







Mary Ellen Carroll, *prototype 180*, 1999—ongoing. Architectural model made by Patrick Sinnott emulating the rotation of 6513 Sharpview Drive, 122 × 61 × 46cm. Installation view, 'Mary Ellen Carroll: *prototype 180*', Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery, Columbia University, New York, 2011. Photograph: James Ewing

Previous spread: *prototype 180*, 1999—ongoing. View of 6513 Sharpview Drive, Sharpstown, Houston, Texas from the street, June 2013. Photograph: EJ Farhood. Unless otherwise noted, all images courtesy MEC, design studios

This Is Not About a Building: Mary Ellen Carroll's *prototype 180*

— Gavin Kroeber

Most of the writing on Mary Ellen Carroll's *prototype 180* (1999—ongoing) starts with the building: a dilapidated one-storey home located in Sharpstown, one of the first suburbs to spring up in Houston, Texas, after mass-market air conditioning transformed the Bayou City's prospects for development. One takes recourse to the building because its physicality and plain availability to perception offer a concrete approach to the complex tapestry of artistic work that surrounds and produces it. This, at least, was how I tried to explain to a companion just why we were speeding along raised freeways to a neighbourhood he had never heard of: 'She rotated a suburban home 180 degrees — the house and the property — so the back yard is now in the front and the front door is in the back.'

But this might not be the right place to start. In emphasising the building, it is easy to misrepresent Carroll's work as a kind of sculpture, when in fact it is a

of the seemingly unitary physical gesture that has become the project's emblem — not only in order to highlight its many processual components, but, moreover, to attend to the artist's particular strategies for the coordination of that projective multiplicity. Indeed, some of the most urgent questions that *prototype* raises, in terms of both its interpretation and its future, emerge precisely when we turn our attention beyond the physical intervention of the building. Leaving my friend and I, then, before we arrive at 6513 Sharpview Drive, I would like to steer towards alternate — if more diffuse — departure points.

Houstonian Speech Acts

While the building was rotated in 2010, *prototype 180* was initiated in 1999 and is still developing, with larger renovations and programmatic activations of the architecture anticipated for the coming years. This is to say, long before a specific building had even been selected for rotation, the work existed in words, and even now it is to a great degree words that represent it to its publics. *prototype 180*'s conceptual tenets and theoretical propositions are mapped out by a series of pronouncements that Carroll regularly deploys in interviews and writings: well-rehearsed rhetorical flourishes ripe for press dissemination. Conjuring an aura of radical potential, these modular phrases are continually being coupled, uncoupled and recombined as leitmotifs in the larger composition. Most prominent among these performative speech acts are the claims that Houston selected itself as the site for *prototype*,¹ that the work '[makes] architecture perform as a work of art'²

Gavin Kroeber examines the multiple facets of Mary Ellen Carroll's *prototype 180* (1999—ongoing), framing her intervention in the urban imaginary of Houston, Texas within a Lefebvrian analysis of planning as a form of ideological representation.

plinth: a material support for the artist's engagement with a set of key questions, and one of many acts undertaken to elaborate a conceptual foundation. This sometimes confoundingly multifaceted work begs the building's disarticulation, the unpacking

1 See Mary Ellen Carroll's statement that 'the city essentially self-selected itself as the site for *prototype 180*', in M.E. Carroll, '500 Words', *Artforum.com* [online magazine], 27 July 2009, available at <http://www.artforum.com/words/id=23335> (last accessed on 11 May 2013). Carroll has similarly explained that the site 'chose itself because of the land-use policy'. Conversation with the artist, 15 May 2013.

2 See, for example, Carroll's statement that 'making architecture perform as a work of art is the conceptual framework for *prototype 180*', in Toby Kamps (ed.), *No Zoning: Artists Engage Houston* (exh. cat.), Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2009, p.54. Carroll has similarly described the project's fundamental question as 'what would be a work that would make architecture perform — but as a work of art, and where the place or the conditions have to do with some kind of unique policy'. Conversation with the artist, *op. cit.*

and, more specifically, that it 'treats policy as a readymade'.³

Such statements draw attention to context. Houston is the only major US city without zoning laws and it is a well-documented reality that the city's urban-planning policies are relatively toothless. In the past hundred years — a period in which the city grew explosively into the fourth largest in the US — Houston has seen the failure and dissolution of four planning commissions and the creation of a fifth that, while it has survived, has been consistently underfunded. In this same time, periodic efforts have been made to vote in zoning ordinances, but, under assault from coalitions of business and real estate interests, they have all been defeated at the ballot box.⁴ The result has been the ascendancy of privatised planning. The flip side of a policy of no policy is an array of private mechanisms that limit property use: deed restrictions, master plans and legal associations that condition Houston's residential and commercial landscapes.⁵

