Temporary and Mobile:
Turning Points for Architectural Practice and Education

TUELAY GUENES
WES JANZ
Ball State University

In much of today's world there are tremendous everyday shifts of people, materials and values. These flows and journeys are so much a part of our everyday life that this reality is fully accepted. We have become used to them, yet unconscious about the potential these shifts embody. However, arrivals and departures of individuals, materials and traditional values affect the way people live, which have been further enforced by the mass-accessibility of travelling, telecommunications, transnational and co-operations. Our built environment reflects these temporary stages of the in-between in various forms. We should take a closer look at what is happening between arriving and leaving.

Contemporary architects are interested in the 'temporary' and 'mobile.' However, the potential inherent in these many arrivals and departures happening at various levels is not illuminated enough, because of the architectural profession's conventional designing, realizing, and building methods. Often, the architect is highlighted while the user's point of view is not mentioned. Yet, the temporary and the mobile have more to offer in terms of creativity, aesthetics and in particular socio-cultural matters.

This circumstance was displayed by 'Mobile01' and 'Mobile02,' which were part of a student project held in Fall 2002, in which 17 graduate students took part. The task required design and construction of two self-made, temporary dwellings, located on unused campus sites. The project's focus was to build with 'leftover materials, in a leftover space and for leftover people.' This undertaking aimed for a better understanding, recognition and admiration of materials, spaces and people which were left behind because they were without merit or value, and were perceived as useless or trashy… and as such became invisible. During this project conventional design methods and architectural understanding were challenged. In spite of the fact that the project's topic was a different one than 'mobility', the main idea of 'leftovers' and 'mobility' still remained the same, namely looking for alternative strategies and turning points in architectural approach.

Mobility makes various appearances throughout human history; each exposes a kind of natural instinct inherent in humans to be always on the move. In contemporary times adjectives like portable, mobile, movable, temporary, adaptable, shiftable, drivable, migratory, fluid, loose, and free, show the range of temporary forms, located in many parts of people's everyday life and experiences. Movable working spaces such as hot dog or ice cream vendors, circuses and entertainment parks, trailer parks, houseboats, and moving sculptures, always existed in most countries and cultures. People share excitement and fascination with mobile, changing environments and imagine the ability to move whenever, wherever and with whatever they want.

Despite this common familiarity, there are still opposing perceptions of 'being mobile.' When Andrei Codrescu argues that the 'American culture became mobile', he describes a shift from traditional stationary dwellings towards a nomadic life:

> ''The house in Sibiu, Romania, where I was born, was built in the seventeenth century and still stands. Nearly every American house I've lived in has long been demolished to make room for some other buildings. There is a delicious (though painful) paradox here: Americans long for stability, but all they get is stationary impermanence. No wonder, then, that many of us long to become perma-

> nent nomads, snails with houses on our backs, Tuareg tribesmen, and Gypsies.'' (Codrescu, p. 10)

Codrescu sees a contradiction between many people's image of the home and reality. Although many families are trying to become house owners in order to establish stability for their future, the fact is that these families will move one day, mostly because of job opportunities or changing life circumstances. In a sense, the idea of the 'moving house' turns out to be even more realistic since work has become a part in the private environment through enhanced development in telecommunications and computers.

According to Codrescu:

> ''This is no longer being the case in our global, decentralized, portable world. You will be able to transport your … roots to wherever you wish.'' (Codrescu, p. 11)

Mobile houses (conventionally, a house is a part of a community, rooted in a local evolutionary development of values) transform themselves to self-sufficient systems, which carry and protect traditional values and simultaneously create a dialogue with new environments, Codrescu observes. Borders and limits blurred, ideas could be shared over vast distances.

Influenced by the idea of 'the mobile home,' the student project started. How could the potentials be explored and what would mobility feel like? Romanticized visions of wanderings, journeys, freedom and always new dialogues to an unknown environment came to mind. The site was difficult; located within the campus public space, it experienced significant pedestrian circulation. Yet, it was forgotten — ignored and used by the public. At this site, it was logical to interpret Codrescu's observation that we are 'able to take roots wherever you want,' as a description for personal comfort, feeling at home, and dignity. The introspective character of self-sufficiency based on mobility would be appropriate to create a secure, intimate and private space within this anonymous and leftover environment. (Fig.1)

Fig. 1. View of the students' informal settlement located on an undefined public space, which is primarily used for circulation.

