

This is a very small project in Hoboken, NJ.

It is the interior renovation of a 670 sq ft railroad apartment.

5 small rooms were linked together from front to back.

We gutted the space to expose the brick walls and the underside of the roof.

The space measures 14 feet x 55 feet.

Our primary goal was to achieve a complete design solution by creatively selecting from existing manufactured products. We also aimed to complete the space with minimal custom design in-between the manufactured givens.

We achieved these goals by coordinating diverse, pre-manufactured products –

- The sleeping area is made from mobile file storage units that hold a king size bed, storage, and the living room entertainment center.**
- The bathroom is made from a panelized office enclosure.**
- The kitchen is made from laboratory furniture.**

Our design process was to shop & critique the available options and intended use of miscellaneous manufactured products unrelated to a residential apartment in parallel with our consideration of the unique spatial needs of this project.

Consuming Sweets: The Work of Architecture in the Age of Selection Among Manufacturers' Manufactured Differences

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This project refutes the view that the extensive use of manufactured products limits the space for making architecture. The strategy shown here is the construction of complete architectural solutions by coordinating the production of others. The skills required are those of the consumer. The architect as consumer develops shopping into an expertise. The impasse is not between co-option (popular reproduction of unique cultural acts), versus meaningful architecture, but between a marginalized profession and its culture's materials and methods. A meaningful style of architecture in consumer culture cannot make co-option an enemy, but must develop a full account of its relation to it.

MANUFACTURERS OF BUILDING PRODUCTS have a great influence on the architectural production of small architectural firms. Manufacturers establish a de facto baseline budget cost for a building, and they also invade the space of architecture itself, the custom design solutions offered by the architect. The typical small architectural firm does not often have sufficient power, position, or budget to reduce the amount of manufactured products used so that their design responsibility can be expanded. The nature of an architectural practice that can only focus aesthetic intentions "in between" the building products inevitably to be used provides scarce satisfaction. Those intentions can easily be negotiated out of projects that function just as well without them. Therefore, the extensive use of manufactured building products is often viewed as cornering the architect into designing and detailing only the spaces in between the products used. The extensive use of manufactured building products is not considered a legitimate architectural practice.

The project illustrated here refutes that view. The extensive use of manufactured products in no way limits the space

for making architecture. The strategy shown here presents the architect with the task of constructing complete architectural solutions by coordinating the production of others (Figure 1). It is a paradoxical strategy that suggests the architect leave the in-between space, although that may appear at first a betrayal of the traditional location of architectural control. The new skills required are not typically thought of as architectural. They are the skills of the consumer. Catalogues are the "tools" of the consumer. Manufactured building products come together currently (in a disjointed way) in

catalogues such as *Sweets Files* and the *Thomas Register*. This information is strategically shopped in order to design this project.

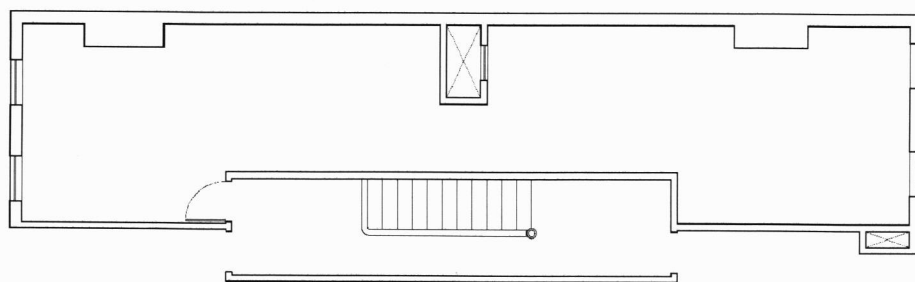
The Project

The clients desired a complete renovation of their top-floor residence with panoramic views of the New York City skyline to the east and the Palisades to the west. The renovation entailed reprogramming and reconceptualizing the spaces for living, eating, sleeping, office, storage, and bathroom. Even when completely gutted to the shell walls, this railroad apartment is still a problematic space (Figure 2). Take the placement of the bedroom. If located in one of the wider, windowed end spaces it would be closed to public use. If located in one of the middle, more narrow rooms, the owners and their guests would constantly need to circulate through it. So the two end spaces, as the most suitable living areas, were conceived around the client's lifestyle to be the new living and kitchen areas (Figures 3 and 4).