It is not just the physical city that has been assembled around this carefully cultivated regulatory void. Houston's triumphant self-image as a free-enterprise paradise is built around an equation of planning and zoning with the violation of property rights, and the principled rejection of urban-planning policies has become valorised in the popular imagination.⁶ In 1972 the real-estate lawyer Bernard H. Siegan published *Land Use Without Zoning*, which celebrated Houston as a model for urbanism, and in the years since many others have applauded the city's policies (or lack thereof). Right-wing think tanks and national newspapers have so succeeded in

publicising the city's special status that the local press now seems to be continually forced to debunk the exaggerated notion that Houston has no planning policy *at all*.⁷ This backdrop — of entrenched neoliberalism and its vocal celebration as a matter of civic identity — is the field in which the figure of Carroll's project is meant to be seen.

It is here that we can return to the claims that *prototype* '[makes] architecture perform as a work of art' and that it 'treats policy as a readymade'. These phrases insist that the physical intervention in Sharpstown ports urban policy into the realm of art, separating it via Duchampian protocols from its prevalent uses in order to consider its other, non-normative capacities. As we have seen, however, in Houston the (permissive) official urban policy cannot be considered apart from the (restrictive and pervasive) private 'regulation' it engenders. The weak

The building's rotation, then, is not so much a transformation that proves what one can get away with under a no-zoning policy regime as much as an intentional misuse of the limited and relatively predictable forms of urban life that Houston's privatised regime permits.

institution of the planning commission is conjoined to the ideologies and private development practices that condition the city's urban space and the ways life is lived within it, and it is *all of this* — a web of mutually influential concepts and practices

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- 3 Carroll has stated that 'policy is a kind of readymade material'. Quoted in Joyce Wadler, 'In Texas, an Artist Plans to Rotate a House 180 Degrees', *The New York Times*, 6 October 2010, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/07/garden/07qna.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=mary%20ellen%20carroll&st=cse& (last accessed on 11 May 2013). Elsewhere she has claimed to be 'treating policy as a readymade'. Quoted in José Esparza, 'prototype 180 by Mary Ellen Carroll', *Domus*, 8 March 2011, available at <http://www.domusweb.it/en/news/prototype-180-by-mary-ellen-carroll/> (last accessed on 11 May 2013).
 - 4 See Joe R. Feagin, *Free Enterprise City: Houston in Political-Economic Perspective*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988; and Stephen Fox, 'Planning in Houston: A Historic Overview', in Barrie Scardino, William F. Stern and Bruce C. Webb (ed.), *Ephemeral City: Cite Looks at Houston*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003, pp. 34–39.
 - 5 See J.R. Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*, *op. cit.*, pp. 149–72.
 - 6 See *ibid.*, p. 158; B.C. Webb, 'Introduction', in B. Scardino et al. (ed.), *Ephemeral City*, *op. cit.*, p. 5; and Cameron Armstrong, 'Un-Zoned: A Memoir' and T. Kamps, 'No Zoning: Artists Engage Houston', both in T. Kamps (ed.), *No Zoning*, *op. cit.*, pp. 32–37 and 158–59 respectively.
 - 7 See *ibid.*, pp. 1 and 172. Examples of fairly recent press coverage include Matthew Yglesias, 'The Myth of Zoning-Free Houston', *Slate.com* [online magazine], 30 November 2011, available at http://www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2011/11/30/the_myth_of_zoning_free_houston.html; and Peter Coy, 'How Houston gets along without zoning', *BusinessWeek* [online magazine], 1 October 2007, available at http://www.businessweek.com/the_thread/hotproperty/archives/2007/10/how_houston_gets_along_without_zoning.html (both last accessed on 11 May 2013). The comments posted in response to both online articles merit attention as well.

