

Log

SUMMER/FALL 2007

Observations on
architecture and the
contemporary city

34° 20' N, 108° 29' W

Quemado, New Mexico

A log cabin at the edge of Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977) is a way station for modern-day pilgrims eager to see lightning dance between the 400 polished stainless-steel poles the artist laid out in a grid, stretching one mile by one kilometer in the New Mexico desert. The installation's ordered footprint contrasts with the surrounding natural environment; its rationality reminds visitors that ever since the machine forcefully invaded the American garden, there is no "natural" landscape. Similarly, the seeming rusticity of the Quemado log cabin belies other regional histories. The "Land of Enchantment" (emblazoned on the New Mexico license plate) was also home to the first detonation of the atomic bomb, at Trinity Site on July 16, 1945, which is today preserved as part of the White Sands National Monument. De Maria's fusion of science and landscape yields a kind of techno-pastoral sublime that suggests the peaceful deployment of technology to harness not only nature's potentially destructive power, but man's as well.

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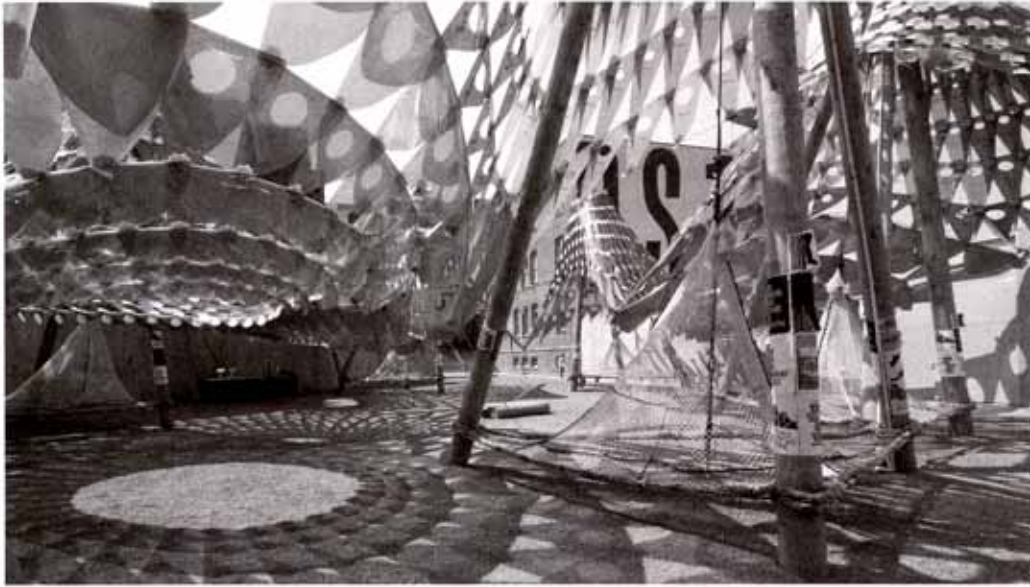
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COLORPLATE 8. BALL-NOGUES STUDIO, LIQUID SKY, PS1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER, QUEENS, NEW YORK, 2007.
PHOTO: MARK LENTZ.

OBSERVATIONS ON DIGITAL TEPEES



BALL-NOGUES STUDIO, LIQUID SKY, PS1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER, QUEENS, NEW YORK, 2007. PHOTO: MARK LENTZ. SEE ALSO COLOR-PLATE 8.

At the MoMA/PS1 fortress of contemporary art in Queens, a fleeting installment of summer cheer has arrived in the form of the eighth annual Young Architects Competition Program, won and constructed by Los Angeles-based Ball-Nogues. Past installations in the PS1 courtyard have come in two types: the low-lying bivouac and the wall-leaping canopy. This year's entry deftly splits the difference, providing an unabashedly temporary structure – circus tent comparisons are inevitable and appropriate – that also attempts to contend with the 20-foot-high concrete walls that surround this playpen for architects under 40. There is a crudeness in the telephone-pole tepees that form the tower structures and in the charmless steel cables used for tensile support, which are installed with little regard for how they hit the ground, the walls, or each other. But the roughness of the construction is refreshing for its lack of self-seriousness – Ball-Nogues did not set out to make a slick or precious project, but one that embraces the limitations of its \$70,000 budget and was built to last longer than past years' notoriously fragile constructions. The canopies, which float at a safe height above the crowds, consist of digitally wrought panels of mylar (in a reconstitution of a similar fabrication the firm undertook in 2005 in Los Angeles); the funnel forms are simple but evocative – the banality of the circus tent transformed ever so slightly. It is digital architecture without teeth, never betraying its high-tech provenance. After PS1's dalliances with the vaguely ideological blobs of Emergent in 2003 and Xefirotarch in 2005, Ball-Nogues' technology displays no such aggressive tendencies – it's only a circus, after all. – Aleksandr Bierig