With a range of building products in mind, we attempted to find solutions with the qualities we desired from the standard production of manufacturers. We set our sights on a schematic plan where the bedroom would interface with the living room, be compressible, and contain the functions of living room shelving, sleeping, wardrobe, and office storage (Figure 5). An office space would be tucked into the desirable position in the center of the plan at the air shaft window, and the bathroom would sit between the office and the kitchen. The bathroom would be a sometimes-transparent container for plumbing fixtures. Even a comfortable eight-foot-tall enclosure would not touch the 11-to-14 foot ceilings. Located in the narrowest area of the plan, the bathroom would have its own opening for the



1. Top: Cabinets from CSI 12345 and vinyl siding from CSI07460. Lower left: Bedroom solution from CSI 10670; lower right: Bathroom enclosure from CSI 13046.



2. Existing plan.

skylight above, allowing light to filter through and around it (Figure 6).

The bathroom solution was found from the standard production of *modular factory-floor office wall systems* in *CSI Classification 13046* (Figure 7). But this meant importing a typically industrial product into a residential project. Manufacturers of these systems were not interested in working with a residential project. Our strategy was to *intentionally decontextualize our product needs from the project at hand*. We provided manufacturers with only those drawings, parts of drawings, or project information that they needed. They saw only information that involved their product.¹

We appended the pseudoscientific prefix “Dr.” to the client’s name and alluded to the pseudocommercial needs of the client to help create a perception of a viable selling opportunity. Three manufacturers became sufficiently confident in the normality of our use of their product that they gave hard bids for the work. Multiple bids, not inflated by fears of stepping outside their customary area, are invaluable to the consumer and the architect as the only way to assess fairly the relative worth of the various specification, finish, and construction options offered.

In creating the kitchen, it was even more necessary to decontextualize the residential nature of the project from the manufacturers of *laboratory furniture* found in *CSI Classification 12345* (Figure 8). While lab furniture has surely been used in residential spaces before, most sales representatives ended the call when they discovered that the project involved specifying a residential kitchen with their product line. We were, however, able to receive competitive bids for this product. The pseudoscientific “Dr.” prefix on the client’s name was the tactic that created the perception of a selling op-



3. Living room.



4. Kitchen.



5. Bedroom, with bathroom and kitchen beyond.



6. Bathroom enclosure, viewed from kitchen.

portunity suitably contextualized to the manufacturers own views of what constitutes the reasonable use of their product.²

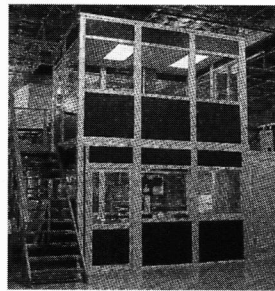
The amount of detailed interaction we would have with manufacturers concerning the bedroom area was too great to avoid telling them about the residential context of our project. The qualities we desired for the bedroom area would stretch the limits of the standard production of *mobile file storage units* found in *CSI Classification 10670* (Figure 9). All the manufacturers were informed that their product was to contain a king-size bed, a wardrobe of hanging clothes, general storage, and a living room entertainment center in need of a power supply. This forthright approach was necessary to get them to engineer properly and innovate willingly with their product in ways we could not do alone.

The bedroom solution is different from the others mentioned in that it involved efforts to innovate by both the architects and the manufacturers. While the manufacturers initially thought the bedroom idea odd, they saw it as understandable—useful in its context—and wanted the opportunity to offer a solution. More familiar with architects, they were more willing to work with us.

Revising their typical load calculations to accommodate clothing and a bed was not a significant problem. The limita-

Manufacturer's Intended Use: Panelized work space enclosure for in-plant offices, toll booths, security booths.

Architect-as-Consumer Re-use: Panelized enclosure for residential bathroom.



Specifications

1. SCOPE

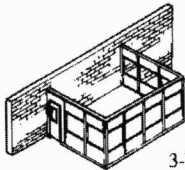
Furnish a ___x___ size, non-progressive building conforming to the following specifications. Building is shipped completely knocked down.

