

Variations We May Not Have Known

For each work of art that becomes physical there are many variations that do not. — Sol Lewitt, *Sentences on Conceptual Art*

JONATHAN LOUIE
Syracuse University

INTRODUCTION

It was in front of us all along. Nestled along James Street in East Syracuse sits one of eight existing Honor Bilt Magnolias #2089 in America—the ‘crème de la crème of Sears Kit Homes’ according to Kit Home aficionado Rose Thornton.¹

A ten room Colonial House the Magnolia is the largest, most ornate, and expensive Sears Modern Home. Designed for the ‘discriminating builder willing to invest a fair amount for the largest returns in comfort² for the mere price of \$9,990.00,³ an ‘average’ homeowner in 1918 could purchase a 12,000 piece kit and instruction booklet for the construction of a new single family home.⁴ Through the standardization of measurement, repetition in manufacturing and material optimization, the Sears Modern Home exploited Balloon and Platform Frame Construction (also known as a Stud Wall, and Light Frame Construction) to manufacture variations that amounted to 477 unique house types.

Each house type associated itself with a generic name and offered variations in characteristics, arrangement, and form; though they were all built from a catalogue of materials offered by the Sears Roebuck. Fulfilling their company motto to provide ‘quality goods at fair prices to the people, one doorstep at a time.’⁵

Marking the point at which industrialization began to penetrate housing, Balloon Framing converted wood construction from a craft into an industry.⁶ Yet, despite being an important component in the growth of the American West. Balloon Framing and Platform Frame construction has found itself left out as an object of experimental inquiry.⁷

From poche to hung textile⁸ the Wall has been the subject of architectural investigation through volume or more recently as a point for new technologies in fabrication. Set to a systematic grid, Balloon Framing has value through the investigation of the autotelic grid and its disruptions as a formal generator.⁹ While common wall assemblies are often conceived to serve a function of weather barrier or enclosure, *Variations We May Not Have Known* proposes the possibility of disciplinary value that stems from the structure between the walls. Proposing that a renewal of serial logics as a mode of-engagement with the Ugly



Figure 1: Photograph of an Honor Bilt Magnolia #2089 in Syracuse, New York. Courtesy of Rose Thornton.



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and the Ordinary—or every day ‘technologically unadvanced structure’—over ‘the heroic and original.’¹⁰

Figure 2 Structure 1, Installation by Author -
Photography by Francesca Ling

MORE THAN A STUD

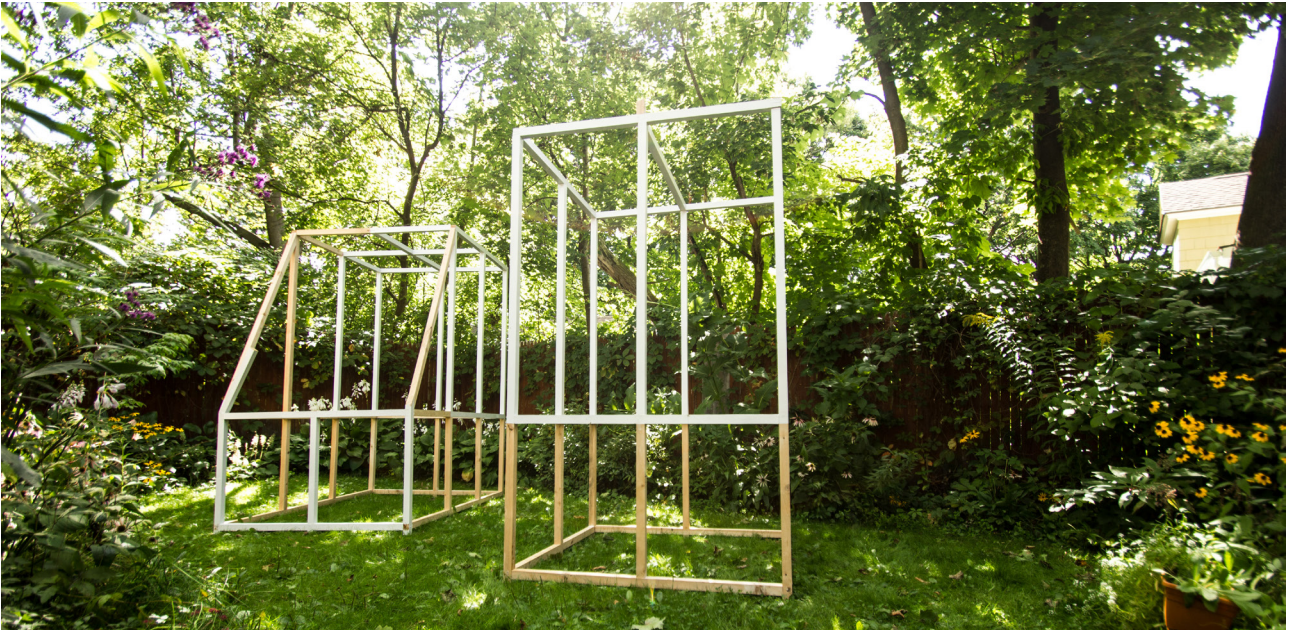
One might say that within the conceptual space between the walls, the logics of the Frame System and its’ individual parts, lies a broader set of implications that relate to part and whole arrangements with serial assemblages, the indexing of formal disruptions, and their application to novel housing types. While the digital project has looked towards intricacy, fineness, gradation, and elegance at the level of micro articulation. Perhaps this is an appropriate time to reconsider coarseness and arrangement between parts. Simply put the reconsideration of part to part assembly in the conception of architectural constructions. Proposing that in the post digital landscape the wood stud offers an opportunity to formally engage the everyday and ordinary through disciplinary values.