To make a conceptual work of art whose process will make architecture perform in this age of the political, and to treat policy as a ready made. The catalytic moment will be the revolution of a structure and its surrounding property 180 degrees. Following the rotation, Everything about the building and its surroundings as a system will be reconsidered and if necessary, redesigned and manufactured as the work of art.

Mary Ellen Carroll
27 Nov 1999-CA

Mary Ellen Carroll,
prototype 180,
1999—ongoing.
Typewritten and
signed proposal,
27 November 1999

bound together by the connective tissue of policy — that Carroll seems to claim as a readymade material. The building's rotation, then, is not so much a *transformation* that proves what one can get away with under a no-zoning policy regime as much as an intentional *misuse* of the limited and relatively predictable forms of urban life that Houston's privatised regime permits — a misuse that, like a bottle rack unexpectedly displayed on a pedestal,⁸ subtly casts the restrictive nature of its normative use into relief.

Denaturalising Spatial Ideology

In *The Urban Revolution* (1970), Henri Lefebvre wrote that 'the *institutional* and *ideological* nature of what is referred to as urbanism has ... taken precedence over its scientific nature', asserting that *urbanisme* (planning, in the French context) had failed in its professed ambition to operate as a pure, unbiased practice, collapsing instead into that amalgam par excellence of ideology and institution: *policy*.⁹ Writing in the waning days of a French Keynesian-Fordist state with a strong legacy of intervention in the built

environment, Lefebvre saw that planning's status as subjective policy (rather than objective science) opened it to a rightist critique that 'subsumes and justifies a neoliberal ideology of "free enterprise", directly or indirectly ... [and] opens a path for the various "private" initiatives of capitalists and capital'.¹⁰ During a recent studio visit, Carroll pointed to this passage in a well-worn copy of the book, saying simply: 'That's Houston.'¹¹ Which is to say, in neoliberal Houston, the conservative critique of urban policy has become the official policy.

Carroll's project is as much Lefebvrian as it is Duchampian, and not only as regards her understanding of policy. *prototype 180*'s attempt to frame Houston's particular realities can be fruitfully positioned within a constellation of urban theory that draws upon Lefebvre's work to address spatial ideology. Lefebvre himself wrote extensively about urban space and ideology but it is probably his inheritors that have most vividly described the braiding of the two. For instance, Kanishka Goonewardena's evocative concept of the 'urban sensorium' addresses the ways ideology is produced, at least in part,

8 *Forté-bouteilles* (*Bottlerack*, 1914) is believed to have been Marcel Duchamp's first unassisted readymade.

9 Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (trans. Robert Bononno), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p.6. Emphasis in the original.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Conversation with the artist, *op. cit.*



through spatial-sensorial sequestration, or the delimitation of one's experience to particular spaces, which produce particular representations of the world.¹² Philosopher Armando Silva offers a somewhat reciprocal theorisation of 'urban imaginaries', or ideas about a city that inflect the uses to which urban space is put.¹³ Both concepts place built space in an indissolubly dialectic relation with its conceptualisation and stress this dyad's double-edged nature: on the one hand, the sensorium and the imaginary have the capacity to regulate ways of living, but on the other, their modification holds out the possibility of denaturalising

spatial-aesthetic representations, thereby making their ideology visible.

prototype 180 is an urban intervention in both the sensorium and the imaginary of Houston, highlighting policy's role as a constituent animating force in both. Destabilising the block's sensorial vocabulary and staging the contradiction between the no-zoning regime's restrictive reality and its discourse of imagined liberty, the work hints at the interconnected possibilities of other sensoria and other imaginaries. In this way, *prototype* embodies a second critique of *urbanisme* that Lefebvre identified — a 'critique from the left, frequently overlooked'.¹⁴ Like the

Mary Ellen Carroll,
prototype 180,
1999—ongoing.
View of the rotation
of the building,
10 October 2012.
Photograph:
Kenny Trice

12 In 'The Urban Sensorium: Space, Ideology and the Aestheticisation of Politics', Kanishka Goonewardena, drawing on the work of both Louis Althusser and Lefebvre, writes that 'the relationship between the production of space and the production of ideology ... is a mediate relationship'. Asserting that 'to be effective, ideology must also be affective, that is to say *aesthetic*, if we recall what this key concept first designated as its object: *the realm of the senses*', Goonewardena defines 'the space of the city as a vital ingredient and determinant of our "sensate life"'. He turns to Lefebvre then 'as a student above all of *mediation*', and in particular to his insights regarding the role of the urban in mediating ideology. K. Goonewardena, 'The Urban Sensorium: Space, Ideology and the Aestheticisation of Politics', *Antipode*, vol. 37, issue 1, January 2005, pp.46—71.

