

## CASA LUCIDA

TWO HOUSES TRANSFORMED  
INTO  
EPHEMERAL  
ART INSTALLATIONS

Patrick Peters



## Alchemy House

Sigmund Freud's definition of the uncanny — "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" — well describes two sites sculpted in Houston's cottage neighborhoods. Their media were not the traditional sculptors' worked surfaces of stone, steel, or bronze, but rather the rupture of the familiar tissues of two ordinary houses. These buildings, each scheduled for demolition at the time of its transformation, drew potency from their ephemerality. They endure in memory through the force of their jarring resonance with the modest neighborhoods that surrounded them, which are themselves threatened by speculation and neglect.

Each of the two sites, *Alchemy House* and *O: A House Installation*, was the project of a team of collaborating artists. The person common to both teams is Dan Havel, a sculptor who moved to Houston from Minneapolis, where he had already been involved in site-specific installations. Through a residency at P.S. 1 in New York he had worked as a crew member with Japanese sculptor Tadashi Kawamata on one of his whirlwindlike installations. Upon arriving in Houston, Havel moved into 5419 Blossom Street, an old house nestled among modest cottages. When his landlord informed him of her intention to demolish the building in three years, Havel proposed using it as the site of an extended installation that would make the familiar disquieting. This work became *Alchemy House*, which ceremonially opened on two occasions before being literally split open to celebrate the vernal equinox in 1994.

Taking alchemical practices as its theme, the installation was composed of five rooms, each of which was dedicated to specific materials and material transformations common among alchemical processes. These were the earth room (the former living room), transformed by soil-coated walls and a living cornfield cut into the floor; the salt and lead room, with live arms and

## ALCHEMY HOUSE

legs hanging mannequin-like through ceiling cut-outs (with participants' bodies hidden above); the mercurial bathroom, whose silver tub was occupied on opening evenings by a bearded female bather; the copper and sulfur room, with walls clad in pennies; and the kitchen, rendered as a cosmic furnace by Houston sculptor Toby Topek.

The final stage of the work was done in collaboration with Kelli Scott Kelley, a Houston painter and performance artist, who wrote the performances, and Amy Ell, a Houston dancer and performance artist, who created alchemical images through her choreography. Like the diurnal movement of the sun, the performances created by Kelley and Ell were closed cycles, infinitely repeatable. They occurred on three ritual occasions marking the autumnal equinox and winter solstice of 1993 and the vernal equinox of 1994.

The final performance on the evening of 18 March 1994 signaled the closing of *Alchemy* with the house's vivisection. Or that was the intention. Three artists, attacking the candle-lit empty house with circular saws, severed the porch and main roof supports, anticipating that the house would ceremonially implode before the streetside audience. However, the network of supports and the sheathing of its platform frame proved too structurally redundant to yield such a dramatic conclusion. Only later was *Alchemy House* fully demolished.

## O House

While Havel worked on *Alchemy House* for two and a half years, work on *O: A House Installation* was, by necessity, compressed into a much shorter period of time. Also, Havel believed that the performances at *Alchemy House* had taken priority over the experience of the sculptor's entropic construction, so in *O House* he sought to avoid that problem.

*O House* opened on 27 April 1995 and existed for less than four weeks. The team of Havel and Houston sculptors Kate Petley and Dean Ruck was permitted to act on the dilapidated cottage because the building's owner planned to clear the site for future development. Behind the boarded-up façade of 707 Lester Street in Houston's West End, surrounded by metal sheds and sagging clapboard cottages, they revealed an unlikely space.

"I had just seen some kivas in New Mexico in the Anasazi ruins," Havel says. "It struck me that they [the Indians] wouldn't build a site without a round room or kiva. I was interested in reconstructing architecture back to its archetype." In an endeavor to reformulate the traditional kiva type, the team's plan called for a circular room — the "O" room — with a spiral entrance so that the center space could be very dark.

The team began by tearing out all interior walls and measuring the void to "find the center," as Havel describes the process. Next they tore out floor boards and found foundation beams that roughly

framed a square almost exactly where their imposed order had centered the now-hollow shell.

In order to introduce unmediated nature into the house, they moved in eight cubic yards of earth, muffling the sounds of footsteps and speech and distancing the visitor from domestic associations. Next, the spiral concrete-on-wire-mesh wall was built from floor to roof structure and colored with acetylene soot. Lastly, they dug and flooded a pit at the center and planned to cut a hole in the roof above the pit.

All the work was done without a city building permit, so it was important to maintain an anonymous façade to avoid detection during the construction process. Therefore they made no changes to the cottage's exterior except to securely board up its doors and windows. The blind exterior led to a significant discovery that changed the original idea.

The opaque walls of the kiva created a very dark central room. In order to get some natural light into the space, the collaborators drilled holes through the roof, unintentionally turning *O House* into a camera obscura. The penetration of sunlight reflected from clouds and the large willow oak behind the house caused the projection of layers of images of various scales and movements into the central space. These were inverted images, not shadows, that appeared on the walls and surfaces in varying sizes and degrees of distortion. In the center of the earthen floor at the middle of the kiva, the pit filled with blue-black water constructed a metaphysical allusion to infinity. The



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O House, dangerous building sign.<sup>4</sup>



installation. It still occupies the site as a silent witness. Havel finds direct correspondence between the ephemerality of these installations and Buddhist sand paintings: they require significant commitment for their conception and execution but, due to their fragility, disappear in a moment.