The installations shown by the author are each variations on a theme, and the first of a series. By denying cladding and hung paneling, the 2" x 2" wall studs in Thick Wall are laid bare exposing a light skeletal framework gone awry. Angles and planes intersect, crop, and penetrate the grid. Defining a range of overlapping volumetric forms that oscillate between the arrangements of the parts and a reading as a figurative whole. Simultaneously framing the space within and the elements beyond. Unlike its wall type counterparts, decoration and adornment are denied in favor of framework, pattern, and form.

ONE TOO MANY STUDS

Important to the conversation on the Stud, is locating its value as part¹¹ of a larger assembly. Not quite an assemblage, a non-modular construction where each and every part is unique in shape and dimension,¹² nor an aggregation, where modular components are connected to produce a mass or form that is not reducible to a modular logic of assembly.¹³

The stud is part of a Ready-Cut¹⁴ home system. One that uses dimensioned wood studs that are cut to fit within a particular location relative to the gridded layout of house. For example, a window assembly may be constructed with a series of framing members to make the opening in the wall. Difference is achieved from common elements through variation in cutting length that are then set into a logical succession of components in an overall form.



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Figure 3: Structure 2 and 3, Installation by Author -
Photography by Francesca Ling

ENDNOTES

1. Thornton, Rose. "One of the most incredible blogs I've ever done..." Web Blog Post. Sears Modern Homes. <http://www.searshomes.org/index.php/2013/07/09/one-of-the-most-incredible-blogs-ive-ever-done/>. 9 July 2013. Web. 15 August 2015.
2. The statement is made by Sears Modern Homes while advertising the Magnolia in their 1922 Honor Bilt Catalogue.
3. Depending on the economy at any given year (between 1918-1922) the price fluctuated between \$5,000.00 and \$9,990.00. Thornton, Rosemary. "My Favorite Magnolia Story—As Told by a Builder who built a Maggy...." Web Blog Post. Sears Modern Home. <http://www.searshomes.org/?s=syracuse+magnolia>. 3 February 2014. Web. 15 August 2015.
4. Holding Corporation, Sears. "Sears History Overview." Youtube. Sears Holding Company, 21 Nov. 2013. Web. 27 Sept. 2015.
5. According to Rosalind Krauss the Grid is autotelic, or '...its order is that of pure relationship, the grid is a way of abrogating the claims of natural objects to have an order particular to themselves.' Furthermore, grids conceptually extend until infinity, its interruption or disruption becomes an act of willing design. Rosalind Krauss. 'Grids.' *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths*.

