

Against Permanence: What the Monument Can Learn from Camp

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This paper offers a critique of permanence by the means of a comparison between two seemingly disparate typologies: the monument and the camp. This critique is situated amidst an ongoing crisis of permanence, evidenced in recent debates over the removal or alteration of existing structures from contested political statues, such as Confederate monuments, to architecturally significant buildings, like Philip Johnson's AT&T building in New York City. The crisis reveals a cultural resistance to political flux, and a social tendency towards static identities—fortified national borders, selective histories, and increasingly homogeneous urban environments. Questioning permanence undermines the significance of built structures over time, and established hierarchies that determine what physical artifacts should endure. As a counter to the established disciplinary project of critical form, the qualities of 'camp' suggest the potential of a critical aesthetics. Connecting camp as a spatial entity to camp as stylistic expression, the politics of space are re-examined, and a new perspective on the relationship between critical architecture and cultural context emerges.

Permanence is a long-held canon in architecture, from principles of typological form, solidity, and mass originating in antiquity, to the relentless pursuit of timelessness, to the historical landmarking and preservation of selectively specific building identities. Permanence is exclusive, determined by hegemonic systems of power that choose what should endure and what is erased. The resulting staticness of the built environment is contradicted by the increasing transience and adaptability of contemporary society. As global population displacement surges due to the increased mobility and political flux, heightened communication and social progress adapt political norms and structures formerly thought to be infallible. Despite these tendencies toward ephemerality, a backwards-looking preoccupation with permanence endures, at odds with the cultural dynamism of the present.

MONUMENT AND CAMP

The monument and the camp impose spaces of exception that operate differently than their surrounding contexts. While the monument imparts exception by its permanence, autonomy, staticness, and symbolism, the camp operates as an open framework – transient, systematic, adaptive, anonymous. The monument yearns for legibility, the camp is understood through experience. The monument is absolute, while the camp is mutable.

The monument represents a paradox of permanence, as a static object in tension with its changing context. Monumentality, as Sigfried Giedion described, is the persistent desire of generations to create enduring symbols to be passed on to the future.¹ However, this tie to a particular historical moment puts it at risk for obsolescence in the contemporaneity of its cultural context over time. In its degeneration, the meaning intended to be preserved loses relevance, negating the monument altogether.

The etymology of monument suggests otherwise. Originating from the Latin *monumentum*, “something that reminds”, which derives from the verb *monere* meaning “to admonish, warn, advise”,² the word describes an entity that signals social constructs that should be improved, changed over time, or even nullified. Therefore, in the context of contemporary debates about contested political monuments or architectural preservation, the truly monumentalist position by this definition would encourage their removal or renovation.

Whereas the monument is understood as an autonomous object, the camp escapes definition as a discrete entity. Camps are temporary constructions that lack concrete identity due to their inherent transience. They are created on an as-needed basis, and therefore perpetually reactive, formed in response to political turmoil, population displacement, or the aftermath of disaster. Whereas the symbolism of the monument is perceived as resolute, camps are symptomatic of ongoing conflict and political flux. People live their entire lives in the transience of refugee camps, or in the uncertainty of holding centers. The unintentional permanence of camps exposes the incapacity of static, inadaptible structures, from a lack of housing to contested national borders.

Camp spaces are ubiquitous in contemporary life, from the frequency of highly publicized protest movements (Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, Standing Rock) to cultural and religious spectacles (Coachella, Burning Man, the Hajj) to the popularity of for-leisure outdoor recreation. Protest camps become the public image of political resistance, and music festivals draw thousands of people to a singular event, each constructing temporary mini-cities for the duration of their cause. Tent cities emerge and grow organically, often becoming semi-permanent living conditions for homeless populations in urban centers. The practice of “glamping” perversely conflates social status and excess with the formerly minimal, bare existence of camping. Camping by necessity is