2. MATERIALS

2.1 WALL PANELS

3" thick, 8' high and 2' or 4' nominal widths, as specified, with expanded polystyrene board core (UL Class 1), and 1/8" vinyl-covered hardboard permanently laminated to both sides. Panels to have insulating factor of R-13.

2.1.1 Standard finishes; walnut, pecan, beige, white, and black.



3-Wall Unit – Attaches to one existing wall to cut expenses; provides all the flexibility you need.

2.2 STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK

Anodized aluminum extrusions alloy 6063T6. All posts are of two piece design and shall allow the wall panels to be connected to one another making the system totally Non-Progressive.

2.3 PANEL ACCEPTORS (wall starts)

Aluminum extrusions for attachment to existing surfaces, permitting two and three wall structures.

2.4 BASE PLATE

Aluminum channel extrusion is shipped in cut lengths for ease of leveling, attachment to foundation, and to provide a smooth surface for caulking and sealing.

2.5 PANELIZED CEILING

3" thick panels constructed of insulating board (R-12, UL Class 1) and acoustical tile (Fed. Spec SS 5-118A). Factory framed with aluminum extrusions to allow ceiling panels to pivot lock together.

2.6 DOORS

Shipped pre-hung, with butt hinges and key-in-knob lockset shipped separately. Standard door to be a 3068x1 3/4" full flush, vinyl-clad walnut, hollow-core wood door.

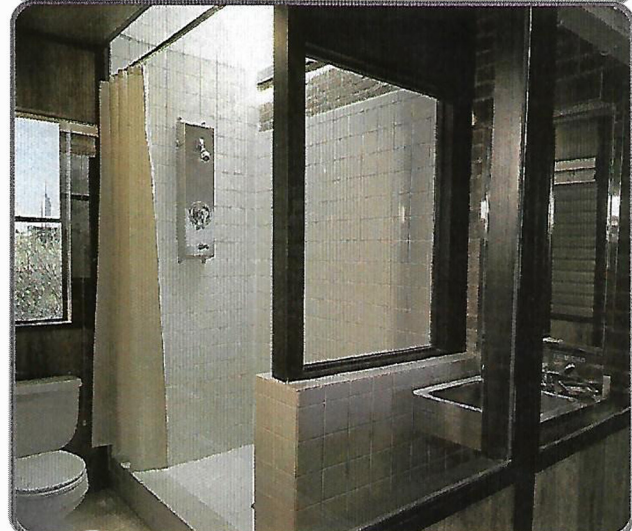
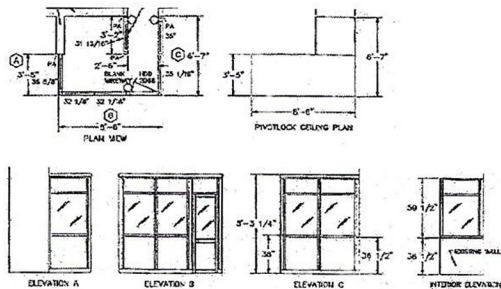
2.7 WINDOWS

Factory assembled in an anodized aluminum frame, glazed with standard 3/16" tempered safety glass. Glazed panels are shipped in 2 sections.

2.8 ELECTRICAL WIREWAYS

Located at panel connections, where specified, for location of light switches and outlets. Boxes, conduit, outlets and wiring to be furnished and installed by others.

Manufacturer's Shop Drawings: specific use for residence remains within limits of manufacturer's proprietary specifications.

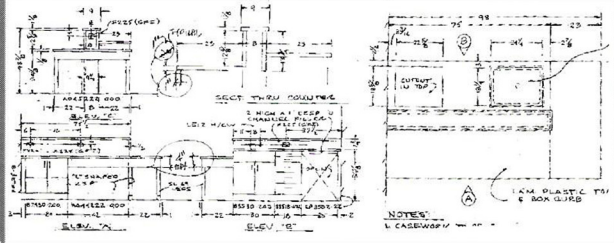
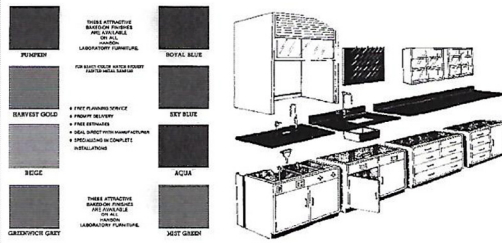


7. Bathroom solution from CSI 13046.

1 2 3 4 5 CSI Classification: furnishings, laboratory casework

Manufacturer's Intended Use: Cabinets, tables and countertops for use in a laboratory.

