

Building Up, Tearing Down

Benjamin Ball and partner Gaston Nogues of the Los Angeles architecture firm Ball-Nogues create cutting-edge permanent structures (including a recording studio in Silverlake, California), as well as temporary installations for events such as Tiffany & Company's launch parties for its Frank Gehry jewelry collection. The company's design of a summerlong installation, "Liquid Sky," for the outdoor courtyard at New York's P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center recently won the eighth annual Young Architects Program competition sponsored by the institution and its parent organization, the Museum of Modern Art. Ball spoke to us about the new outdoor work, and the differences between designing temporary and permanent structures.

Congratulations on winning the competition. Can you tell us about "Liquid Sky"?

Every summer [P.S.1 has its] "Warm Up" series, which is a music series with DJs and bands and performers. We imagined a kind of psychedelic circus tent space that changed the color and temperature of the light hitting the courtyard. We're using a high-strength Mylar material. It acts like a giant lighting gel over the space. We wanted it to feel like a daytime nightclub outdoors.



Benjamin Ball amid the firm's 2005 outdoor piece "Maximilian's Schell," at Los Angeles's Materials & Applications. Photo: Joshua White/Courtesy of Ball-Nogues



A model of Ball-Nogues's installation that will fill the P.S.1 courtyard this summer.

How did you get involved with event work?

I used to be an art director for movies, commercials, and music videos. About 10 years ago, I worked on a Janet Jackson video for her Velvet Rope tour, and Virgin Records contacted us about designing the release party for the record. [Jackson] wanted it to feel like a block party. It was on the Sony lot, on that fake Main Street U.S.A. they have; I created this dramatic entry piece that looked like a tenement building that had the facade part off of it. We had 20 film projectors projecting into the back of the rooms, so it was like a video installation. That was in '99.

What do you like about event work, and how does designing for events compare with designing buildings?

[Event work] happens much more quickly, and it's temporary. You're really trying to create atmosphere and a shared memory for the people who attend. Some of the event things Gaston and I have done in the last couple of years have involved the installation of architectural structures and architectural building systems. We're looking at ways to put things together, and the fact that they're at an event is beside the point. A lot of experimental architecture gets done in the form of installations, structures that only live for weeks or months. There's a direct relationship between the time frames and the budgets you're dealing with in architectural installations and event design, although event design [budgets] are usually a little bit higher.

So your event design and architectural installations are heading in the same direction.

They could be. There's an area ripe for design experimentation that's not quite architecture and not exactly installation work. It's in-between. We're interested in pushing our interests as designers and creative people through event design. Whether we do it in a gallery or we do it on a building, they're ideas we want to explore, and event design provides the opportunity for us to do that.

Is that in part because it takes less time than working on something permanent, like a building?

Perhaps the stakes aren't as high as when you design a building. You can be more experimental, you can try more things. It's not something that lasts, so if people hate it, they only have to hate it for a couple of days.

—Irene Lacher