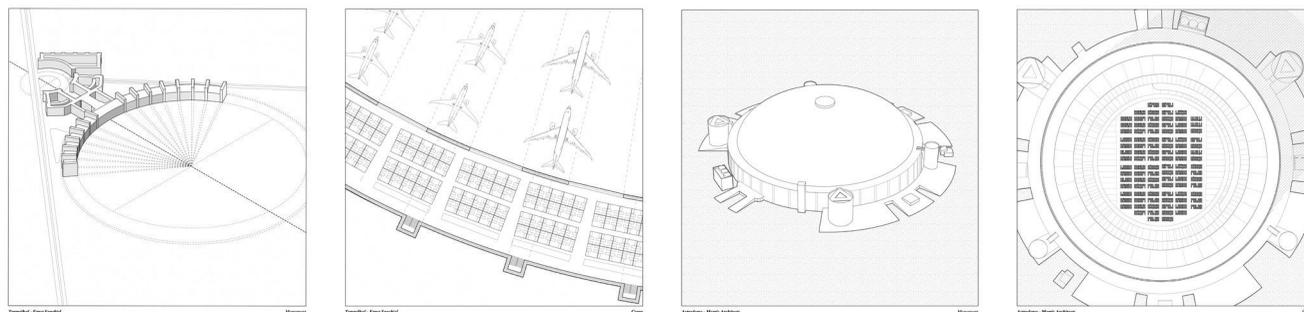


Figure 1: Berlin Tempelhof as Monument and as Camp, Houston Astrodome as Monument and as Camp, all drawings by Katharina Koerber, 2018.

poverty but camping by choice is luxury. Whether by cultural affluence, political turmoil, necessity or choice, we exist in a “camping world”³; ephemerality is a definitive trait of contemporary society.

Monuments are assumed permanent but tend to decay. Camps are assumed temporary but tend to endure. In this way, the camp is the inversion of the monument: a short-term construction that inadvertently becomes permanent, fortifying a condition of transience, a persistent state of uncertainty without identity. Though oppositional, the monument and the camp each form spaces of exception, deviant territories that resist formal and cultural norms of their immediate contexts.

As monuments decay over time, their relevance in perpetual decline, camps persist in a state of permanent transience for inhabitants with no place else to go. Despite their conflicting identities, the two typologies often occupy the exact same space. Protest camps occupy monumental sites, deliberately appropriating their iconic symbolism. And large-scale civic structures originally erected for one purpose, are often adapted to another over time. Examples of such transformation are Berlin’s Tempelhof airport and Houston’s Astrodome. Tempelhof, constructed in 1927 as a symbol of Berlin’s growing cosmopolitanism, was quickly appropriated by the Nazis during WWII. Later during the Soviet Union, it became a refuge for escaped East Berliners, and today it houses Germany’s largest refugee population.⁴ Tempelhof ceased operation as an airport in 2008.

The world’s first domed athletic stadium, Houston’s Astrodome was a structural wonder at the time of its construction in 1965. After 30 years of operation as a sports arena, it was closed to the public in the 1990s. During the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the building housed 25,000 evacuees from New Orleans for a period of several weeks.⁵ Despite its subsequent disuse, in 2017 the building was designated a State Antiquities Landmark, preventing its

alteration or removal without the permission of the Texas Historical Commission. These buildings are evidence of architectural conditions that accommodate oscillation between monument and camp identities. As architecture participates in the formation of such spaces of exception, the question of its criticality arises.

MONUMENT AS CRITICAL FORM

The notion of critical architecture concerns the relationship between architectural form and culture. It is a common subject in the writing of historians K. Michael Hays and Jane Rendell. An early essay by Hays entitled “Critical Architecture” cites a series of projects by Mies van der Rohe as evidence of architecture that is both autonomous and resistant to cultural determinism.⁶ Distinguished from the “real” conditions of the world, critical architecture does not represent its technical, social, and economic origins, but rather obscures them by the material volition of the building form. The architecture is “a participant within the world, yet disjunctive with it.”⁷ For Hays, the criticality of the Mies’ work is reinforced in its repetition across multiple projects, demonstrating a “constancy of intent.”⁸ It is as much critical form as critical practice.

Rendell’s book of the same name, published decades later, is a collection of essays interrogating the relationship between architectural criticism and practice, both understood as forms of architectural production. Like Hays, Rendell views cultural critique as an essential component of critical work, and self-consciousness imperative of authorship. She sums up her position: “Design is a mode of enquiry that is capable of generating new ways of knowing and understanding the world through creative processes and the production of artefacts...designers are able to offer critiques of their own mode of practice, both self-reflective and politicised.”⁹ Critical architecture maintains an outward cultural resistance as well as an inward self-critique on the part of the author. For both Hays and Rendell it is autonomous, identified by a distinct cultural intent as well as a distinct form.

Architectural discourse is fraught with projects of autonomy, fixated on the singularity and objecthood of buildings. Like monuments, theories of autonomy involve typological assemblies and the formal expression of political power. Frequently

revisited are the unbuilt neoclassical projects of Ledoux and Boullée, their massive civic monuments composed of hollow platonic solids, vast bare walls, frameless apertures, and the repetition of elements. These formal qualities have been interpreted as critiques of their urban contexts, the finiteness of the building-object an opposition to the uninhibited expansion of the city. The autonomous object is deliberately non-participatory.