Manufacturer's Shop Drawings: Specific use for residence remains within limits of manufacturer's proprietary specifications.



Architect-as-Consumer Re-use: Residential kitchen.



8. Kitchen solution from CSI 12345.

tions of this solution derived from the willingness of manufacturers to innovate a warranted standard product that could accommodate the unusual items we called for. All the manufacturers we contacted engineered solutions and submitted bids. The uniqueness of this application was a positive factor for Spacesaver, the manufacturer that ultimately provided the bedroom unit. They purchased professional photographs of the finished work for use in their own marketing portfolio!³

Minimizing the use of our own hand in design while making disparate, manufactured products work together is a challenge, since the manufacturers' concerns (and their specialized knowledge of their methods and materials) stop at the limits of their own shop drawings and specifications. Yet the building products used need to be spatially coordinated. Indeed, just like programming and schematic design, massing and proportioning remain a traditional architect's responsibility in our design process as well.

The key organizing feature is the addition of a unifying soffit plane through the middle of the space (see elevations, Figure 10). This plane proportionally links the free-standing bedroom and bathroom manufactured objects installed below. It also contains the new lighting, HVAC, and ductwork. In the living room a soffit plane at the once-existing 9'-6"-plaster ceiling height re-introduces the appropriate sense of scale from the original space (Figure 3). In the kitchen a plane of reflective ceiling tiles, free-floating on three sides, provides the opportunity for down lighting, uplighting, or a combination of both, as the clients occupy the kitchen at various times, day and night (Figure 11). Of the perimeter walls remaining after demolition, we decided that the center hallway wall would receive a manufactured siding product as a metaphor of its reading. Thus, this wall took on the character of a typical adjacent building pushing close to one's property line, clad in vinyl siding and outdoor lanterns (see Figure 5, 10, and 11).

Almond: Making the Optional Specifications Coherent with One Another

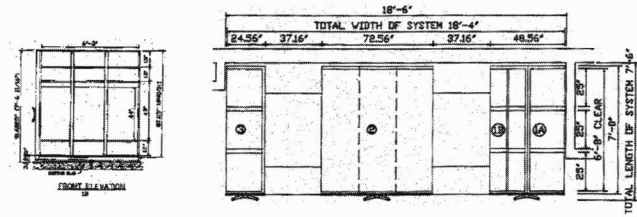
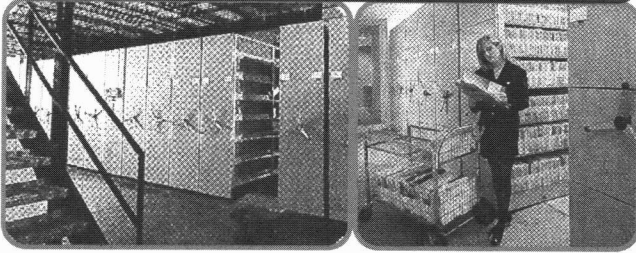
The most striking observation concerning our effort to coordinate various products as per the standard finish and color selections is the ease with which almost all manufactured things might be organized visually by the color "almond." Almond, also known as light putty, beige, cream, or tan, is the most common name given to the approximately equivalent color options offered by all manufacturers, followed by dark brown.⁴

We liked the idea of almond being forced upon us as a choice, and began to see it as similar to the neighborhood associations near the Getty Center in Los Angeles forcing a similar beige on Richard Meier Architects. In fact, it became an obvious and potentially sublime choice to specify absolutely everything—every finish, paint color and material—in monochromatic almond.

10670 CSI Classification: specialties, mobile file storage units

Manufacturer's Intended Use: High-density material storage.