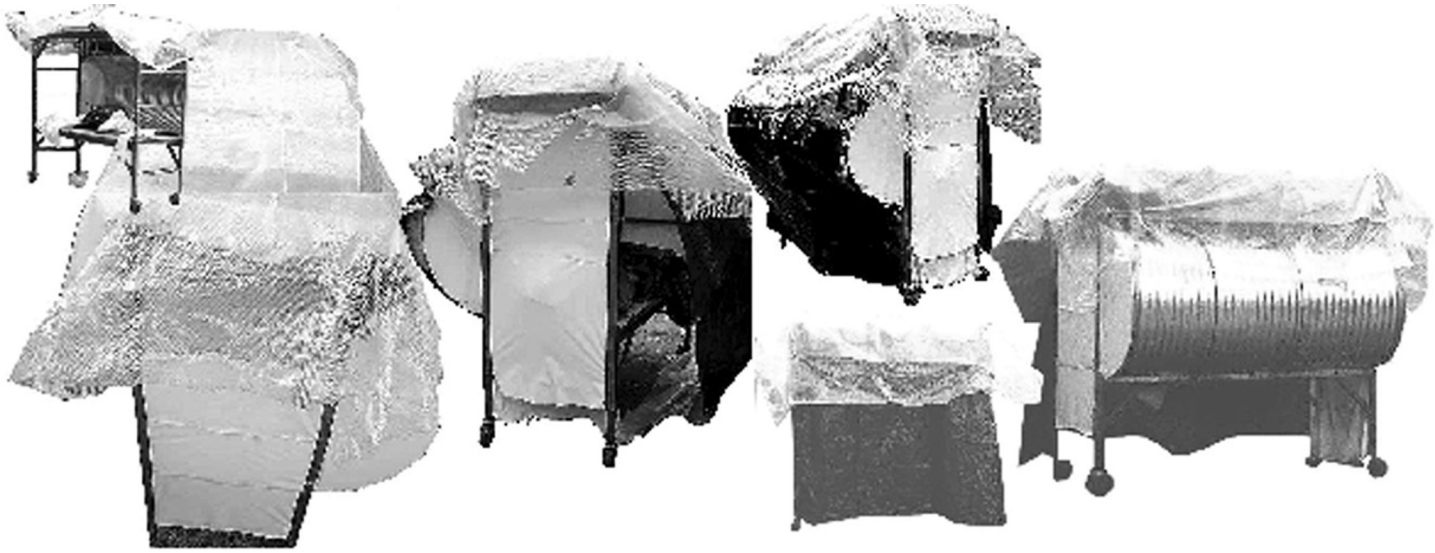

Fig. 2. Mobile01: The primary load carrying structure is scaffolding. Without access to power tools, wall and skin elements like plastic sheets, a window well, and drainage elements were joined together.

As the project developed, considerations about how to build the dwelling became important because the form, structure, materials, and the joineries depended on found materials. Conventional design approaches needed to be questioned. Nevertheless, looking at Richard Horden's concepts of micro-architecture offered more insights about structuring and detailing in order to realize the idea of being able to move around: compact, holistic concepts compared with lightweight materials addressed needs for adaptability to the site and portability. With 'Point Lookout,' an observation tower for lifesavers on the Australian coast, Horden presented a light-weight system that could be easily dismantled and packed into two bags and carried off or onto the site. These concepts were extremely powerful in terms of optimal detailing and joineries of well-chosen and effectively used materials. Yet, they did not work for this particular student project. Materials could not be optimized in this way since the task was working with what was found.