When synonymous with autonomous form, critical architecture becomes an end rather than a means of participation in the evolution of the city. Recently, Keller Easterling proposed an alternative: medium design, which regards design as the construction of “not a single object but a platform for inflecting populations of objects or setting up relative potentials within them”.¹⁰ Context here is understood as a spatial matrix that incorporates social, political and technical networks with which the design object is fully intertwined. Critical architecture is a feedback loop between object and context, cause and effect.

The theoretical shift Easterling proposes is away from critical form as a cultural response, and toward an understanding of architectural form and cultural context as mediums in a feedback loop by which both are indeterminate and adapting relative to the other. In this situation, mutability is power and the autonomous monument lacks the agility to perform critically. Rather than permanence and monumentality, in medium design critical form should adhere to the qualities of camp – transient, systematic, adaptive, anonymous, mutable.

CAMP AS CRITICAL AESTHETICS

If the monument is an established project of critical form, camp might be a project of critical aesthetics. While form involves the objective qualities of shape, structure, geometry, and type, aesthetics refers to the subjective conditions of beauty, abstraction, meaning, and experience. Form is absolute, while aesthetics is mutable. Unlike the formal legibility of the monument, camp is understood in abstraction through episodic fragments that are suggestive of the total form but do not convey it outright. Camp is “wholly aesthetic”.¹¹

The term “critical aesthetics” resonates in philosophical discourse more readily than in architecture. The concept frames an understanding of the cultural interpretation of physical objects as plural and varied, dependent on the lived experience of the viewer or user. This suggests that both the meaning of the object (be it an artwork, building, or place) relative to its context and the conditions of its situation are constantly shifting amidst social and political forces. Since this critique begins with an assumption of multiple viewpoints, it relies on open-endedness to respond and maintain relevance to a cultural situation. This plurality is essential to philosopher Jacques Ranciere’s theory of the “Politics of Aesthetics”,



Figure 2: SESC Pompeia by Lina Bo Bardi. CC Image courtesy of paulisson miura on Flickr

which intends to break down social hierarchies in favor of “a common experience in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed.”¹² The multiplicity of collective experience allows for meaning to shift and for various interpretations to be made, creating an atmosphere of productive agonism as a critique of singular notions of both form and culture. In this way, the politics of aesthetics suggests a feedback between the constructed entity and its viewer, similar to Easterling’s medium design wherein physical identities are in constant state of flux relative to the cultural forces around them. Critical aesthetics influence and adapt the viewer as much as they construct the object.

Critically aesthetic architecture produces an experience that is multiple and varied. It responds to and alters perceptions of a cultural context, producing social and political effects. Rejecting conventional principles of composition, the subjective qualities of critical aesthetics range between beauty and ugliness. An architecture of critical beauty, Frida Escobedo’s Serpentine Pavilion for example, invokes cultural critique in its design precision. Escobedo’s carefully positioned porous walls create a concrete gossamer, simultaneously veiling and framing the interior space, the experience of which is both uniquely individual and shared by the collective. As described by the architect, it is intended to be “a compass that allows you to locate yourself, not just geographically, but to give you larger understanding of what social space and can be.”¹³

The collage micro-urbanism of Lina Bo Bardi’s SESC Pompeia operates via a critical ugliness. The term “right to ugliness”, used by Bardi in reference to folk art, applies to her architecture in its alternative aesthetics, produced by the knitting together of the existing building, cultural context, and design authorship. For Bardi, architecture is inseparable from the