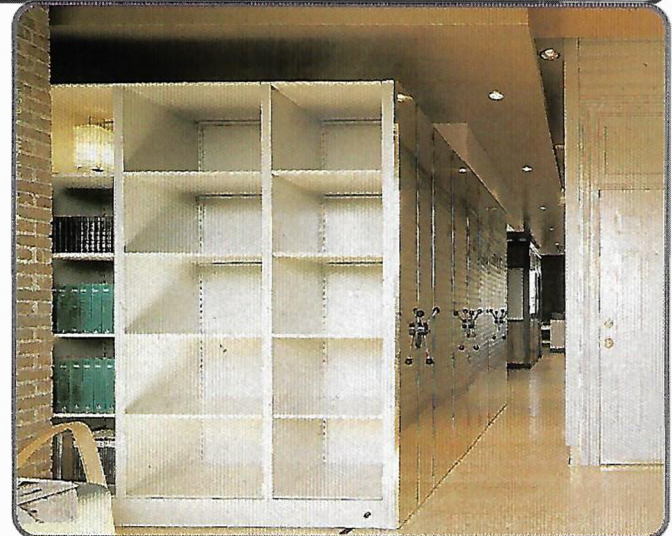
Manufacturer's Shop Drawings: Specific use for residence remains within limits of manufacturer's proprietary specifications.



Architect- as-Consumer Re-use: Compressible bedroom, wardrobe, living room shelving and office storage.