*O House* lacked such modern amenities as faxes, voicemail, e-mail, cellular phones, video games, and microwaves that tend to reduce direct physical contact with real time and space. Can one find refuge from the "mediascape"<sup>1</sup> by merely stripping off the trappings of consumer culture at one or two sites? Perhaps not. But these two works suggest another possibility: that by embracing profound materiality and by recognizing the accelerated decrepitude common to most postmodern cities,<sup>2</sup> one may seek to resist the supplanting of lived experience by signs. Havel suggests that *O House* lives on because it found ownership among its visitors,<sup>3</sup> including one group that came there on four occasions to meditate until the sun's projections faded to darkness.

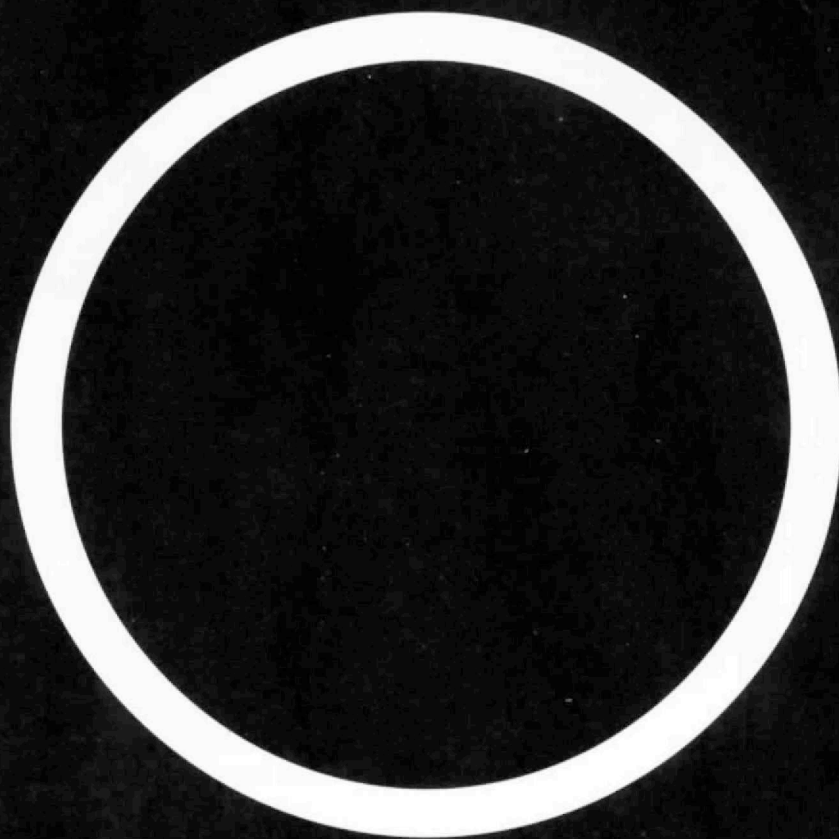
*O House* and *Alchemy House* challenge consumptive desire by their ephemerality. They turn attention away from art as collected objects and toward the individual's autonomous experience and its lasting record of personal memories. Here the anti-sign is a subtraction, an erasure, or more properly a hollowing out of comforting domestic associations, allowing an alternative, even uncanny, reality to filter in. The inside is challenged by the outside, the private by the public, the man-made by the natural, and the tectonic by the geological, creating a crisis of boundaries that dissolves conventional limits.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Christensen, "Mediation and Return: Ambiguous Identity of the City's Edge," in Malcolm Quantrill and Bruce Webb, eds., *Urban Forms, Suburban Dreams* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1993), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Giuliana Bruno, "Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*," *October*, Summer 1987, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Dan Havel, Kate Petley, and Dean Ruck, 23 September 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Because all the interior detritus formed a significant curbside mound, Arthur Cobb, an alert city inspector, cited *O House* as a dangerous building, thereby assuring that the project would live on in the public record: "D/B 2.20.95 A Cobb."



# H O U S E

trio originally had planned to open the front wall to deconstruct the house, but they grew to prefer the mystery held within the dilapidated exterior.

As a means of redressing the ugliness of this little house, the collaborators removed its interior lining of gypsum wallboard. The resulting bared structure crystallized several ideas. Not only did the building's simple framing present an unselfconscious beauty, but the history of the structure was also rendered more vivid. Marks where a fire had destroyed its headers and the level of decay and dissolution to its fabric were now readily apparent.

While *Alchemy House* had resisted destruction as a publicly enacted ritual, *O House* was privately leveled by a backhoe in 23 minutes. The developer who had planned to demolish the existing house was persuaded to retain the large oak tree, the image of which had been projected into the heart of the

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by Havel