

Shadow Landings: Community Engagement with Art and the Creative Process

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The practice of engaging the shadow as the progenitor of form has directed my architectural scholarship and artistic investigations for over twenty-five years. The shadow is born of one thing yet reveals another as its transparent and immaterial essence animates the surface upon which it falls. It is this phenomenological quality of the shadow, once severed from the object that ignites my imagination and informs my creative process.

Generated from time-based interactions during three periodic intervals of day – morning, noon, and night – the ephemeral play of shadows is made static through sequential tracings that collapse space and time into one singular composite drawing, a ‘shadow map’ from which new iterations of the shadow may be formed in answer to my theoretical enquiry, ‘If an object can cast a shadow, can a shadow cast an object?’

Danielle Rago, curator and writer on contemporary art, architecture, and design, eloquently describes a recent exhibition, *Tracing Time to Measure Space*, saying:

*These drawings effectively liberate the idea of architecture from its professional constraints to allow for a different perspective on making, one that is independent of digital equations and computer-driven aesthetics, and unencumbered by the practical considerations of translating from two dimensions to three-dimensional space. Released from its formal contract with the object, the shadow now has an independent life and functions as the mediator between the realms of the real and imagined, static and dynamic, visible and invisible. The phenomenological qualities of light and the effects it produces through the shadow become the elusive generators of form and ultimately the structure or organizing principle for three-dimensional invention. (Essay: Mediating Between Realities in the exhibition catalog, *Tracing Time to Measure Space*, 2013)*



Figure 1: “Shadow Landings” The Allentown Art Museum commission to create a 9’x50’ installation based on my shadow drawings.



Figure 2: Welded Steel Sculpture [H 9' x W6'x D 2.5']

In essence, my creative practice makes way for collaborative dialogue between one's formal imagination, ideating concepts, and its manifest material imagination, "mediating between realities" in order to bring an idea into the world to interact with the public.

My most recent artwork, *Shadow Landings*, commissioned by the Allentown Art Museum and currently on exhibit through March 26, 2017, was designed to engage the community in which I worked and fellow artists with whom I collaborated.

This paper and presentation on the development of this large-scale three-dimensional work endeavors to illustrate how collaborative creativity can generate opportunities for improvisational decision-making in the artistic process and ways creative collaboration can build bonds within the community.

PART ONE: COLLABORATIVE CREATIVITY

Gaston Bachelard contends that two types of imagination inform the creative process: a formal imagination and a material imagination.[1] Formal causes stem from intuitive and associative image production, and lead to a process of conceptualization that provides the analytical tools to create an object. Material imagination is provoked solely and directly from our immediate confrontation and manipulation of matter. These images may be assigned category by the eye but only the hand truly reveals them. I begin with this statement because it typifies the two forms of conceptual thinking that went into the making of *Shadow Landings*.

This new installation continues an evolution that began with two works; both are included in this exhibit. The first, *The Architect*, a

freestanding eight-foot metal sculpture, introduces the exhibition. The original small-scale version of this sculpture derived from tracings of the shifting shadow patterns the object created during stages of its construction, while the sun's angle shifted over the span of a day. It was created using a self-imposed parameter that limited the compositional trajectories to two diagonals. I commissioned a former student of mine, Eli Hess, to fabricate the metal sculpture at Atelier of Hess Industries, Baltimore. The experience of collaborating with one of my students, now working as a professional, validated my pedagogic approach in the classroom.

The second piece, *Janus* (2015) is a freestanding, two-sided piece of laser-cut thin oak veneer that illustrates *The Architect's* shadow-map.

The generative process I refer to as, 'Shadow Mapping,' records the passing of time by capturing the shadows an object casts. By defining and tracing an object's shadow and then recording the changes at three intervals—morning, noon, and evening—the resulting drawing becomes the blueprint from which the new object is generated. Its composition is not form driven but is a result of space and time in an act of making.

After receiving approval by the museum curators for my design proposal—a collaged composite, I invited several of my artist friends to help in this process of translation—the art of invention.

Communicating an idea to another compels one to clearly articulate the concept. Through Collaborative Creativity, an improvisational state of mind, being present is essential and being able to listen is fundamental. We resolved problems inherent to translating the proposal into the large-scale installation. Craft remained a high priority as we fabricated the work, first in corrugated cardboard, then ultimately, in painted and stained wood and metal. Along the way, ego was set aside and I relied on the expertise of others who were open to the collaborative process and to crafting inventive responses to problematic conditions. By increasing scale, we were required to address issues of materiality, its weight and the effect of gravity, and the relationship between each individual part.

My design/build experience, acquired over thirty years in architectural practice and academia, established the foundation for effective collaboration with the skilled artisans engaged to assist me with this project. As Paul Klee surmised, "the form is in the forming."

An artist needs an audience, not just as the critic of the end product, but in the case of a large-scale construction, during every step along the way. I learned, from working with Italian artist, Michelangelo Pistoletto, during his "Creative Collaboration" project in Atlanta (1979-80), that engagement with others during the creative process is the essence of making art that conveys meaning and contains the potential to change the way others see the world. No one person can make something as complex and beautiful as architecture or large-scale public art without relying upon others to be an integral part of the entire building process.