To complete the wall assembly, over the framing is exterior sheathing—to prevent moisture—and nailed to the interior are drywall panels—a manufactured product that took the place of plaster and lathe. Precut standardized wood studs (2" x 8" and 2" x 4") were factory cut, pre-packaged, and shipped to the consumer.

Not completely a serial system a Stud Wall assembly loosely plays within a predetermined logic that is disrupted by a second formal system of walls, doors, windows, and openings—they become opportunities of chance or disruption from 'the overall regularity of its organization.'¹⁵ Mel Bochner states 'the Serial Attitude is a Method, not a Style.' Serial Attitude takes on systematic terms, order taking precedence over execution, and the completed work being parsimonious and fundamentally self-exhausting.¹⁶ When applied to the arrangement of stud walls to a grid, the system in its' purest form—without windows, doors, intersection, or openings—arranges itself based on a self-exhausting geometric order. As Rosalind Krauss puts it the grid is an order of pure relationship,¹⁷ and its' disruptions operate only on an inwardly referential system that is logically distinct from the world around it. One may conclude that the Sears Modern Home is nearly a serial system, they are a number of closed systems that each take on variations from a theme.

STUDS AND STUDS OR VARIATIONS ON A STUD WALL

The success of the Sears Modern Home was not only in its' packaging or system of production, but in encouraging potential clients to create their own variations on a house theme.¹⁸ Individuals could modify the illustrated home plans in numerous ways, including reversing floor plans, switching materials, adding dormers and windows, and even altering the position of the fireplace.¹⁹

Contingent upon the values of the individual homeowner, the disruption of the idealized grid interwove with the messy realities of life. The process of customization triggers a geometric progression in the Stud Wall²⁰ baring odd wall stud couplings, idiosyncrasies in the stud layout, overlaps and overlays with drywall, and gaps in the rigid spacing. The part to part sensibilities refocus the attention onto the peculiar qualities as parts rather than the intricacy or effects of the overall field.²¹

Common Studs no longer become common once they are coupled with a King Stud; Cripple Studs move between Sole plate to Sill plate and between Header and Top Plate; while Jack Studs are shortened brethren that are coupled with King Studs. They are peculiar formal and

aesthetic qualities built through the overlay of two logics, disassociating some studs from their structural value to the system.

The act of part to part coupling deflects the assumed value of the redundant studs.²² Producing what Peter Eisenman writes as the plurality of diagram logic, 'that architecture could exist as both integers of constructions, and also, on some level, as an index, that is, as the possibility to act as another condition of sign that is not related to its function, its meaning, or its aesthetic... characterized as one of an excess in relation to the necessary conditions of function, structure, and meaning.'²³ According to this logic the stud wall is a form of architectural production that indexes a logical progression of one thing to another based on a preconceived arrangement.

New formal variants are a result of adding and intersecting walls, doors, drywall, exterior siding, and windows to the building frame. The Stud Wall is an intrinsic system for the development of deviation within a theme, offering hints of individuality across America. While reminding us that perhaps it's time to seriously reconsider the potential found in the ordinary environments around us. As the realities of everyday construction offer new territory to engage with the discipline of architecture.

HOMES ACROSS AMERICA²⁴

Over a span of over 30 years about 70,000²⁵ Sears Modern Homes were sold and built across the American Landscape, each one a near neighbor, or variation on a theme. Some wider then they are long, others two stories, while others longer than they are wide. Through the addition or subtraction from the frame, the Ready Cut system distinguishes itself as a building shell that forms the basis for multiple housing types. In this way a box with a sharp oblique roof it may be referred to as a Cape Cod Style; a Ranch Style Home refers to a house that is longer than it is wide; a home with equal sides an American Foursquare, and two story homes are considered as Colonial.²⁶ With the Kit Home, the owner and their property are tangential to the design of house styles.²⁷

Formal variants of generic types may be best understood as not one size fits all, but there is a size that fits all. Neil Denari questions whether 'the generic is all good things compressed into basic formal and programmatic identities or is it completely average, a type of fundamental from which one moves toward a more precise configurations?'²⁸ In this case the generic offers the production of new variations on existing types, ignoring the stylistic inclinations of a region and foregrounding formal experimentation through the focus on the Stud.