13 Armando Silva's theory is grounded in the somewhat confounding Lefebvrian assertion, also expressed in *The Urban Revolution*, that 'society has become completely urbanised' and that urbanisation as a process is distinct from the city as a socially constructed category. Moving on from this foundation, Silva insists that the idea of the city nonetheless remains a potent mechanism by which people — even people that may not inhabit the same bounded space — 'name, evoke and make a city ... the imagined city ... that is being constructed over the blight of physical urbanisers'. Describing these 'urban imaginaries' as 'invented forms that rival, interrogate and converse with the material forms of the architects, designers and planners', Silva is particularly focused on representational practices and the ways they produce models for behaviour in urban space. Because they illuminate 'how we construct, out of our desires and sensitivities, collective ways of being, living, inhabiting and abandoning our cities', Silva argues that these imaginaries allow us to 'catch a glimpse of ... how the inhabitants of a city ... invent forms of urban life in order to create their city as an aesthetic and political act'. See A. Silva, 'Imaginaries' in A. Silva (ed.), *Urban Imaginaries from Latin America*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2003, pp.22—45.

14 See H. Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p.6.



Mary Ellen Carroll, *prototype 180*, 1999—ongoing. Land-use policy discussion with the mayoral candidates, held at the exhibition 'No Zoning: Artists Engage Houston', Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 2009. Photograph: Kenny Trice

rightist critique it provides an alternative to, this second critique was aimed forty years ago at policies of statist intervention, but in contemporary Houston it might now be understood to directly confront that first critique, which has usurped and hollowed out the place of public policy. This second critique, writes Lefebvre, 'attempts to open a path to the possible, to explore and delineate a landscape that is not merely part of the "real", the accomplished, occupied by existing social, political and economic forces. It is a *utopian* critique because it steps back from the real without, however, losing sight of it.'¹⁵

'That's *prototype*,' said Carroll.¹⁶

Projective Multiplicity

As a project, *prototype 180* sprawls, encompassing a multiplicity of forms. The building and its discursive representations are privileged mechanisms by which Carroll engages her core interrogations, but there are others she makes use of. The project has entailed extensive research processes, from the original site scouting to analyses of Sharpstown's land use via Geographic Information Systems.

Negotiation has been a compositional element, encompassing donor cultivation, courtship of the property's former owner, regular updates to the neighbourhood's civic association and neighbourly interaction on the block. These activities have generated not only personal encounters and relationships, but also an archive of maps, phone bills, correspondence and transactional paperwork, as well as built artefacts such as the rotating maquette that displayed Carroll's intentions to the neighbourhood, installed in the property's front yard prior to the rotation, or the slatted fence that, in deference to community standards, separates the building from the street while it awaits renovation.

There are also more discrete elements of *prototype*, such as the act of rotation itself, which was framed as a performance and brought a crowd of onlookers to the park abutting the property to watch as the fragile structure was jacked off its slab and onto a massive truck, the foundation collapsing at one dramatic point.¹⁷ There have also been numerous temporary events, from occasional tours that activate the site

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.6—7.

¹⁶ Conversation with the artist, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ The rotation of the building took place on 11 November 2010. Documentation of the event is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AiCtgvxgnk> (last accessed on 11 May 2013). Details of the collapse were relayed in conversation with the author, *op. cit.*



to courses and exhibitions that take place elsewhere but also fall within the project's web. To represent the work in a group show at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in 2009, Carroll designed a table-cum-stage at the scale of the building's kitchen floor and convened a public dialogue around it between mayoral candidates on the subject of land use.¹⁸ Likewise, she has produced bodies of work for sale and dissemination, such as photographs of the site, which extend *prototype's* boundaries into the art market.¹⁹

The project also manifests itself online, both through authored gestures such as the video feeds from two on-site security cameras viewable at prototype180.com and through incidental representations on sites such as Google Maps. Indeed, Google's 'map view' of Sharpstown renders *prototype* with almost diagrammatic legibility: amidst the straight lines

of platted parcels a clear serial logic predominates — but for one break in the chain of homes perched along the street's edge. Read formally, not as a map but as an arrangement of shapes, the image distills the project's most fundamental operating principle: variation within limited means, the insistence upon options where there seem to be none. Dependent upon the existence of the building, this second-hand artefact in some ways offers a more direct window onto the heart of the project than the view of the house on site.