Collaborators along the way included Bill Perkins, a friend, architect, and boat builder who flew up from Atlanta to help me move into the Creativity Lab, the downtown studio space provided to me by the museum. Together, we set up the woodworking shop and established the 2-foot square grid system on the wall to aid in the enlargement process. My life partner, Cheryl Dougan, and I began the process of enlarging my model to full-scale by fabricating a corrugated cardboard construction of the work. This material gave me the ability to quickly construct panels that would be eventually transformed into more permanent materials for the exhibition.

The corrugated cardboard has a unique aesthetic in and of itself that influenced my choice of final materials. Phases of the work reminded me of the early work of the Frank Gehry, where he used corrugated cardboard to structure furniture by taking advantage of the material's cross-sectional qualities. What was usually seen as a cheap and inconsequential material was elevated to a high standard, not just by the nature of the material but by the creative awareness and clever manipulation by the artist/architect. It was tempting to complete my project in this material, but much more experimentation in materials lay ahead.

Once the full-scale cardboard prototype was complete, I hired Bethlehem friend Jeff Metzler, master craftsman and artist in his own right, to work with me. We had previously established a working relationship in 1993 when he and two other artists collaborated with me construct and object/sculpture from a shadow map, as part of my first solo exhibition on shadow mapping at Lehigh University.

Jeff and I deliberated daily about ways to best translate the working model in such a way as to preserve the integrity of my concept and the relationship between the parts. Decisions came easier as we began to anticipate each other's moves. This intuitive experience also occurred with others who joined in the collaborative process along the way - artist, Kathy Triplett from Ashville, NC and Allen Hoss, my partner in Hoss/Viscardi and Company, (Atlanta 1979-1992). The common language of collaborative creativity directed decisions, whether about compositional details, joints and connections, or color.

PART TWO: CREATIVE COLLABORATION

The idea for Shadow Landing was initiated in 2015, when David Mickenberg, Allentown Museum President and CEO, asked me to create an immersive installation (9' x 55') derivative of my most recent theoretical drawing/visual investigations on constructed shadow. This new work continues my pursuit of the shadow as the progenitor of form that was recently shown in two solo exhibitions, *Tracing Time to Measure Space* (Lehigh University Zoellner Gallery 2013) and *Prints of Darkness: Shadow Cast Impressions* (Experimental Printmaking Institute 2015). The basis for all of this work was initiated during my Fellowship at the MacDowell Colony in 2012.

Shadow Landings, a 3-dimensional construct, was developed in a glass-walled studio, the Allentown Art Museums' Creativity Lab,

located in center city, a site that allowed for the public to observe the creative process over five months' time. During that period, the public was invited to attend a series of workshops and open studios to engage in discussion and learn more about the creative process.

As stated in the Morning Call newspaper article titled; 'At Allentown Studio, Artists Need an Audience,' by J. Dale Shoemaker July 24, 2016:

Part of collaboration between City Center Lehigh Valley and the Allentown Art Museum, Viscardi's "Creativity Lab" is meant to let people walking by see art as an artist creates it. The lab's goal, its creator said, is community engagement; a movement museums are pushing to engage more people in art and the creative process. Far from the days when art was only for the eyes of the elite, the community engagement movement seeks to break down the wall between artist and viewer. Though there's still an end product, watching the art take shape is a key part of community engagement.

As David Mickenberg said, "We want the process to be discussed and transparent. This is a creative and unique way of bonding the artist and the community.

This community engagement, an unexpected aspect of my artist residency, provided opportunity for a unique exchange with people from different walks of life, economic circumstances, and ethnicities who work and live in the community surrounding the museum and the Creative Lab studio. By inviting the public to experience the work in progress, the creative process of art making was somewhat demystified. People who dropped by on a daily basis began to comprehend the truth of the artistic practice, that only when the generative idea is freed to embody failures and successes, does the artist discover the essence of art.

The public was invited to view every phase of progression, stopping in the studio to view that transformation as the full-scale corrugated cardboard prototype was slowly translated into steel and wood. The play of light through the glass walls enlivened the work, casting transient shadows throughout the day. At night, the dynamics of spotlights defined and darkened the cast shadows, making them an essential, almost tangible, part of the work. Visitors watched me sketch, both on a drawing table with an architect's scale and on the wall, using an eight foot level to convert my small drawings and models into full-scale construction. Small groups gathered at my studio one evening a month for open discussion facilitated by museum staff. We shared observations, and lively conversation that oftentimes continued at a nearby bar/restaurant. As well, I conducted series of free shadow-casting workshops where participants, or "shadow hunters," learned the process of capturing, recording, drawing and constructing shapes cast by the sun.