1 compressed for living space
opened for bedroom

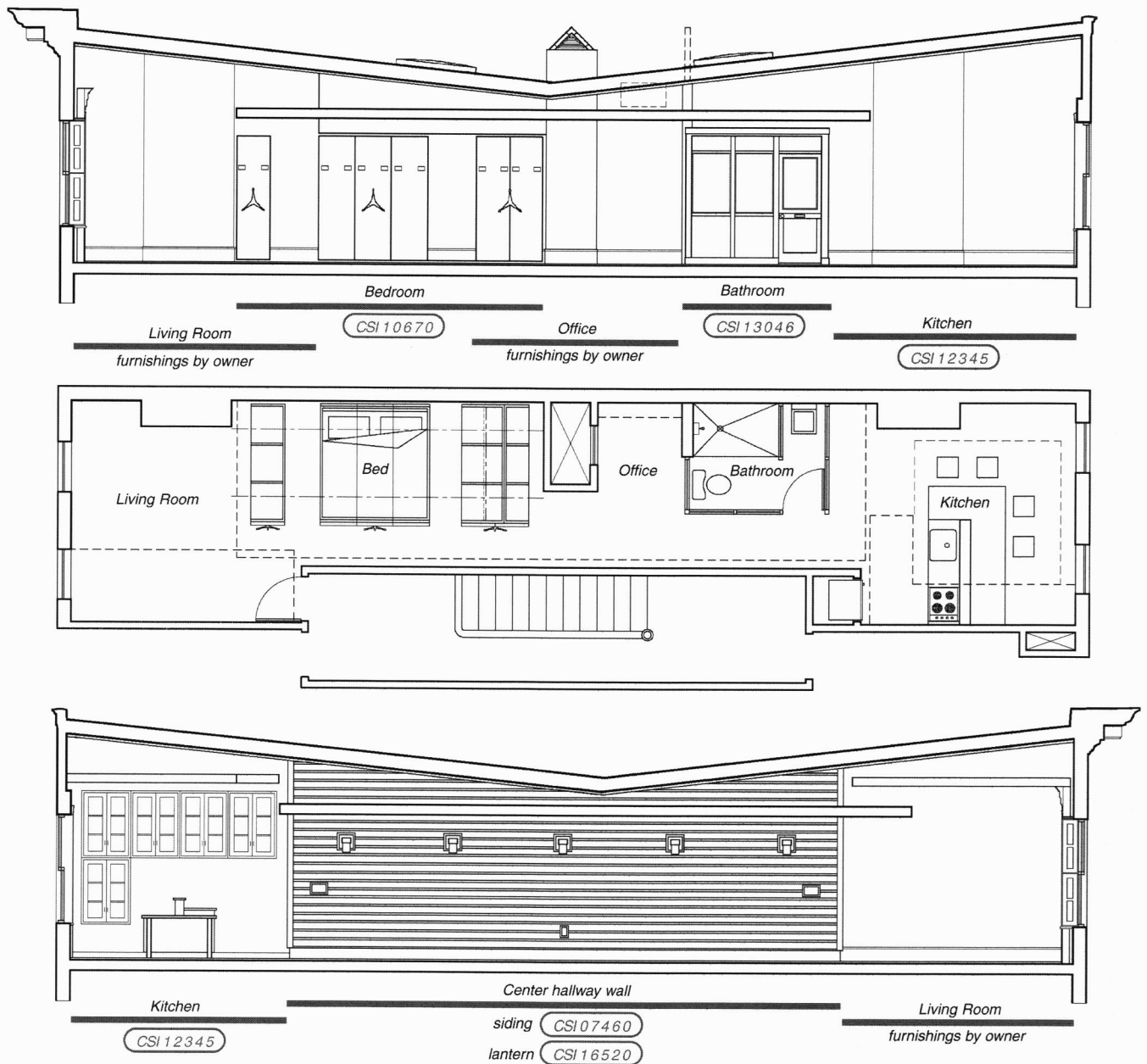


2 opened for office storage (behind)
4 bedroom wardrobe



9. Bedroom solution from CSI 10670.





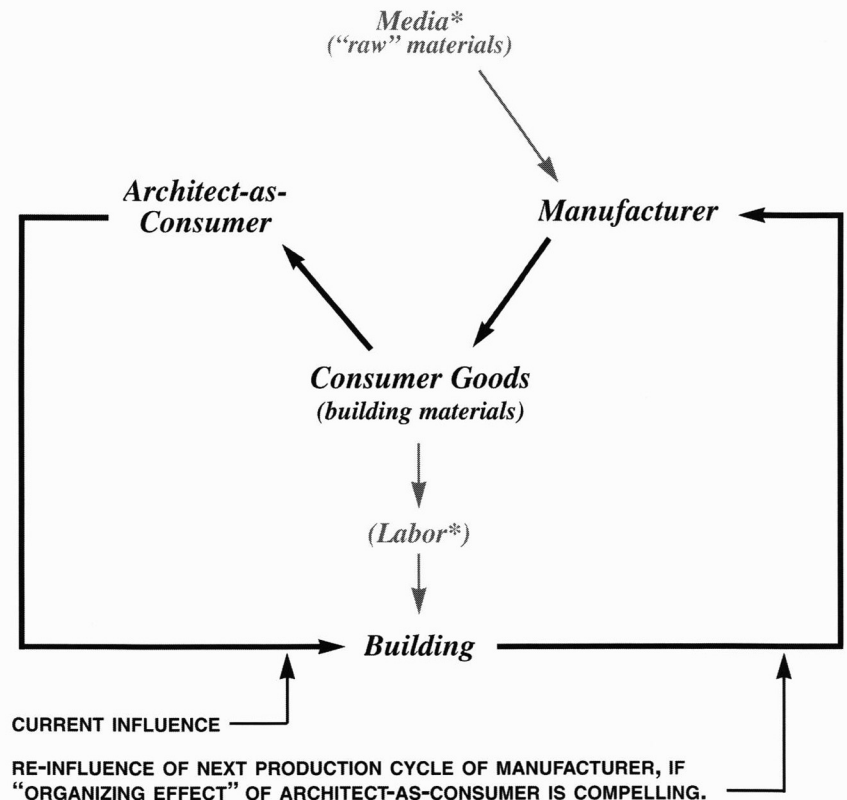
10. From top: North interior elevation; floor plan; south interior elevation.



11. Kitchen ceiling.



12. 11-07-1973: Fort designed and built with brother. Our last project executed with complete design autonomy. (Note: Learned how to hold hammer correctly.)



13. The less heroic organizing effect of shopping: Aesthetic production in the capitalist cycle. (Asterisk = "no interface with the architect.")

But this was not to be. There is one crucial reason why. *There is no pre-existing industry-standard almond.* A monochromatic, interproprietary standard color formula is a fiction. Indeed there are proprietary almond colors such as Spacesaver TanTM that actually clash with the almonds of others.