The Organisational Impulse
prototype 180 promises to multiply its aspects even further. Alongside her claims regarding what the project is, Carroll offers visions of what it will be, stating in interviews and texts that the house will be retrofit with sustainable features and serve as a model for the rethinking of first-ring suburbs — an ambition that potentially

Google Maps
satellite view of
6513 Sharpview
Drive, Sharpstown,
Houston, Texas,
1 August 2013.
Map data and image
© Google 2013

18 'No Zoning: Artists Engage Houston', Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 9 June—4 October 2009. See T. Kamps (ed.), *No Zoning*, *op. cit.*

19 See, for instance, Carroll's photographs *Prototype 180, 6513 Sharpview Drive, North Façade* and *Prototype 180, 6513 Sharpview Drive, South Façade* (both 2011).

20 Carroll hopes 'to use [*prototype 180*] as a model ... where you have this kind of hub that then goes out into this area and ... things that are being done to the actual model ... can be replicated on some scale throughout'. Conversation with the author, *op. cit.* See also T. Kamps, *No Zoning*, *op. cit.*, p. 54; and 'Artist Mary Ellen Carroll Rotates a Houston, Texas House in a Ground-Shifting Work of Conceptual Art that Will Make Architecture Perform' [press release], available at http://www.prototype180.com/docs/press_release_11_11.pdf (last accessed on 11 May 2013).

includes the renovation of other homes throughout Sharpstown.²⁰ The artist anticipates the building's activation by a yet-to-be-determined public programme, hints of which may be read in the on-site and off-site events already discussed.²¹ Both of these potential trajectories — towards extensive renovation work and dense programming — suggest that *prototype*'s culminating form could be that of an organisation, or as Carroll puts it, 'an institute that can run and study itself — and its context'.²²

This impulse towards organisational form seems deeply entangled with the artist's expressed desire for *prototype* to act as a 'protagonist' — as 'the performer in the narrative' or as 'its own entity'.²³ Carroll's aspirational protagonist is, as the term suggests, perceived as a character or an agent, possessed of self-determination and the ability to produce effects in the world: 'it's the performer in that area [Sharpstown]', she says, adding anthropomorphically that 'what it does and what it's seeing ... needs to have its own autonomy.'²⁴ The assimilation of public programmes or renovation activities into the project would serve this end, establishing a consistent pattern of encounters within the locality, regularly confirming the protagonist's presence and potency. Its autonomy, however, is not just a matter of agency, but also independence — it is not beholden to the imperatives of others. Carroll stresses that she wants *prototype* 'to be as open and inclusive as possible' and, as such, that it needs 'to be friends to all and not ... aligned with an institution, [which] limits who can be involved'.²⁵ Carroll's protagonist is

neither subsumed in a larger institution nor alienated in its independence from the resources it requires to affect the world.

Here we encounter an ideal that has fuelled and haunted four decades of art practice. From the 'alternative arts movement'²⁶ of the 1970s and 80s to more recent waves of 'mockstitutions'²⁷ and 'institutions by artists',²⁸ new organisations have time and again been assembled in order to negotiate questions of agency within established power systems — and Carroll's impulse, even if left unfulfilled, positions her project within this genealogy of alter-institutional practice. Pregnant with possibility as much as indeterminacy, her public evocations of an organisational *prototype* may well be the defining element of the project at this moment in its evolution. Julie Ault has written that 'the notion of alternative has been confined to what is shown, discussed and publicised ... alternative space is considered to be a venue rather than a medium or an end in itself'.²⁹ Presenting us with an organisational impulse unadorned by specific programming — an empty venue, as it were — Carroll invites us to consider the organisational form as a medium in itself, and moreover what its capacities might be.