"Art exhibits that engaged the community started popping up around the country about 10 years ago," said Elaine Mehalakes, the museum's Vice-president for Curatorial and Education. "It's a trend the Allentown Art Museum joined about two years ago. The big

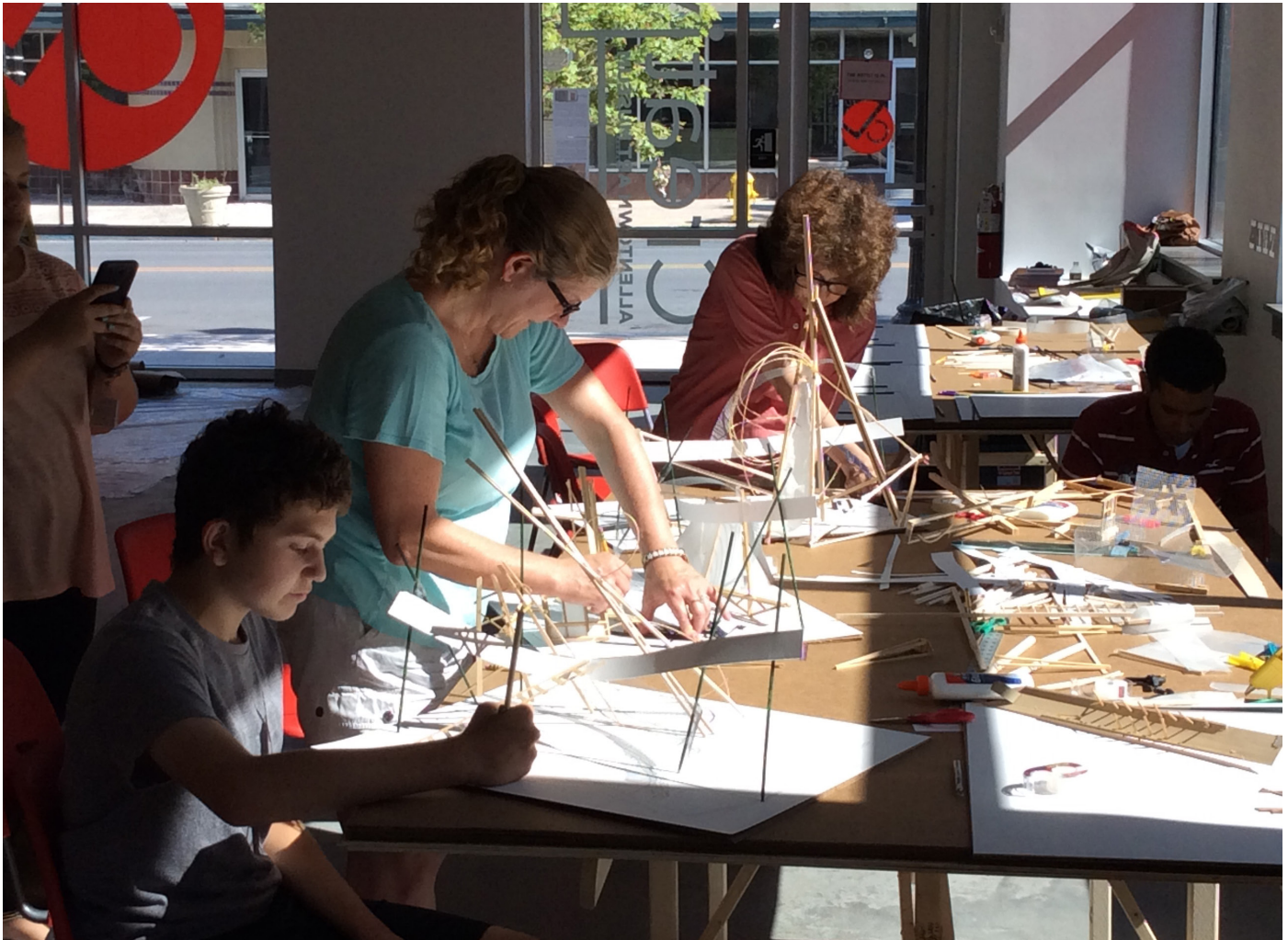


Figure 3: 'Shadow Mapping Workshops' with Allentown Community members.

push behind this move towards community engagement in art is a powerful thing and sometimes people need an introduction to it. In many ways, it's changed the field of art, and the museum has seen an uptick in attendance since its community engagement programming began."

According to Jane Heft, City Center's Vice President and the Director of Project Design and Corporate Branding said, "On the business and development side, community engagement has the potential to liven up downtowns like Allentown's. As people who work downtown go out on their lunch breaks, they'll stop when they see the Creativity Lab and check it out. It's a way to get people to slow down and hang out downtown without selling the space to another restaurant. Community engagement isn't going away any time soon. It's about opening doors. The museum isn't just sitting there with its collection. It's being activated by people."

The Creativity Lab will be occupied next by art conservators who will be working on restoring an early mural by Franz Kline. Indeed, Creative Collaboration holds the potential to transform communities.

ENDNOTES

1. Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams, The Introduction: Imagination and Matter*, pg. 1, 1983, The Pegasus Foundation, Dallas, Texas.



Figure 4: Delamination: Close up of Aluminum section of 'Shadow Landing.'