



P.S.1 in The Sun

By JAMES GARDNER

June 28, 2007

In the heat of summer, everything goes on holiday, and architecture is no exception. "Liquid Sky," a new installation at P.S.1, stands in the same relation to the world's usual, gravitationally bound buildings as a samba is to walk or a piña colada to a cup of Lipton Tea. An exercise in tensile architecture, along the lines of a suspended yurt, this project's point, like that of all previous winners of MoMA's Young Architects Program, is to transform the drab gray space of P.S.1's interior courtyard. In the process, it is to become an enchanted space.

This, after all, is the space that, beginning Saturday, will be reconceived as this year's Warm Up, a kind of frantic urban Club Med where artistically inclined 20-somethings gather, drink, and get semi-naked, while a disc jockey puts another tune on and douses them with water from sprinklers.

"Liquid Sky" is the work of the L.A.-based firm of Ball-Nogues (Benjamin Ball and Gaston Nogues, two architects just shy of 40 years old). Both of them have passed through the studio of Frank Gehry, a fact that is borne out in some of their recent projects, as well as in this latest one. The four main tensile events that make up the P.S.1 courtyard rise like the onion domes of John Nash's famed Brighton Pavilion in Southern England, a spirited folly which, even though it has lasted nearly two centuries to date, is another example of architecture on vacation.

Beyond that superficial flash of association, the two projects could hardly be more divergent. "Liquid Sky" falls into the neo-Mod school of contemporary architecture, which looks lovingly back to the curving, looping, blessedly non-Euclidian blobs and catenaries that arose, mainly in the decorative arts, as an ultimately un-availing challenge to the grown-up, rectilinear rigors of mainstream modernism.

At the same time, this project exhibits a love of the architectural process itself, as well as a determination to call attention to the industrial-strength materials that it has used. To that end, the tentlike components of "Liquid Sky" are covered in red and orange strips of Mylar laminate, a plastic most often seen in wind-surfing sails. Each flap preserves its numbering, which creates a rough-and-ready effect. These tents are held up on a tripod of bare wood, at whose base are surprisingly comfortable hammocks that serve as sofas and that were fashioned out of extremely durable plastic fishnet by Sheila Pepe.

In an adjoining space, known as "the Beach" because its floor is strewn with sand, there is an ingenious contrivance designed by Jenna Didier, a visual artist who works with water. A series of poles serve as the armature for a suspended canopy of bright red Mylar, cut into hundreds of small flaps. In a strong wind, these emit a sound like the lapping of waves. On either side are large poles, surrounded at the base by a small boardwalk and by a dense group of log stumps set into the sand. Above is a vat that holds up to 15 gallons of water. Silently it fills up until it reaches a critical point, then flips over, dousing anyone or anything that happens to be beneath it, and emitting a thunderous roar.

I saw the project before it had been entirely "tensiled" out; the tentlike structures left a good deal of the original space visible and recognizable. The overriding point of the project, however, was to alter the place beyond all recognition, to transfigure it until it came to seem surpassingly strange. This it has not entirely succeeded in doing, but it is a valiant effort and a lot of fun.