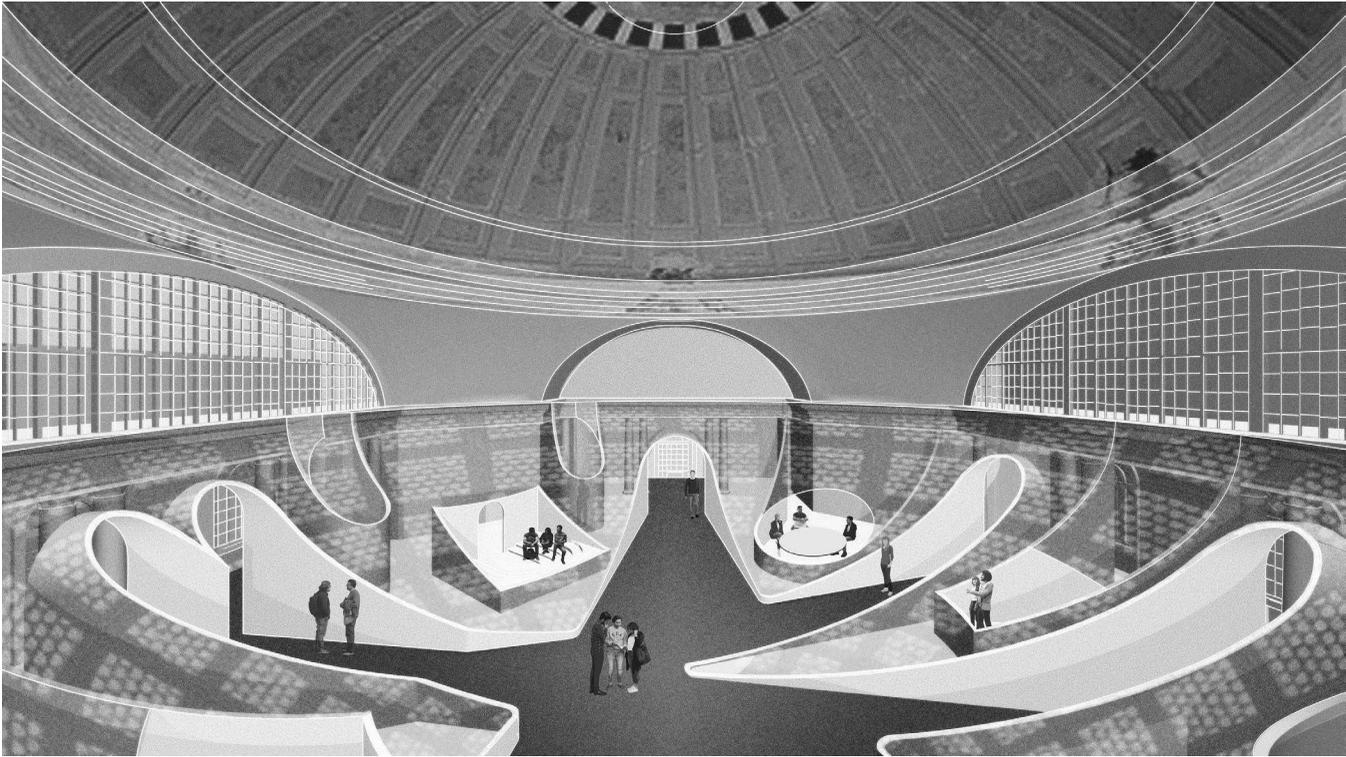


Figure 3: “Many Other Assemblies”, proposal for the 2017 Daniel Burnham Prize, image by the author

broader political context, therefore aesthetic experience is also political. As such, the “right to ugliness” is described as the “right to try out a different language to the dominant one, a language that subverts the rules and techniques of architectural composition, reclaiming its dignity beyond any preclusion of aesthetic order... freeing it from self-referentiality and formalism.”¹⁴ In *SESC Pompeia*, Bardi’s conversion of a former factory to cultural center is folk meets post-industrial meets children’s playhouse, an aesthetic experience that challenges conventional notions of high art or civic architecture, producing an authentically raw and culturally rich publicness. Such projects perform through the varied experiences of a collective audience – critical aesthetics is equally about a unique experience as its commonness.

‘CAMP’ STYLE

Camp aesthetic already exists as an established cultural reference. ‘Camp’, the adjective, refers to a stylistic expression that is celebrated for its bad taste, an appealing “ugliness” not dissimilar from Bardi’s architectural mash-ups. Camp style denies conventional definitions of artistic beauty and sophistication, giving preference to frivolity, excess, exuberance, and irony. In her seminal essay, “Notes on Camp” writer Susan Sontag describes it as an aesthetic quality that is equally countercultural as it is lowbrow. She cites as examples from the gaudy everyday to ornate Art Nouveau: the brown derby hat-shaped Brown Derby restaurant in Los Angeles, the elaborate ink drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, intricately patterned stained-glass Tiffany lamps.¹⁵ Camp is uncanny,

whimsical, and exaggerated. Yet it is also indifferent to cultural consensus and resistant to mainstream influences or formal logics. Camp is counter-cultural, common, and collective. In its exaggerated decadence and populism, ‘camp’ is acutely deviant.

