

City as Camp: Architect as Camper

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Architecture promises stability and permanence through built form. But these aspirations are threatened in today's rapidly changing and unstable world, and new relationships between urbanism, transience, and the politics of property ownership offer clues to how architecture might engage with our volatile present. To this end, what if architects operated more like campers? Campers establish communities that are both temporal and spatial; these communities are typically conceived as temporary but often become permanent through recurrence or duration. The home of campers—the camp—is a combination of generic and highly personalized spaces. Regardless of the motive behind a particular camp, they are living systems that can be rapidly deployed, altered and dismantled. This paper will explore camp— as a place and an act, and campers as the protagonists—to propose a new way of seeing, being and operating within our current cultural context. Studying material cultures, histories, and multiple subjectivities in relation to architecture's fixity (or lack thereof), will provoke new ways of engaging cities, communities and spaces.

I present this paper as we lay witness to yet another natural disaster - Hurricane Michael has made landfall, rendering widespread physical destruction, illuminating our persistent state of under-preparedness and inability to avoid and respond effectively to imminent crisis. In practical terms, governmental officials and aid workers are springing into action, deploying a series of camp logics to cobble together a well-intended and mostly inadequate response to this unfolding situation. I am reminded of Charlie Hailey's opening essay in his book *Camps: A Guide to 21st Century Space*, where he describes, "In the early morning of August 28, 2005, New Orleans officials urged residents to prepare as if they were planning to go camping. By 8am, the Superdome had been declared a refuge of last resort and Hurricane Katrina evacuees, soon to be called "refugees" filled the adapted site - a camp for the estimated 20,000 disaster victims." Hailey continues:

"As news of the hurricane's devastation spread, antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan in Texas was breaking down her protest camp, and in Nevada a group leaving the Burning Man festival made plans to reconstruct their theme camp as a relief site along the Gulf Coast. Meanwhile, many of the nation's eight million recreational vehicle owners were camping across the nation as the Hurricane Katrina diaspora sought accommodation in FEMA trailers, RV parks, and other forms of temporary housing."
—Charlie Hailey, *Camps A Guide to 21st Century Space*

Hailey's assessment reveals the diversity of meanings, contexts and cultures that define camps. Regardless of the motive behind a particular camp, they are living systems that can be rapidly deployed, altered and dismantled. There is also not a singular way in which we understand camp.

While Hailey's book and his essay *More Notes on Camp: A formulary for a New (Camping) Urbanism* have been influential in my thinking about camps, my intention is to pose camp and camping primarily as a methodology and mindset to inform architectural practice as much as it is the construction of a particular temporary urbanism. As such, and in light of current events, from disaster relief housing to the unfortunate emergence of camps holding migrant children at our borders, I want to both acknowledge the range of ways camps are deployed including the deeply problematic and unethical, but posit that perhaps if we take a step back and revisit the logics of camp and camping we can turn from a reactive state to a proactive one.

Like Susan Sontag's essay *Notes on Camp*³, or Charlie Hailey's *More Notes on Camp: A Formulary for a New (Camping) Urbanism*, I will structure this talk not as a singular, neatly formed essay, but a series of observations around camp. And, in the tradition of Sontag and Hailey, to begin one must define what camp is, or how it is defined and understood. When one hears the word camp, many images may come to mind. There's a good chance one may think of camp sites, national parks, tent camping and RV camps, campfires, boy and scout trips, to name a few. These camps require one to bring a temporary shelter - in the form of a tent, a camper trailer, or an RV to a site - often in a state or national park, or a private or franchised campsite like KOA. These campers pull up to a pre-designed site and can plug-in to an established infrastructure - a flat pad or camping area, a picnic table, fire pit, an electricity source. Alternatively, images of more extreme versions of back-country camping—like hikers along the Pacific Crest Trail or Appalachian Trail—may come to mind. These travelers carry food and shelter on their backs for months at a time and rely on a combination of highly organized and improvised infrastructures to receive supplies of all kinds - from food, to first aid, to new shoes.

