Out of Context

Artists James Casebere and Glen Seator nudge architecture's boundaries.

Branden Hookway crosses the border with them.

In a two-person show at the Addison Gallery in Andover, Massachusetts, Glen Seator replicates one corner of a Friendly's restaurant (left) as modernist sculpture. James Casebere's Pink Hallway #3 (2000), a photograph of a model, imagines a postdiluvial corridor at nearby Phillips Academy (facing page).

Casebere's goal is not to conceal the artifice of the model with graphic slight-of-hand. Through lighting, textures, a minimal use of detail, and, in this series, "flooding" the models to create distorted reflections, Casebere suspends us eerily between the abstraction of a model and the connotation of an almost-real space. In this exhibition he documents the Eastern State Penitentiary, a hallway from Phillips Academy, and a World War II-era German bunker system. Space, for Casebere, is always man-made, interior, and confining.

Glen Seator's work likewise takes place on a middle ground between architectural concept and realization, but this time the critical boundary lies between the freestanding sculptural object and the site-specificity of architecture. Places for Balanced Sculptures was created for installation at the Addison Gallery, and refers to three sites: the Addison Gallery itself, a nearby Friendly's restaurant in Andover, and a terminal at Logan Airport in Boston. Each of the three sculptures consists of two walls and a floor, meticulously re-creating the materials and finishes of the three sites. The surfaces are held in identical 6-foot-square steel frames and bolted together to make corners. When balanced on these corners, they refer to a trope of late-modernist sculpture: The cube balanced on one of its points.

Each of these spaces has been transformed into surface treatments: the grand neoclassical solidity of the Addison's plaster on lath walls and oak floor; the homeliness of the wallpaper, bead board, and carpet at Friendly's; and the clean modernity of the Logan terminal, with its glass walls and terrazzo floor. More than creating a sense of specific places, these surfaces reveal how social behavior is encoded in architecture. The most superficial of instruments—wallpaper, carpet, veneers—can demand certain attitudes, dress, tone of voice, or posture. For Seator, the modernist axiom of honesty in materials is rendered just one more stylistic effect. Conceptually and formally, both Casebere's and Seator's work suspends for a moment the cause-effect relationship between design intent and spatial effect.

The Architectural Unconscious: James Casebere and Glen Seator, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, May 12 through July 29

Exploiting its most novel capability—interactivity—Archnet provides users with online workspaces where they are encouraged to post their academic and professional work. The idea is to build an online community where individuals can receive feedback on their work, get advice, and collaborate with fellow Archnet users. To test the possibilities of these collaborative workspaces, MIT coordinated a joint online studio last October, spearheaded by Charles Correa. This 10-day charrette involved faculty and students from MIT, the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, American University of Beirut (AUB), and the Center for Environmental Planning and Technology in Ahmedabad, India. Students were divided into 10 teams and given a choice of problems proposed by faculty from each school.

One problem, posed by the AUB’s Marwan Ghandour and Hiba Abu Akl, focused on a contested urban locale in South Beirut, the illegal settlements of Saint Simone. Students found themselves addressing complex political and social issues related to the spatial claims on these properties made by squatting populations. Nonlocal students relied on their Beirut partners as visual experts and social interpreters; chat rooms served as shared studio space; and work throughout the design process was uploaded to the Web, allowing for ongoing commentary and criticism by teachers and students alike. The charrette culminated in an online final review, a virtual free-for-all in which everyone could critique the resulting projects.

There are plans to eventually upload the complete catalogue and backlist of the MIT Press, but this brings up another potential problem: Just how much information can be posted and how many of Archnet’s interests can be represented without undermining the site’s Islamic focus? With its capacity to show, listen, and respond to all “others,” Archnet must be careful not to lose the sound of its own distinctive voice.

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