In contrast to Horden's optimized and determined design, the dwellings of the students were mostly compromises between what they wanted to do, what they found as usable building-material, and how they could join unconventional building materials together simply, and as quickly as possible, and partly without the use of power tools. Constraints forced the students to generate a different creativity: academic, fragmented knowledge was suddenly combined, applied and tested in reality. Different variations of cardboard, wood, plastic sheets, timber pallets, and even plastic barrels were built together within a few days. The result was a small informal settlement in the middle of a small town on an unattractive site that suddenly attracted many people who wondered about the meaning of this 'junk' community. One member of these small houses was 'Mobile01,' made of found materials like scaffolding, window wells, drainage material, plastic tubes, sheets, and leftover rubber. It was built on the loading dock of the architecture department's woodshop in three days, rolled to the site in ten minutes, and inhabited for the entire five nights and six days. (Fig.2, and 3)

The students had to deal with the reality of real constraints, such as not having conventional materials, joinery or construction. Gravity, climate, temperature, the site, and time played substantial roles. It was not easy to handle these realities, and the reason was simple: trained in design assignments, which remained in theoretical bubbles, did not give any hints about real circumstances with which everyday architectural practice deals. In Fall 2002, the students rapidly felt this for the first time, influenced further by having to inhabit their own designs: they experienced cold nights, public and private spaces, the need for security and communal life. For the first time they understood that 'architecture was the result of design.'

Although ideas regarding lightweight materials, load-carrying structures, and independent, closed systems as offered by Codrescu and Horden were helpful for Mobile01, one might ask questions about the feasibility of such sophisticated and complex approaches. Facing these questions already lead to some conclusions about conventional architectural education and practice and formed a turning point in understanding designing in

architecture. Why do architects apply their knowledge only for a chosen client group who has the necessary wealth, thus giving the designer opportunities like time, financial background and decision-making power in order to realize holistic, perfect, and absolute designs? Is such a role realistic and appropriate for young architects?

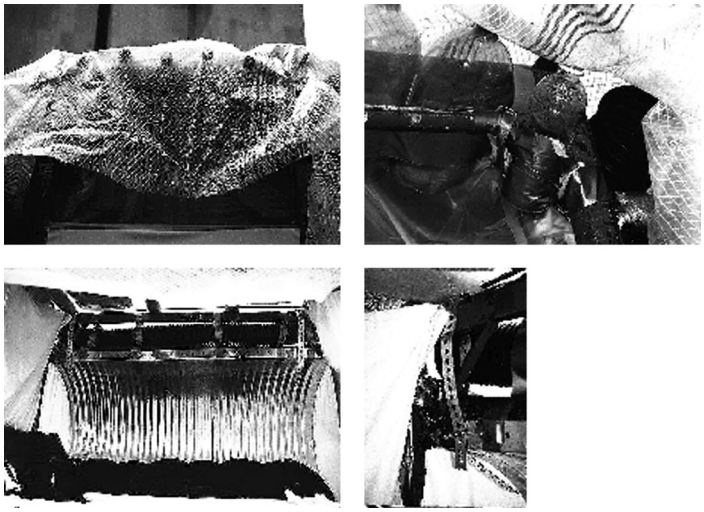

Fig. 3. Details of Mobile01: Plastic sheets, fixed to the scaffolding with bottle joints, cast translucent light into the living and sleeping chamber. Rubber tire parts leveled the chamber and provided a soft and insulated surface for the night. All elements were hung from the scaffold, the joints were handmade using: screws, flat steel tapes, bottle twist tops, duct tape, and hooks.

The question — 'Who is the client?' — opens a wide range of new perspectives. Let's ask this first in terms of mobility: who is arriving and leaving, and for what reasons? Do people choose to be mobile, to be detached from roots and to live a nomadic life? According to the artist Krzystof Wodiczxko, many do not decide to live a nomadic life or live in temporary structures:

> Currently, just under half of the world's population lives in cities. This urbanisation process is most pronounced in developing countries, where the urban population will increase from 39.9% (2000) to 50.8% (2020). Estimates of the total number of slum dwellers confirm that as many as 30% (712 million) of the world's urban population in 1993 were living in slums. (UN-Annual Report, 2000)
>
> ''Each year, from June to September during the Monsoon rains, 1,000 to 2,000 people die in the floods and almost one-quarter of the 123 million people of Bangladesh are made homeless''. (Arthus-Bertrand, Feb 20)
>
> ''1999, Serbia and Kosovo tensions: Almost one million Albanian refugees were taken by neighboring countries, chiefly Albania (440,000) and Macedonia (250,000). (…) In addition to Kosovar refugees, there were almost 50 million displaced people in the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century.'' (Arthus-Bertrand, October 01)
>
> ''In winter 1987/ 88, New York had 70,000 homeless people.'' (Wodiczko, p.79)