This invitation could be taken up by positioning Carroll's project in relation to any number of organisational art practices — historic and contemporary — but, in light of her protagonistic ambitions and *prototype*'s physical site, it is perhaps most fruitful to compare it to a constellation of other US artworks that have developed organisational forms around neighbourhood-scale architectural

21 Carroll has said that the house 'will be retrofitted and rehabilitated to become an occupied structure that will become an institute for the study of considered urbanism'. M.E. Carroll, '500 Words', *op. cit.* See also M.E. Carroll, 'prototype 180', available at <http://www.prototype180.com> (last accessed on 11 May 2013).

22 Conversation with the artist, *op. cit.*

23 See Carroll's statement that 'the house becomes the protagonist in the narrative', in T. Kamps, *No Zoning*, *op. cit.*, p.54. The artist has likewise stated that the 'structure is the protagonist, it's the performer in the narrative' and that it is 'its own entity, which is what it really needed to be'. Conversation with the author, *op. cit.*

24 *Ibid.* Carroll deploys other anthropomorphisms, such as the use of the two webcams mentioned earlier to suggest eyes and thereby to represent a perspective particular to the house-as-entity. Such measures promote the ascription of a certain subjectivity to the project, as seen, for example, in the following catalogue entry: 'The footage from these cameras is from the house's point of view and will be streamed through the internet ... neighbours will be able to talk back to *prototype 180* through a Wi-Fi cloud that will be installed over the neighbourhood.' T. Kamps, *No Zoning*, *op. cit.*, p.54.

25 Conversation with the artist, *op. cit.*

26 See Julie Ault (ed.), *Alternative Art New York, 1965—1985*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

27 See Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, London and New York: Pluto Press, 2011, pp.152—85.

28 See Jeff Khonsary and Kristina Lee Podesva, *Institutions by Artists: Volume One*, Vancouver: Filip Editions, 2012.

29 J. Ault, 'Of Several Minds Over Time', in Steven Rand (ed.), *Playing by the Rules: Alternative Thinking/Alternative Spaces*, New York: apexart, 2010, p.99.

interventions.³⁰ These include Rick Lowe's *Project Row Houses* (1993–ongoing), also in Houston, best known for its titular shotgun-style houses, which have been renovated and reprogrammed as exhibition spaces, residency spaces and homes for young mothers; Design 99's *Power House* (2008–ongoing), an off-the-grid house in Detroit that serves as a laboratory for sustainable design and a community space; and Theaster Gates's *Dorchester Projects* (2009–ongoing), which involves the renovation of derelict houses in Chicago's South Side and their reactivation through public programmes.

Carroll complicates any such comparison, however, insisting that *prototype*'s 'surrounding context and its process not be considered as urban renewal', and that it be located in a neighbourhood that is 'not calling attention to itself either socio-economically or typologically'.³¹ Framing this differentiation within Miwon Kwon's analysis of site-specificity,³² we can see that while the 'phenomenological/experiential' sites engaged on both sides of this comparison are similar (older residential buildings), Carroll's framing distinguishes *prototype* in terms of both the 'social/institutional' paradigm of site (favouring a more-or-less unexceptional 'diverse, middle-class neighbourhood'³³ over what might be considered an economically devastated community) and the 'discursive' paradigm (engaging debates around urban policy and sustainability rather than around theories and methods of 'renewal'). While *prototype* stemmed from a discursive site,

providing the criteria by which a location would 'select itself', the narratives of the other works in question develop first from place: a specific building offers certain assets to a certain community, and by artistically developing the interrelation of these two sites the project eventually opens onto larger discursive debates about urban renewal and community development.

This difference is important and would merit a deeper comparative study,³⁴ but here I am interested in teasing out what these projects might have in common: namely the way they seize upon organisational form's capacity (as a medium, perhaps, after Ault) to produce durational relationships between the multiplicity of sites at play – phenomenological, social and discursive. Much of the discussion of Kwon's writing has focused on the rising centrality of 'discursive' sites in an art world of increasingly nomadic artists who engage locational sites only fleetingly and incidentally, through the mediation of inviting institutions. These works, however, suggest the organisational medium's capacity to produce countervailing, long-term interrelations between physical and discursive sites, and moreover remind us that artists' ventures into organisational form may at times be inspired by this possibility, rather than any desire to produce a brand or entity, or even to critique established institutions.

