desirable for people to affect their environment by being able to act upon it, the architect has designed a real house, a model of which is in the show. Designed for Eve and Hal Levy, and now under construction, the model shows a modest beach house surrounded by four small pavilions, each with a separate use. The floor plans indicate that one interior sliding wall can close down a den area, making it into a guest bedroom. The same wall can slide in front of the service core, to hide it, or close off the kitchen. Large exterior sliding shutters protect the north windows when the house is closed in winter. A pavilion for shade has an adjustable roof canopy. This is not a cool push-button house, but the most direct, palpable and workable of homes.

Also at the gallery is a show of wood constructions by the New York architect Susana Torre, called "On (Post Modern) Architectural Space." Both shows will run through Feb. 16 at the Feldman gallery, 31 Mercer Street (Grand Street); 212-226-3232. Hours are 10 A.M. to 6 P.M. Tuesday through Saturday.



The New York Times/Jack Manning

Model of Allan Wexler's office for a garden site.