For these people, mobility means far more than the freedom of not being bounded to a certain place. Surviving and dealing with constraints is their every day reality. If architects want to embrace the topic of mobility, they must look at the needs of the other. The reason is simple: people who are losing their houses every year — refugees, informal settlement dwellers and homeless people in the 'civilized societies' — have practice in being mobile. They live with mobility, portability and self-sufficiency every day and try to do this in a dignified way without the contribution of architects. Mostly, these people remain invisible to the rest of the population. Can architects learn from those marginalized and unpopular people, not to romanticize their situation and 'lifestyles' but to understand more about the tension between the ideal and the reality of 'being mobile, loose and unstable'. Could architects contribute to those people's situation?

Homeless people, who gathered in order to live together, built 'Dignity Village,' an authorized, informal settlement in Portland, Oregon, USA. They made themselves visible by finding a solution for their situation, since the local institutions were not successful. They required a piece of land from the communal government. Personal dignity was enforced by establishing a self-organized community, micro-enterprise activities and farming cooperatives that built on member participation and active help. Those people set their own values: they did not feel homelessness anymore, yet they were still houseless. Facing instability in their temporal settlement, stability was found within the community. The role of the architect was here a subordinated one, located in the structuring of the communal form, negotiations with local officials, and project's recording and preparation for the public. Should that be our professional goal, to be facilitators, or consultants? Surely, it is a further alternative to the very restrictive approach of conventional architectural practice.

In the students' informal settlement, a communal feeling was generated more accidentally than consciously planned, but was still very powerful. The meaning of the site, location, dialogues between dwellings,

Fig. 4. Community & gathering place.

spaces in-between and the common spaces were not abstract and nebulous ideas anymore. (Fig.4)

Mobile01 created an ambiguous situation: on the one hand, it provided the freedom to move around and express itself in its independence and self-control. It was able to always renew its relationship to the new site and question conventional meanings of 'home and communit.y' On the other hand, there was no need for going away since communal identity, protection and strong relationships were present in the students' informal settlement. In addition, since Mobile01 was obviously movable, it was pushed around! The owner lost control over her independence. Was that another turning point of what mobility can mean: having the freedom to move but also being forced to move? The importance of the community and the object's messages should not be underestimated, as Wodiczko highlighted:

> ''Design is not just useful, nor is it not just an image with certain associations. It is an event, a social experiment … It is something that disrupts reality. It creates questions with no answers, but it is suddenly more than real than something written, because of our complex relation to objects. They always seem to be more than disturbing in their merciless, naked presence…'' (Wodiczko, p.186)

The influences of the built object would never be absolutely known until it is built and can be explored within its context. During the 'leftover informal settlement experiment,' many design approaches were criticized. Even 'finished' dwellings were modified and changed during inhabitation because essential needs, like warmth, privacy or stability, were not satisfying enough. Such re-engagements go against the conventional understanding of many architects who they see their designs as untouchable and everlasting, even though the architects themselves do not inhabit the created space. Yet, with or without the architects' permission, alterations of already built objects will definitely occur.

The first self-made dwelling in the informal settlement ended after five nights and days of experiencing architecture. The students' informal settlement was dismantled. However, Mobile01 was destroyed by unidentified individuals. The owner was told that one afternoon five men came and disjointed her dwelling while she was at work; her house, which was built in three days, moved to the site in ten minutes, inhabited as her intimate shelter for five nights and six days but remembered always … was gone. The owner lost her shelter and home. Now she was a leftover.(Fig.5)

Echoes from the collective social experiment remained. Mobile01 was a dwelling on the move, discovering the circumstances of the surrounding society, detecting gaps within the system of rules and conventions found in the public space. It revealed the inhabitant's inability to keep control over her own dwelling. A question came: how far can architects go in order to actively contribute to the society by exploring its systems of conventions, rules and control mechanisms?