For a project like *prototype 180* – composed of multiple elements engaging multiple sites – how we understand the

30 For example, other comparisons could be made with the alternative arts movement and the contested legacy of its counter-institutional aspirations. Regarding the movement's ambitions and its perceived failure to reach them, see Arlene Goldbard, 'When (Art) Worlds Collide: Institutionalizing the Alternatives', in J. Ault (ed.), *Alternative Art New York*, *op. cit.*, pp.183–200. *prototype* could also be framed within an emergent constellation of US organisations, centres and initiatives that operate discursively at the confluence of art and urbanism, such as Creative Time's 2013 Summit 'Art, Place and Dislocation in the Twenty-first Century City', Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, New York University, New York, 25–26 October 2013; Southern Methodist University's 'Forum for Art and Urban Engagement', Dallas; and University of California Berkeley's 'Global Urban Humanities' initiative (to name only a few).

31 M.E. Carroll, '500 Words', *op. cit.* The affirmation of renewal as a core activity of the other three projects is evident in their respective mission statements: Row House Community Development Corporation, established in 2003 as an outgrowth of *Project Row Houses*, seeks to address 'housing and related community and economic development needs by providing low-income rental housing'; Power House Productions, the non-profit that runs *Power House* as well as other art-design projects in its neighbourhood, aims 'to develop and implement creative neighbourhood stabilisation strategies to revitalise and inspire the community'; and Gates's Rebuild Foundation, which oversees *Dorchester Projects* and other works nationally, claims to 'help neighbourhoods thrive through culture-driven redevelopment by activating abandoned spaces with arts and cultural programming'. See 'About Project Row Houses' (<http://projectrowhouses.org/about>), 'info: PHP' (www.powerhouseproductions.org/index.php?updates/info-statements) and 'Rebuild Foundation' (<http://rebuild-foundation.org>) (all last accessed on 11 May 2013).

32 See Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2002, pp.3 and 11–31.

33 M.E. Carroll, '500 Words', *op. cit.*

34 Such an exercise would likely yield important ways of differentiating not only Carroll's work, but of productively disaggregating all the works in question.



Mary Ellen Carroll,
prototype 180,
1999—ongoing.
Renderings by
Adam Bandler of
the future building

work has everything to do with which part of it we're looking at (is it the building? the rotation? the research? the events? the policy?). This is to say that while coordinating diverse sites or elements poses a challenge, there is also the challenge of representing them. Might organisational form — a medium characterised by duration, frequent programmatic reconfigurations, varied forms of display and multiple ways of engaging publics — have a greater capacity to represent the work as a whole? Approaching organisational form as a representational paradigm — an alternative to the archive or the exhibition and the ways they represent projective multiplicity — we might complement the prevalent tendency to address organisational artworks in terms of institutional critique with the suggestion that it is their medial or representative capacities that maintain their lustre for artists, even at a moment when the art world seems predominantly

sceptical regarding the possibility of oppositional alterativity.³⁵

It is of course hard to submit these ruminations to scrutiny, with *prototype* not yet having moved into its announced future.³⁶ For Carroll's part, she also engages the protagonistic-organisational future of her project speculatively, evaluating it in a spirit that is at once open and hesitant. While her public statements regarding *prototype's* development have been quite confident, she qualifies them conversationally, explaining that '*prototype 180* has not become anything beyond what it is now and my intention may be to change that or not. Time will tell.'³⁷ This is to say that she intends to test her proposals, and that she is not trying to manufacture the conditions for their implementation but rather to simply remain responsive to opportunities — for programming, for retrofitting — that may present themselves more organically. We are watching an artist publicly

35 One recent record of such scepticism (and organisational form's persistence despite it) is J. Khonsary and K.L. Podesva's *Institutions by Artists: Volume One*, which examines the multiplication of 'artist-run associations, collectives, bureaus, clubs, schools, institutes, centres, offices, initiatives, storefronts, troupes and movements' simultaneous to mounting conclusions that 'the bureaucrat-formerly-known-as-artist and the defeat of a particular attempt at self-determination are in evidence'. J. Khonsary and K.L. Podesva, *Institutions by Artists: Volume One, op. cit.*, pp.17—18.

36 One important organisational development is going forward: the property is being transferred from the limited liability corporation Carroll formed for its purchase to a non-profit she is now incorporating — a passage which for Carroll represents a minor reversal of Houston's historic dissolution of public institutions into a privatised landscape. Conversation with the artist, *op. cit.*

37 Email from the artist, 21 June 2013.



decide whether or not the organisation is a medium appropriate to her work. In the meantime, the building waits.