In the context of this paper, I am considering one specific camp typology - the ultralight. Attempting to define the ultralight presents a series of challenges. Technically speaking, ultralight typically refers to long distance hikers who undertake

substantial - in length and duration - hikes. General consensus provides an unclear outline of what one might expect to carry on an ultralight event: ten pounds or less, including a sleeping system, rain system, and essentials like sunblock and batteries. Broadly speaking, ultralight is a series of techniques, as an ethos and a strategy. It builds on a Do-It-Yourself culture that constantly seeks lighter, more efficient means to achieve an end. Often defined by guiding principles, instead of lists of objects, ultralight promotes the principles of: safety first; elimination of non-essentials; downsizing; simplicity; and multi-functionality. In the context of through-hiking, ultralighters desire to travel further, for longer, unencumbered by non-essentials. Ultralight is ultimately a mindset of inventiveness, a way of seeing, and a way of being. In his book *Beyond Backpacking*, mountaineer, rock climber, sea kayaker and ultralight hiker Ray Jardine describes the ultralight mindset:

“More important is our presence in the wilds: how we carry ourselves, how softly we move upon the landscape, how aware we are of the patterns of life around us and how we interact with them. I and many others both present and past refer to it as the Connection.”⁴

—Ray Jardine, *The Ray Way*

On a philosophical level, ultralight is a practice—one that questions basic human needs—from shelter and nutrition, while enabling certain physical and psychological comforts. Ultralight then, is a way of seeing, a way of being-in-the-world, and as such is an exploration of minimums, and exploration of possibility. The methodologies used to construct and deconstruct ultralight camps reveal cultural values toward the built environment and the earth. Ultralight requires participants to step outside of their everyday routine, whether by choice or circumstance. The act of removing oneself from the ordinary, and committing to the daily work and visceral engagement encountered through ‘camping’ has the radical ability to shift, alter, challenge and expand world views and expectations.

This act of removal from the everyday gives rise to the construction of sites, domestics, and community, each of which hold potential for the design disciplines. The ultralight requires participants to develop—and refine—a series of logics that reinterpret each of these architectural and urban contexts. In order to illuminate this camping mindset relative to architecture, I will frame the camper in five ways using mostly familiar figures and institutions.

THE CAMPER AS LIMINAR

Liminality, now a common term utilized across many disciplines, was first described by Arnold Van Gennep. Van Gennep, a Dutch-German-French ethnographer wrote of the liminal phase that occurs during rites of passage in 1909⁵. Further theorized by cultural anthropologist Victor Turner in 1966 his book *The Ritual Process*, liminal individuals

(liminars) are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony.”⁶ The ability to occupy this between-state is predicated upon both an initial separation from the mundane world, and an eventual assimilation back into the world with new experiential knowledge. The separation from the everyday prompts the emergence of an unstructured, egalitarian community (*communitas*) in lieu of ordinary societal hierarchies. This transient state opens new potentials in societal structures based on participatory engagement. Movement between the “normative” and the liminal enables critical reflection through distancing and may lead to a reflexive ethnographic experience, whereby the lived experience (participation) reflects a deeper understanding of liminality, rather than one-dimensional reporting from the outside. Reflexivity holds an important place in the consideration of liminality; critical analysis of self and one’s experiences enables insights into personal growth and cultural production.

THE CAMPER, IN THIS CONTEXT, SEES THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY

The camper must not only be opportunistic in seeking a site for shelter, but in seeing the site. The camper is an active participant - actively surveying situations and conditions to find a suitable, temporary, home.

Consider New York in the late 1960s. The city was reeling from economic disinvestment, strained race relations, and was under siege by Robert Moses’ grand highway schemes. The loss of manufacturing created vacancy across swaths of the city—including the area we now know as SoHo. As described by Jeffrey A Kroessler, “SoHo evolved entirely outside the law. Landlords gratefully rented vacant industrial lofts to artists and looked the other way when they took up residence in violation of all zoning, housing, fire codes, while the city turned a blind eye to the illegal conversions.”⁷ In other words, artists, acting as campers, filled the void created by the city’s economic misfortune.

I will return to the situation of SoHo in a forthcoming camp observation, but first I want to expand upon the camper seeing and constructing site by SoHo resident, Gordon Matta-Clark. Matta-Clark, in his 1973 *Reality Properties: Fake Estates*, purchased 14 properties—13 in Queens and one in Staten Island, in municipal tax sales for \$25 per parcel. These properties—tiny slivers and inaccessible parcels—reveal the history of urban expansion and the collision of existing property lines with the municipal street grid. The fact that they were both auctioned and sold illuminates the ways in which Matta-Clark constructed site. As landscape architect, Martin Hogue, writes about Matta-Clark’s *Fake Estates* in his essay *The Site as Project: Lessons from Land and Conceptual Art*:

“the role of site in relation to unusual or unusable locations

is rhetorical; they cannot receive a building within a traditional understanding of an architectural project. Fake Estates invites speculation as to the value and purpose of land and reveals the conceptual potential of “real” sites, even small and unusable ones. It suggests an aggressive seeking of sites in unexpected locations, or simply in those places that we assume do not have architectural potential.”⁸

IF THE ARCHITECT CONSTRUCTS SITE, THE ARCHITECT ALSO CONSTRUCTS HOME

While the history and theories of the domestic are abundant in architecture, I want to focus on one particular example. In 1921, Rudolph Schindler and his wife, Pauline, along with another couple, Clyde and Marian Chase, purchased a piece of land on the then-edge of Los Angeles.

