

Recent Work: Cultural Excavations

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For many people, the relationship of the “product” of architecture to the contents within which it is produced, commissioned, or used ultimately remains unquestioned. Our work in design research concerns itself with a critical inquiry into new surfaces, sites, programs, and materials that may operate as a scaffolding for contemporary logics of production which define our culture’s attitudes towards the artifacts which it produces. The recent entry of domestic and urban infrastructure into cycles of production, consumption, and obsolescence signals a shift from Modern ideals of the permanence and invisibility of the industrial. Through physical exposure in the process of installation and demolition, and through the psychological familiarity that comes from increased use and reliance, infrastructure has acquired a new and unprecedented visibility in our culture.

The perceived “autonomy” of the Modern object erodes. Ligatures of once “invisible” systems of utilities, communication and transportation now acquire a greater material presence as they become dense and interconnected. An increased importance is placed on the relationships that are constructed between things. Formerly considered to be “anonymous,” a territory of the “trades” and not a “subject” of architecture, the underlying orders of the infrastructural offer a paradigm for the visible and invisible ways in which people, materials, events, and objects are connected in our culture.

The Computer Laboratory at the Rhode Island School of Design (1991) makes visible the connections between the products of technology (power, information, light) and the networks of electrical infrastructure through which technology is transmitted, accessed, and controlled within the School. In this project, the space of the wood stud wall is excavated as a site of research. Elements of electrical infrastructure which are usually not in the “domain” of architecture—electrical conduits, outlets and power surge suppressors—are used as material. The location and profusion of this material is both unintentional and strategic. The excessiveness of what is necessary in the Computer Laboratory produces a surplus of meaning that is always ambiguous. The architecture supports a continual rereading of the infrastructure and its presence in space through the exposure of the points of contact and connection—the cords, wall cavities, plugs, and network system—which enable technology and also make it vulnerable.

In the science playground at The Children’s Museum in Boston (1992), the existing post and beam structure of this warehouse building was uncovered to form an armature for the electrical and plumbing infrastructure needed to support the “wet” and “dry” exhibit areas. The materials of the wall surfaces were selected to support the infrastructure: the “dry” wall was constructed from an assembly of pine crates, the “wet” wall of stacked blue plastic water bottles. A

condition of reciprocity emerges between “servant” and “served.” The location of the copper plumbing pipes organizes the architecture and produces an understanding of the space of the water and the ways in which it moves inside and outside the building. The infrastructural orders of water suggest relationships between the plastic water bottles, the water in the Channel outside, the floor drains, the sinks, roof vents, and the drinking fountain.

The construction of the Central Artery in Boston in the 1950s and its anticipated demolition and rebuilding underground in the 1990s provided the opportunity to link the necessity of the physical public access with access to information about the construction of the City’s infrastructure. Funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Interim Bridges Project is an architectural research project for three public passages which are designed to allow pedestrian access during the ten-year construction of the new roadway.

In the fall of 1992, a Prototype of one of the Interim Bridges was constructed at the site of a public archeological excavation adjacent to the Artery. The Prototype contains an exhibition of photographs which document the construction of the Central Artery, the displacement created by eminent domain and the ways in which domestic artifacts found at the excavation site (implements, shoes, bottle shards) are con-

structed, used, discarded, and replaced. Electrical power for the Prototype, which is open twenty-four hours a day, is tapped from the existing Artery at Bent #28. The integration of the highway with the electrical utilities which illuminate the exhibition establishes a new connection between the physical facts of the Artery as an element of infrastructure and the less visible political dimensions of the public works process which are at work in its making.

As architects, we are interested in the paradoxical logics of the 2x4 as a product, the ways in which it transcends time and place in our contemporary culture because of its technical reproducibility, its ubiquitous presence, and the possibility of its scalar presence as an increment whose dimension is found everywhere. We try to uncover the ideas and potentials that are embedded in industrially manufactured materials to reexamine the notion of material “value” in architecture. There is a re-loading toward the facts of production inherent in the physical qualities of the material itself, the opacity and translucency of its surfaces, and the ways in which it reacts with light and shadow, aggregates, or is deformed. If an available architecture is to survive, its subjects, situations, details, materials and the means by which it is made must be radically redefined. We see this research as a process of extraction, a cultural excavation where invention resides in a critical re-vision of what is already existing.