Wodiczko's 'Critical Vehicle' seemed to give some insight relating to issues of power and communication within the public sphere. In 1988/89 he developed a proposal for homeless people in New York City. He intervened actively in the issues of homelessness by analyzing, identifying and understanding the status of

Fig. 5. The dismantling of the informal settlement.

homelessness within a modern culture. Wodiczko noticed that a claim for territory would create visibility, and thus a level of communication could be established. He developed the 'Critical Vehicle' together with the affected people, trying to fulfill their immediate needs. Again, the solution was a mobile object, drawn from the image of the shopping cart, which was a survival necessity of being always on the run as being pushed around and driven out with all personal belongings. Mobility here allowed a territorial claim as well as a detachment. Arguing in favor of a vehicle, the artist saw the ability to 'serve as a means of enacting the oppressiveness' (the term 'vehicle' has here the meaning of an 'object' as well as a person, located in a society; either it is his/her native social context or not). Since the subjects of that oppression were often unaware of their dependency and passivity, moving vehicles are needed as disturbers and active components of society in order to challenge unnecessary rules and overpowered dominance. Wodiczko implies the ability of creating awareness, social responsibility and criticism of moving objects … and persons.

Tadashi Kawamata's temporary project 'London Lodgings' focused also on territorial claim but fully respected the social environment as a healthy basis for his design proposals. While Wodiczko's 'Critical Vehicle' sought to become visible, to disturb our 'illusion of freedom,' to work against suppression in order to communicate through the created object with the surrounding, Kawamata's approach proposed 'creation of a secret, hidden space within the city,' preferring observation and adaptation to the found patterns and materialism of the context as a way to question it. He searched for alternative spaces in the urban realm that could be used for private, individual spaces. Kawamata and his students explored gaps in the social, cultural and communal system, to camouflage themselves in these invisible spots, and to hide underneath that urban surface. Rather than being different from the urban environment, 'London lodgings' investigated the potential of detected unused spaces with direct responses to the context and materiality of the chosen site. In this manner, hidden aspects of the city became revealed and analyzed by the architects, which were normally ignored.

A second project was introduced. Its challenges: to design and build a 'sleeping platform' in a very public space on campus without permission, without being seen, to sleep in it for one night without being caught, and to return the site to its original condition (as if the occupant was never there).

Wodiczko's principles of making the built form communicative to the outside using known images were applied in the design and construction of 'Mobile02.' Doing so enabled the occupants to be hidden 'underneath the urban patterns.' Yet, a private and intimate spot within a very public space was generated, embodying its own aesthetics of combined leftover materials, patterns and light. Besides using the public space characteristics to camouflage the inhabitants, the site features were also provided the necessary heat and ventilation: the temporary structure was mounted above a heat exhaust vent. From the inside of this temporary built structure, investigation of the site, social and communal conditions were practiced in an aware, active and resistant manner while being 'under cover.' (Fig. 6)

Santiago Cirugeda Parejo's architectural approach influenced Mobile02, even though he acted much more provocatively during the 'dumpster project.' The Span-

Fig. 6. Sleeping Platform: camouflaged as a construction site, it was possible to sneak under the urban surface and observe a very public space from within a hidden and private location.

ish architect challenged town-planning policy and authority: the building process of his proposal initially relied on subversive compliance in the system of public goods; he created new 'urban reserves,' which were spaces usable by the people, liberated from the oppression of senseless and unnecessary laws and orders. He reclaimed public space by re-conquering it for the citizens, giving it back to the people and in doing so, encouraged the democratization of urban space.

Although Wodiczko, Kawamata and Parejo took critical positions within their practice of space definition, their approaches seemed to stay in the theoretical and experimental realm. Wodiczko created an artificial and unnatural container for individuals with insensitive and strongly distinguished language. Homeless people were used as part of a social experiment; the artist did not really seek to improve directly the affected people. Also, Kawamata stood in the background, though giving valuable insights about the relationship between the public private space and the community. However, long-term inhabitation of Kawamata's lodging proposals would not prove their feasibility for inhabitation, which was probably not the artist's goal. Here as well, ideas about the relationship of material, site and community, and the considering the inhabitants were

explored, but the projects did not offer a serious solution for an important issue; the projects remained artistic works, though with deep insights.