Generating a constant iteration of internal difference between the part, the wall, and overall house shape. The logical addition of stud parts and catalogue home hardware to housing type produces variations that connect both small and large American families with 477 different Housing Styles and sizes. By offering homeowners opportunities to submit blue-prints of their own home variations each house is nearly unique in form yet common in material.

Despite being necessary for the growth of the American Landscape, recently, ordinary objects and materials have found themselves left out as mediums for experimental inquiry. From a broader perspective, in architectures' recent history, process as flows and forces have often been evoked for its formal ends.²⁹ Characterized by an interest in continuous surfaces and complex biomorphic forms, the effects of the digital project were no different. Linking capitol A architecture to institutions, while experimental research often stays hidden in the facilities it was developed within.

Deriving pleasure and delight from the realities of everyday technology may be the key to establishing a connection between the everyday and ordinary construction materials with experimental modes of design inquiry. As there is both discursive value in the available things around us, and knowledge to be gleaned from the everyday and ordinary.

6. The invention of Balloon Frame construction is attributed to George W. Snow. Economy and abundance play a large role in the value of light frame construction. The use of minimal structural materials in standardized dimensions allows builders to enclose a large area with minimal cost, while achieving a wide variety of architectural styles. It was also known as Chicago Construction.
7. In der Stil Gottfried Semper deduce the origins of the wall as a device for hanging decorative textiles that communicate program through adornment.
8. The autotelic and the autonomous grid is used by Rosalind Krauss as a point of departure to describe new art works that are no illusory, but horizontal and intrinsic. The grid is about itself. Krauss, Rosalind. Grids. October, Vol 9. 1979. Pp 50-64. Print.
9. This is a reference to Robert Venturi's article in Complexity and Contradiction, 'The Ugly and the Ordinary, or the Decorated Shed.'
10. Many thanks are owed by the author to 'Part Problems/Problem Parts' a recent paper given by Clark Thenhaus at ACSA 103.
11. Lynn, Greg. Intricacy. Philadelphia. ICA Philadelphia. 2003. Print.
12. *ibid*
13. Built from an annotated set of Studs and Planks, in a written statement to Congress a Sears Representative states that 'A ready-cut house should not be confused with a sectional-portable house, which can be taken down and moved by being unbolted. A ready-cut house is a permanent house and the method of its construction is not different from any other frame house.'
14. Krauss, Rosalind. Grids. October, Vol 9. 1979. Pp 50-64. Print.
15. *ibid*
16. *ibid*
17. "Sears Craftsman Houses Sears Modern Homes." What Is a Sears Modern Home? | Sears Modern Homes. Web. 2 July 2015.
18. *ibid*
19. Sears Craftsman Houses Sears Modern Homes." Sears Craftsman Houses | Sears Modern Homes. Web. 2 Sept. 2015
20. In der Stil Gottfried Semper deduce the origins of the wall as a device for hanging decorative textiles that communicate program through adornment.
21. Thenhaus Clark. Part Problems/Problem Parts. ACSA 103. The Problem.
22. Eisenman, P. (2000). Autonomy and the Will to the Critical. *Assemblage* 41, P. 91
23. Eisenman, Peter. Cubes. *Diagram Diaries*. Universe. 1999. Print p 65.
24. This is a title in reference to Dan Grahams' seminal text 'Homes for America.'



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25. Sears reports that between 70,000 – 75,000 Homes were sold between 1908-1940. "Sears Craftsman Houses Sears Modern Homes." What Is a Sears Modern Home? | Sears Modern Homes. Web. 2 July 2015.
26. Graham, Dan. Homes for America. Arts Magazine. 1966-1967. Print
27. ibid
28. Lavin, Sylvia and Helene Furjan with Penelope Dean. Crib sheets: Notes on Contemporary Architectural Conversation. New York: Monacelli Press (2005). Pg 109
29. Allen, Stan. "Digital Complex." *Log 5* Spring/Summer 2005; pg 93-99. Print.

Figure 4: Homes for America
Photography by Dan Graham