Camp style is currently making a comeback. The chosen theme of the Met Costume Institute’s main 2019 exhibition is, as described by the curator in charge, “relevant to the cultural conversation to look at what is often dismissed as empty frivolity but can be actually a very sophisticated and powerful political tool.”¹⁶ As for Sontag, aesthetic expression reveals the commonality and pluralism of collective experience. Camp simultaneously holds a mirror to and critiques dominant cultures and social hierarchies. As in Ranciere’s theory, formal structures are challenged by the shared and multiple experiences that are constantly adapting and reconstructing the world around us. This is what the monument could learn from camp.

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MANY OTHER ASSEMBLIES

The 2017 Daniel Burnham Prize Competition, organized in conjunction with the Chicago Architecture Biennial, called

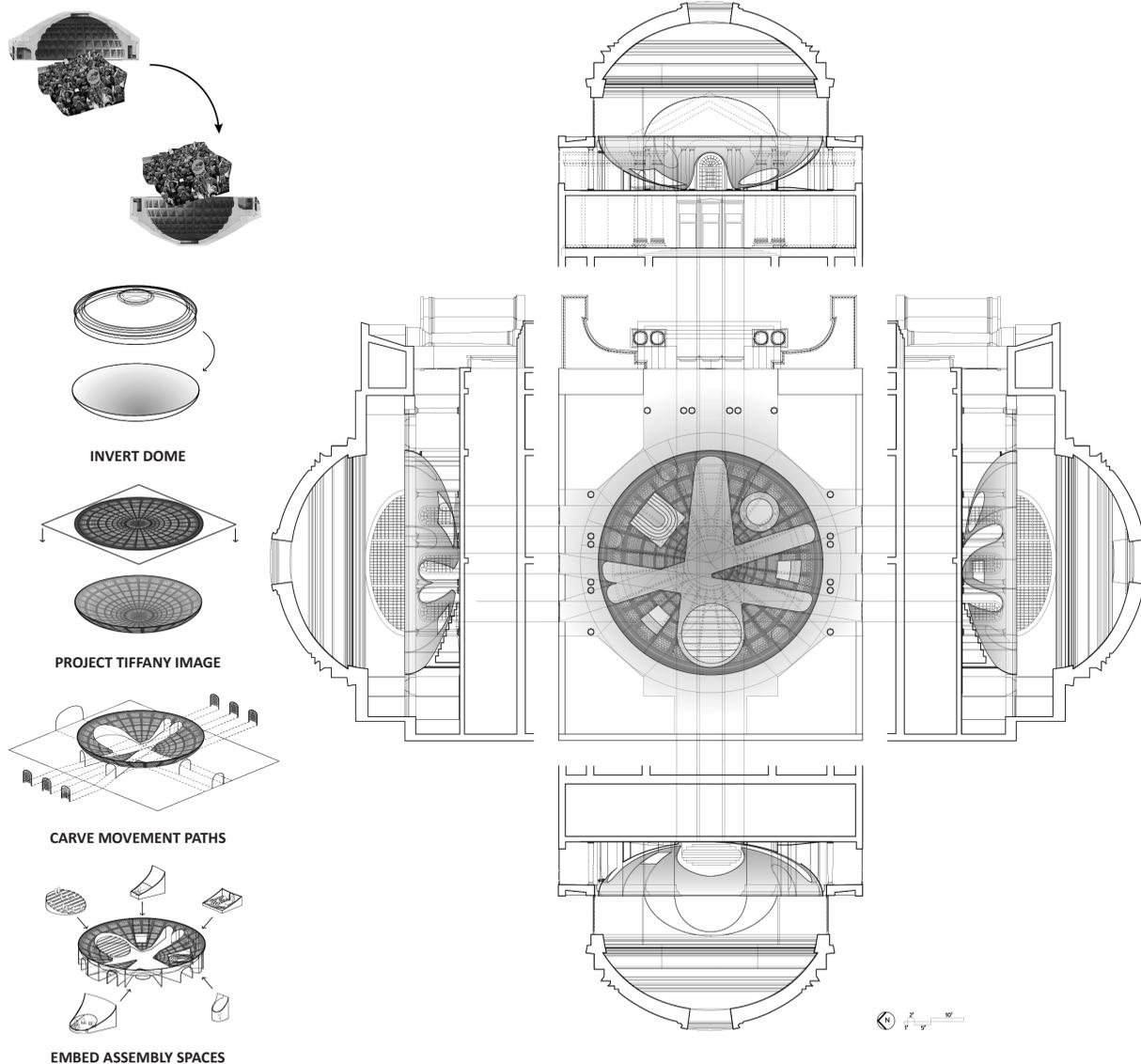


Figure 4: “Many Other Assemblies”, proposal for the 2017 Daniel Burnham Prize, drawings by the author