We look back to the initial question: what is happening between arriving and leaving? Both Parejo's critical, active interventions and subversive compliance and the potentiation of used and wasted materials referred to in the student project were promising. Both projects were able to give useful and applicable design strategies since they equally incorporated the meanings of the site, community and the responsibility of generating an object within the public space. Mobile01 and Mobile 02 went further. Since the designer was the dweller, permanent modifications during the design process were made and did not stop after mounting the shelter on the site. This led to an insight and turning point in the understanding of built forms: full participation of the client is critical, as is realizing that after the architect leaves, the user will come with new needs and alter the already finished design. Also, understanding that the creation and disposal of waste is one of the world's great issues, using leftover materials as a source for building materials embodied great potential and meaningful power. By giving value back to the material, which once was carefully produced and needed, the inherent energy and beauty of the material was re-appreciated. In addition, their value became potentiated because they were used differently than originally conceived.

Due to constraints found on the site, in the client's or user's financial situation and the designer's abilities, a different kind of creativity occurred. This was unconventional in architectural education since idealistic and unusable assignments, which were out of touch with the reality, were the usual. Enabling students to face those framing circumstances generated creative problem solving abilities, which the architect knows from his/her everyday work. Here, especially the question of who the client was gave further conditions for the design. Romanticized imagination of a conceptual idea cannot be a preparation for later professional work.

Also, many architects, artists and theoreticians propose their personal interpretations of contemporary nomadic reality. Although architectural interest in temporary built structures is significant, these should not be the only approaches considered. Take a look at those unpopular people like refugees, informal settlers, homeless people, etc. and their method of surviving and living in their dwellings. Mobility is already broadly a reality and has many aspects to be viewed. Architects can learn from these informal, ephemeral structures, but again, not in order to idealize the way people live in their every day struggle, rather to recognize potentials in simplicity, micro-ownership, application of knowledge in an, uncomplicated, direct way. In addition, looking at other client groups (besides just the wealthy ones) offers new opportunities for the application of professional knowledge. Improving people's quality of living in general and especially of the mentioned groups is a challenge. It can be further developed into an argumentation which states that decent housing should be a realized human right no matter if the need is a temporary or a permanent housing type.

Again, what is the role of an architect and what should it be? Today the architect has the potential to be involved in most phases of the building process. Further opportunities could be searched as a facilitator or consultant of community development programs, as a social and political activist, and as a researcher. The investigation of impermanent habitation strategies offers a wide field for possible interaction. An impermanent inhabitation differs from a permanent one in its potential to be able to explore ideas, test materials, search for new forms of habitation, and recall forgotten values. In this manner, conventional rules and norms are left behind and we arrive in a stage of full awareness about professional constraints and abilities, material potential, and site and community comprehension. That could be a meaningful way to understand better how to express individuality, and still find a place in society, locally and globally. Giving this knowledge to young architects would extend their horizons towards an active professional practice where innovations can occur more easily.

Fig. 7. The Sleeping Platform site as the installation was dismantled.

The message is clear: a critical and actively engaged professional practice implies great potential and continues the journey. (Fig.7)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arthus-Bertrand, Yann. *Earth from above, 365 days.* (Paris: Editions de LaMartiniere, 2001).

Brayer, Marie-Brange and Beatrice Simonot, eds. ''Santiago Cirugeda Parejo,'' in *Archilab's Futurehouse.* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

Codrescu, Andrei. In the foreword of *Mobile — The Art of Portable Architecture.* Edited by Jennifer Siegal. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 10-11.

Arbor, Ann.*Richard Horden: Light Architecture.* Edited by Annette LeCuyer. (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1996).

Kawamata, Tadashi. *''Lodging: London/Tokyo,'' AA files* 43 (2001): 52-78.

Wodiczko, Krzysztof. *Critical Vehicles.* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999).