Our final decision was not monochromatic and not sublime. We coordinated whatever colors and finishes appeared to be complimentary among the standard choices offered for the specific products we had already selected for purely functional reasons.⁵

We accept both form and function as the already-prepared and individually offered solutions of others upon which we make little or no modification (Figure 12). Since we design "selections," not the objects themselves, we have discovered the advantages of intentionally breaking the formal from the functional. Now functional selection (product usefulness to design need) can be independent, at a moment not parallel with formal selection (product proportion/color/finish). When evaluating only function, we can discover

alternative solutions to programmatic needs. When evaluating only formal criteria, we can develop various aesthetic alternatives without altering the successful prechoice of the functional objects. Yet one is not obliged to choose the functional coordination before the formal.⁶

Are We Autonomous? If You Have to Ask, The Answer Is "No." On the "Organizing Effect" of Shopping⁷

The architect as consumer is transformed from a supplier of aesthetic products into a shopper among the questionable products of common manufacture (Figure 13). But this position is no more marginalizing than the present state. The relevant impasse is not between avoiding cooption (the popular reproduction of a unique cultural act) and producing meaningful architecture, but between a marginalized profession and its culture's methods and materials of construction. Architects traditionally position the cultural act of architecture "outside" the massive structures of commodity capital.

They are forced into a position “against” cooption; it is demanded that they somehow hold a style of meaningful architecture out and away from the death blow of cooption. A meaningful style is expected to have a unique formal quality of the sort that popular reproduction would disarm and damage. This has been the problem of the avant-garde. But there can no longer be resistance to the connection between these two factors: a meaningful style of cultural production and its relation to cooption.⁸

Manufacturers do not acknowledge cooption as a problem in the same way architects do. Manufacturers coopt the freely circulating aesthetic ideas of others in order to produce salable goods. They then patent and protect the territory in which they can make a profit. This requirement to develop (or coopt) innovations, stake out profitable territory, and then protect it from cooption once again, is the double-edged formula for success in consumer culture. The weapon of choice in this battle goes by the name *Expertise*—objective, subjective, perceived, marketed, or “real” expertise.

The architect as consumer is the *expert user of things*. While external forces will coopt anything salable in that use of things, this is not a problem. They do not coopt a maintained expertise, only a physical style or design, necessarily transcended by the creative consumer’s next round of shopping. Herein lies the beginning of a clarification, that of a interchangeability between the consumer and the producer, for both can elevate a claim to expert status.⁹

Acknowledgments

Project team: Larry Sassi, Matthew Wasylciw, Akiko Takenaka, Madeline S. O’Brien.

Photography: © Dan Redmond, 1997.

Notes

1. The use of a product outside its categorization (i.e., residential, commercial, industrial) prescribed by its producers is discouraged by its producers. This is true regardless of the fact that prescribed categorization may have no practical claims on a product’s intrinsic materiality or usefulness. The source of this observation is both experiential and theoretical. On the experiential level the source is professional practice. To specify a building product outside the conventions of its intended use deters the manufacturer’s desire and ability to sell and guarantee the product. So, in the case of the project illustrated here, our *de-contextualization* strategy was *not to show* the plumbing fixtures to be located within the bathroom enclosure, since they fall outside the usual scope of *CSI 13046* work and would have raised the idea of an unusual context, all of which would deter *CSI 13046* manufacturers from taking the project seriously. On the theoretical level, *prescribed categorization* in manufactured production is an indication of the social construction of the conventions of science and technology. It is theoretically analogous to Thomas Kuhn’s description of the social conventions of what he calls normal science. The use of manufactured building products outside their prescribed categorization is analogous to Kuhn’s critical science. See: Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

A critical science may effect the working presumptions of the normal science if its model, hypothesis, or promise of discoveries are deemed so compelling. Such compulsion engenders a paradigm shift to occur. In this theoretical analogy, the paradigm shift occurs in architecture when the use of manufactured building products outside their prescribed categorization re-influences the next production cycle of the manufactured product. In the case of both science and architecture, a mere argument against the socially constructed conventions of the normal science/manufacture is not itself compelling enough to engender change. Nor is it possible to dislodge the normal practitioners and perform their practices differently with the same tools. An actual demonstration of some form of an alternative is required. In both science and architecture, to create an actual demonstration, tactics and strategies may occur that appear ethically suspect from within normal practices (i.e., unsanctioned experimentation in science, and our deceptive method of decontextualizing our real product needs from the manufacturer in architecture). These suspect acts are necessary for the required demonstration to occur, so that a displacement of the normal takes place.