Everydayness

And what is the building while it waits? It is qualitatively everyday. Seen from the street, it does not stand out unless you are looking very closely, and even when examined up close or within the frame of Carroll's photographs there is little sign of the heightened transformative experiences that the word 'art' is most commonly associated with. The quotidian form of the suburban domicile, the anodyne texture of a first-ring neighbourhood, the quiet bureaucracy of public policy, the procedural quality of legal documents and real-estate negotiations — in subject matter and in form, *prototype* can feel subsumed within the everydayness it intervenes in, a slight variation in

Houston's urban background noise. This is, however, a principled commitment, and Carroll's refusal to produce 'a spectacle that really has somewhat more of an impact' stems from her concern that 'if you do something like that there is always the possibility that it becomes more of an amusement'.³⁸ Rather, in *prototype* the everyday is privileged as both the site for critique and the material of intervention.

This is a decision that distances Carroll from what we might call the Lefebvrian tradition. Lefebvre, who wrote extensively on the everyday as a kind of capitalist wasteland, advocated for a practice of resistance organised around the contravening notion of 'moments' — radical experiences that would illuminate or obliterate the everyday.³⁹ This work established the basic contours of a festive-Marxist discourse that has extended from Lefebvre and his interlocutor-rival

Mary Ellen Carroll, *prototype 180*, 1999—ongoing. Photograph taken during a bus tour of the site organised by the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH), 23 May 2009. Courtesy the artist and CAMH

³⁸ Conversation with the artist, *op. cit.*

³⁹ The oppositional Lefebvrian 'moment' is 'dis-alienating in relation to the triviality of everyday life — deep in which it is formed, but from which it emerges — and in relation to the fragmented activities it rises above', and moreover can be compared to 'a festival [that] only makes sense when its brilliance lights up the sad hinterland of everyday dullness'. H. Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life. Volume Two: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday* (1961, trans. John Moore), New York and London: Verso, 2008, pp.347—56.

⁴⁰ For a survey of this tradition, see Claire Tancons, 'Occupy Wall Street: Carnival Against Capital? Carnavalesque as Protest Sensibility', *e-flux journal*, issue 30, December 2011, available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/occupy-wall-street-carnival-against-capital-carnavalesque-as-protest-sensibility> (last accessed on 11 May 2012).

Guy Debord onward to Hakim Bey and arguably even to the Occupy movement.⁴⁰ It is a tradition that has again and again met with a certain impasse, its embrace of heightened experience as a form of radical critique blurring with the values of an expanding experience economy that, in celebrating and selling heightened experiences, not only affirms the fallowness of the everyday but depends upon it and a rising public desire to escape it.⁴¹ If this slippage between theories of radical experience and late capitalism's festive aspect serves to remind us that *Erlebnis* — experience in its momentary, exceptional sense — possesses no inherently emancipatory property, then Carroll's intervention suggests other approaches to the everyday. Eschewing the Lefebvrian tradition, she does not attempt to throw the everyday into starkest relief, but rather clings to established norms as closely as possible while still producing *some* modicum of differentiation. There seems to be no desire to symbolically maximise experiential difference, but merely to establish its conditions of possibility, almost at the limit point of visibility. She reinforces the critique but rejects the tactic, suggesting a kind of exit from this tradition or a reframing of its terms.

Still, her choices produce other defining complexities: namely, *prototype* is hard to see. The project's everyday materiality, nearly invisible subject matter and unrealised organisational existence make its contours difficult to detect, and this is why the building seems an inevitable starting point. It does not serve as a subsuming object, however, absorbing the project's multiplicity in its own self-evidence, but as a discursive object, one that can be mobilised to reveal the project's less conspicuous work. We attend to the building not because it speaks for itself, but because it offers something concrete to *speak of*. It is evidence, a clue that a larger project exists. We turn to the building, ironically, to try to prove that the project is more than the building.

41 Friedrich von Borries summarises the issue: 'Are Nike's urban interventions, and is the situative brand city, not actually a fulfilment of the Situationist dream of an experientially intensive city — albeit not as a social, utopian project, but instead as a consumable simulacrum?' F. von Borries, *Who's Afraid of Niketown?: Nike Urbanism, Branding and the City of Tomorrow*, Rotterdam: Episode Publishers, 2004, p.74.