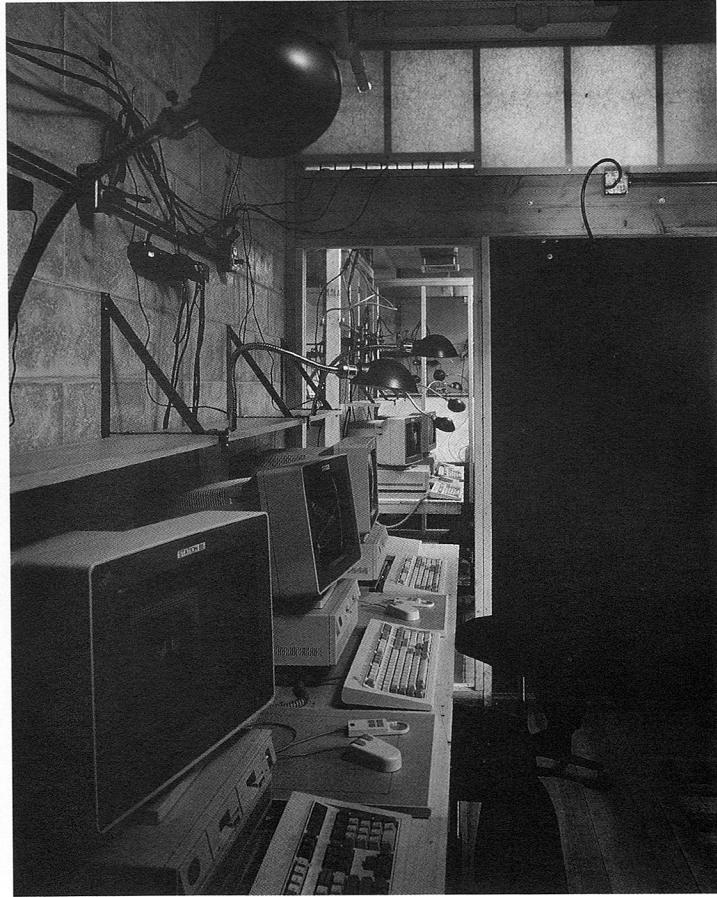
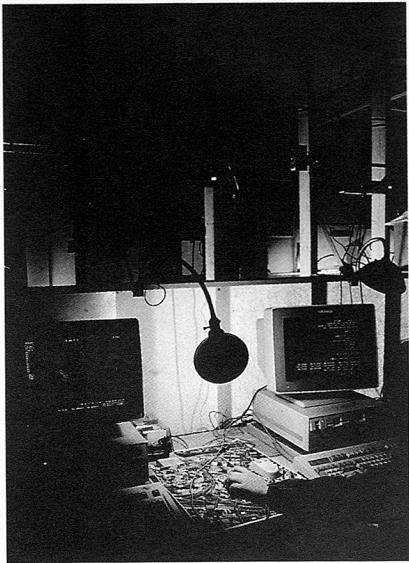
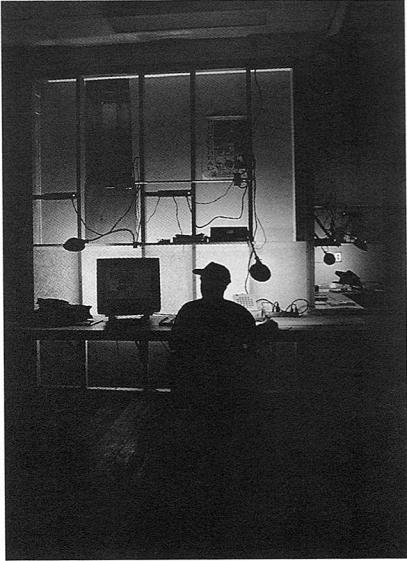
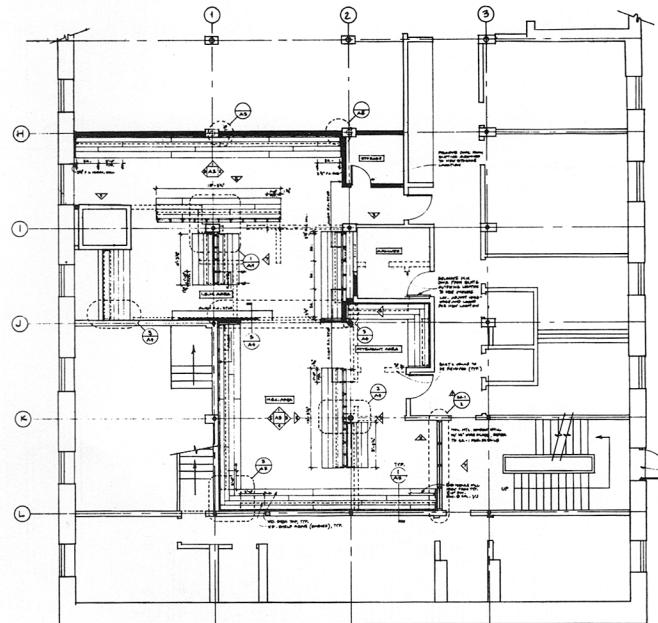
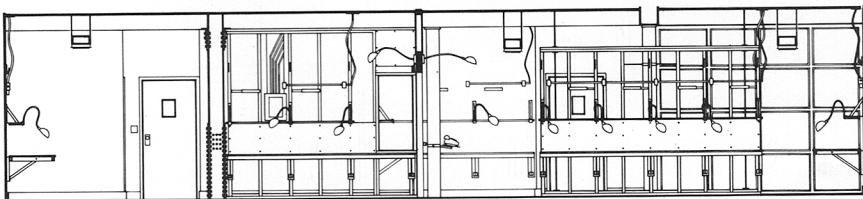


Photo: Bruce T. Martin



1 COMPUTER LABORATORY PLAN
1/8" = 1'-0"

251 NORTH 19TH STREET (ONE LEVEL ABOVE)



Photo: Steve Rosenthal