2. There is much disingenuous activity not being concealed in this paragraph that is for us a reflection of the unwholesomeness of the oppressive mode in which architectural building products have been categorized. For example, we hide behind the facade of the prefix “Dr.” with its connotations of expertise that alone can make the manufacturer comfortable with us as a selling opportunity, whereas as the generalist architect we could not make them comfortable. We gratuitously ape the manufacturers’ views of their own production so we can more smoothly get what we want them to produce. We surreptitiously delete unusual information (such as the plumbing in the bathroom) from the subset of plans we use to communicate with manufacturers. We rename the bathroom by its euphemism: the “office,” for the double pleasure of its quality as an inside joke not known to the manufacturers and for its ability as a more credible name to elicit their serious bids and shop drawings. Such completely unnecessary jokes, and all these deceptive activities, acknowledge our right as the subordinate class (the small architectural firm) to make something of what is made of us, our right to parody and to make useful, in any way possible, a dominant mode of production that was never of our choosing. Such disingenuousness and repressed anger in subcultural styles of aesthetic production are discussed in Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979), pp. 130–140. Also see: Michel deCerteau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1984).

3. This exemplifies the organizing effect of the architect’s re-influence of manufacture shown in Figure 13.

4. Alongside the perennial almond color, new sensibilities in high design add to the manufacturer’s standard color palette. More recent standard colors dusty rose and sky blue accompany the successful postmodern classicism of the 1970s–’80s. In the mid-1980s deconstructivist design added matte black, bright red, and polished chrome. In the 1990s brushed aluminum finishes, complemented by green-toned glass, became a standard manufacturers’ offering as a result of the neomodernists’ great volume of custom-designed window walls using brushed aluminum mullions and solar glass.

5. We teach ourselves to like what we see. In the Warholian sense we “like” what we are offered as a choice. Of course, an orchestration of only the clashing almond colors could have been undertaken, for at least the polemical effect of making the required “demonstration” mentioned in Endnote 1. But such discordant colors would bring upon this project an ugliness we were admittedly not prepared to endure.

See Michel deCerteau, "Making Do: Use and Tactics" in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1984), pp. 29–42.

6. "It is not the nomad that defines this constellation of characteristics; it is the constellation that defines the nomad. . . ." Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), p. 423.

7. "Organizing effect" is an aesthetic method and concept. It was used by Walter Benjamin to describe the value of the plays of Bertolt Brecht in: Walter Benjamin, "The Artist as Producer," Peter Demetz, in *Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), pp. 220–238. I first translated this aesthetic method and concept into a useful method of architectural production in my own writing. See James P. O'Brien, "From Industrial to Consumer Culture: On Material Use in

Art and Architecture," unpublished master's thesis, New Jersey Institute of Technology, 1995.

8. This problem of cultural production having no critical distance from the forces of capital and commodification is acknowledged but not at all resolved by Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979), p. 130, and Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 87. The condition is described most clearly in Thomas Frank, "Why Johnny Can't Dissent," ed. Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland, in *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 31–45.

9. In Figure 13 we make relevant the fundamental question posed by Walter Benjamin in "The Author as Producer": What is the position of the work within the relations of production of its time? The

question applies today not only to the making of a building but to its life thereafter, to the distribution, consumption, cooption, and reuse (in parts and whole) of its innovations and aesthetics. Most important is that the cooption of publicized, innovative aesthetics not leave the architect feeling impotent to innovate next time (in the next building). The cooption of one's prior artistic production is a process understood in this diagram, but not often taken into account in preserving the longevity of the creative consumer's ability to produce. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "7000 B.C.: Apparatus of Capture" in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), pp. 424–473.