The house, a radical reorganization of domestic space, was described by Schindler as providing the “basic requirements for a camper’s shelter: a protected back, an open front, a fireplace and a roof.”⁹ The house, which accommodated two couples in two apartments with outdoor patio spaces and a shared communal kitchen, embodied the lifestyle of Pauline Schindler - a near constant hostess and active participant in LAs radical politics. Not only did Schindler’s house on Kings Road accommodate the two couples - the Schindler’s and Chases- but life on Kings Road was shaped by a community of constant visitors, house guests, and social visitors. The logics of camp - the protected back - or tilt wall construction, established the literal structure to support new domestic configuration and relationships, while the open fronts - and the fireplaces - shaped the social life and enabled the vibrant community at Kings Road.

BY OCCUPYING A LIMINAL STATE, AND INHABITING A TEMPORARY DWELLING, THE CAMPER CONSTRUCTS COMMUNITY

Just as King’s Road facilitated the Schindler’s construction of community, Gordon Matta-Clark’s 1971 project FOOD, constructed community and social space in SoHo. Located in a storefront on the corner of Prince and Wooster Street, Matta-Clark, together with collaborators from the anarchitecture group sought to produce both a source of fresh and seasonal foods and a space of employment, performance and enjoyment. Artists were invited weekly to serve as guest chefs, and the whole dinner was considered a performance art piece. This three year experiment in community built off his pig-roasting performance of the same year, where he served whole pig under the Brooklyn Bridge and served 500 pork sandwiches as part of a performance. Matta-Clark’s use of space as a conceptual element, enabled him to convert the holes in the urban fabric to a space that art historian Pamela M. Lee has described as “the perfect conjunction of food, architecture and sociability.”¹⁰

CAMP IS AN AESTHETIC PRACTICE

In the words of Susan Sontag:

A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about; but there are special reasons why Camp, in particular, has never been discussed. It is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Indeed the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric—something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques...To talk about Camp is therefore to betray it.¹¹

CAMP IS AS AN IDEOLOGY

I have meandered and plucked a few morsels from art and architectural history to provide non-camp examples of how an ultralight mindset might continue to shape our built environment. Returning to the camping philosophies put forth by Ray Jardine, ultralight essentially involves a combination of philosophical and practical, yet innovative techniques to reduce pack weight to enable a more enjoyable existence when one ventures out into the world. The ultralight mentality requires a reconceptualization of the architecture’s fundamental products: site, shelter, and social space. The liminal state induced by camping creates a space apart from daily life, and is liberated from the logics and expectations that structure daily life. The ultralight - in its extreme paring down to essentials, personally defined, is a combination of practice and style. In this context, I want to consider how the practice of architecture might become more joyful or playful, while taking on the social; the sustainable; and the practical. What are the essential logics of the ultralight that might inform how we practice, operate, innovate and plan for our future? Are their ultralight practices, in art or architecture, that might pave the way for a new methodology of working as an architect? If architects act as campers and approach the design (of spaces, buildings, cities, communities) as emergent rather than deterministically permanent, how might the discipline shift towards a more nimble and projective, rather than responsive, practice?

ENDNOTES

1. Charlie Hailey, *Camps: A Guide to 21st-century Space*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
2. Charlie Hailey, "More Notes on Camp: A Formulary for a New (Camping Urbanism)," *Thresholds* 33 no. 33 (2008): 27-33.
3. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation, and other essays* (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966).
4. Ray Jardine, *Beyond Backpacking: Ray Jardine's Guide to Lightweight Hiking* (Arizona City: AdventureLore Press, 2001), 12.
5. Arnold Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).
6. Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969), 94-97.
7. Jeffrey A. Kroessler, "Gordon Matta-Clark's Moment" in *Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's Fake Estates* (New York: Cabinet Books, 2005) 33.
8. Martin Hogue, "The Site as Project: Lessons from Land Art and Conceptual Art," *Journal of Architectural Education* (2004), 54-61.
9. Rudolph Schindler, Michael Darling, Elizabeth AT Smith, *The Architecture of R.M Schindler*, (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001).
10. Pamela M. Lee, *Object To Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) 72.
11. Sontag, *Notes on Camp*.