for proposals to rethink the decaying dome of St. Stephen’s Church, a 100-year-old abandoned building located in Chicago’s Hyde Park. In the context of the Biennial’s theme, “Make New Histories”, the competition brief opened with the claim: “History is made not from a position of sentimentality toward style, but rather it must be critical of our past and used to inform architecture that is responsive to both its context and future inhabitants.”¹⁷ In its decay, the chosen venue of St. Stephen’s dome is the physical embodiment of static permanence, unresponsive to the surrounding cultural forces. The brief contrasts the abandoned St. Stephen’s dome to the newly refurbished Tiffany Dome in Chicago’s Cultural Center, the Biennial’s main venue. The ornate, stained glass dome is the largest of its kind, named for the artist behind the signature Art Nouveau-styled lamps (one of Sontag’s chosen

references for ‘camp’ style). Renewed to its original pristine state, the Tiffany Dome is a preserved monument, characterized by quite literally by a sentimentality toward style.

In response, “Many Other Assemblies” is a proposal to invert the dome of St. Stephen’s Church. The dome, a typological element of monumental form, is steeped in historical and political symbolism that has persisted throughout centuries. It is an architectural signifier of political assembly, the void beneath it charged with potential for congregation. As today the typologies, scales, and modes of assembly are multiple and diverse, and the need to enable them is more than ever, the proposed installation seeks to provide a spatial alternative to the singular void under the dome, that would accommodate multiple scales and varied spaces of assembly. In this way, it is a proposal to rethink the monument through the logics, and style, of camp.

The inversion of the dome is both literal and metaphorical. Physically, the existing dome overhead is mirrored by a semi-transparent, draped bowl suspended just above the floor. This veil creates a visual fullness in the formerly empty space under the dome. As both canopy and curtain, the inverted dome marks an oblique threshold between the multiscale assembly rooms situated at the edges, and the collective space at its center. The image of the Tiffany Dome is transferred onto the inverted dome surface, the ornate pattern an overlay through which the original dome structure is seen from below, and a sheer, stylized blanket over the space when perceived at its center. Drawing from the architecture of the Church, paths of movement are carved through and assembly spaces which range in scale from individual to group are embedded within the inverted fabric dome. These spaces are rooms within the room, both visually connected and concealed, spatially unified and distinct, simultaneously public and private.

Veiled in the ornate pattern of Tiffany Dome, the singular void under the dome is obscured, divided into multiple venues for various scales congregation. The decaying monumentality of the dome overhead is answered by a physical and aesthetic 'camp' below.

CAMP AS CRITIQUE

Amidst growing political uncertainties, architecture is grappling with its next move. At stake is the dynamism of the built environment, its ability to support and encourage change, and the critical spatial practices needed to adapt it. "Monumentality" is counterintuitive to the need for agility, responsiveness, and adaptability in design. 'Camp' is a critical spatial enterprise; an inherently open-ended medium and critically aesthetic construct constantly responding to social, political, and cultural forces. What the monument can learn from camp is a resistance to static identities and fixed images, and the pursuit of new aesthetic characteristics that foster collective difference and dynamic pluralism over static consensus.

Jane Rendell's call for critical spatial practice demands the production of new models, expressions, and structures that affect our political and social consciousness. From a different approach, Keller Easterling's medium design fully immerses design practice within the context of rapidly changing societal, technological, and political forces. Truly critical architecture participates in the creation of spaces of exception in the built environment that hold the potential to resist the formal, cultural, and social status quo. Amidst an increasingly homogeneous built environment, the project of 'camp' offers a medium of spatial deviance. Camp architectures operate parasitically, attaching to their physical, historical, and social contexts in strategic ways as to produce alternative spatial and political effects. Contemporary artistic interventions such as Ai Weiwei's "Good Fences Make Good

Neighbors" or Assemble Studio's temporary, pop-up venues appropriate residual and leftover urban spaces, imposing new spaces of exception and a reframing of their surroundings.

In order to have lasting effect on the built environment, the critical project of Camp should not be limited to the autonomous nor the temporary, nor contained in a typological or theoretical vacuum. Rather, Camp architecture should adapt static structures, in response to existing cultural forces, producing alternative spatial and political conditions that exceed the baseline needs for functionality and efficiency. Critically aesthetic, Camp architecture operates against permanence, monumentality, and stagnation in the built environment.

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