Bemis Ground

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This project submission represents the results of years of engagement with an institutional client and a single building. At the Bemis Center For Contemporary Arts, the McCord-Brady Building, a former dry goods warehouse, is both laboratory and experimental work site for a variety of investigations that challenge the relationship of a non-profit arts organization and its multiple audiences (staff, artists, regular patrons and the non-involved public). The projects, all designed by the author and developed, detailed, and fabricated by students are products of a university "design-build" program intent on developing radical forms of collaboration and project delivery, including working with prison inmates.

More than incidental public spaces for the Bemis Center, an artist-in-residence program in Omaha, Nebraska, the InfoShop, Soft Cube and Bemis Gardens are social condensers forming a discursive space between the city outside and the controlled environment of the galleries inside. With its emphasis on social and environmental issues, contemporary art is increasingly engaged with the world as opposed to framing an escape from it. In a slow transformation of roles, the art center is becoming a laboratory for ideas rather than a repository for artifacts. In this context, the projects focus attention on the ideas and issues brought up by the gallery programs, and more importantly, by patrons. While serving different functions, these spaces are multi-purpose social platforms for spontaneous meetings, dialog and debate.

The social infrastructure of the InfoShop is spare to allow for flexible use. In the center is a 24'-long reception desk composed of edge-laminated Masonite over a plywood & steel frame. The wall behind the desk frames the space and is clad with custom, CNC-milled MDF panels derived from a pinwheel aperiodic tiling pattern. Digital fabrication of the InfoShop wall panels was programmed by students and milled in collaboration with inmates in a medium-security Nebraska state prison.

A semi-permanent installation in a Gallery 3, Soft Cube functions as a set of devices that soften the white cube gallery and create a flexible and multi-purpose social platform for events programmed in conjunction with exhibitions. In contrast to the familiar typology - a white gallery conversion within an early 20th century warehouse - the primary component of the Soft Cube is the Soft Wall, an undulating wall of Homasote strips with a bench of sanded.

Bemis Gardens is the product of an exhibition and design laboratory organized to transform the Center's exterior into a public art site and urban garden. The event series functioned as a forum for speculation on the urban future of the contemporary art center and its relationship with downtown Omaha. In recent years, artists, architects, ecologists, and social designers of all stripes have invested significant energy in forming new hybrids between food production and social space, urban ecologies and public art, forgotten space and material ingenuity, storm water reclamation and public spectacle. Throughout its three month run the exhibition remained in flux — between the gallery and its exterior, between design process and fabrication, between presentation of completed work and installation of site-specific works.