Container forms

Deborah W. Pratt

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The College of Fine and Applied Arts in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

CONTAINER FORMS

by

Deborah W. Pratt

May 18, 1985
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Date: May 18, 1985
To M. A. B.

Thank you
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INTRODUCTION

The objective of this thesis project is to investigate the container as a vehicle for sculptural expression inspired by the containment qualities of architectural structures. This paper will investigate the influences behind this objective in relation to the body of work. The paper is composed of three chapters. The first, Architecture as Container, deals specifically with the containment qualities of architecture. The second chapter, The Container Form as Architectural Sculpture, investigates containers as a sculptural expression referring to architecture in form, content, and imagery. Chapter three is a documentation of the thesis work itself. In the reading of this paper it is important to keep in mind that, to the artist, this thesis project is an attempt to come to terms with, if not to summarize, a personal life-long journey.

As a young child the artist had the usual fascination with her immediate world. The moments of discovery and the objects discovered are connected in memory by a simple fascination with containers, such as a bird's nest, a sea shell, and a village fashioned from sticks. Her sketch books were filled with the child's classic concept of the house as well as more intricate drawings of the people and activity that inhabited it. This fascination with containment could also be seen in her choice of literary favorites as a child, especially in the works of Frances Hodgson Burnett. The artist dreamt of discovering a buried key which
would open the hidden door to a forgotten garden environment as Mary did in *The Secret Garden*. Like Sara in *A Little Princess*, she yearned to become an attic dweller. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard speaks of such childhood fantasies. He writes:

It is on the plane of the daydream and not on that of facts that childhood remains alive and poetically useful within us. Through this permanent childhood, we maintain the poetry of the past. To inhabit oneirically the house we were born in means more than to inhabit it in memory; it means living in this house that is gone, the way we used to dream in it.¹

For the artist, this thesis has become a way of maintaining the poetry of the past that Bachelard speaks of. It is an attempt to design, engineer, and build the house that lives in her memory and imagination. Through her thesis work the artist wishes to express the joy of building as well as the mystery, excitement, and pleasure associated with being contained.

I. ARCHITECTURE AS CONTAINER

The artist has been greatly influenced in the choice of imagery and areas of conceptual thinking by her developing interest in architecture. The concept of the building as a container is at the foundation of the body of work presented in this thesis.

Containers have been a vital part of man's everyday existence since the beginning of civilization. The forms and roles containers have assumed are in direct correlation to the functional necessities, religious requirements, and aesthetic tastes of any given culture. Presumably, the first containers were developed as an effort by men and women to live in harmony with their environment and to simplify their existence.

Shelter was, perhaps, the single most important container in terms of survival for primitive man. The construction materials from which dwellings were made were often abundantly found in the immediate environment. Whether woven from reeds or built of mud, the primitive shelter has become a record of a society's ability to utilize its environment in order to co-exist with it. Bernard Rudofsky writes:

There is much to learn from architecture before it became an expert's art. The untutored builders in space and time ... demonstrate an admirable talent for fitting their buildings into the natural surroundings. Instead of trying to conquer nature as we do, they welcome the vagaries of climate and the challenge of topography.  

In the same sense that primitive man was concerned with building into his natural surroundings, the architects of recent years have felt a responsibility toward fitting their buildings into the context of their environment's style and spirit. Building structures not only provide men with the functional aspects of shelter and safety but have become more aesthetically significant. This is largely due to the modern architect's concern with evoking intellectual and emotional responses through the use of symbolism.

The use of the building as a vehicle for communication has made the building, as a container in the functional sense, seem secondary to its potential for storing human experience and emotion. While the exterior architectural structure gives shape to the interior space, it also gives boundary to the human energy that fills it. It becomes a container of life. Environmental elements filter through the structure by way of windows and doors in the form of light, heat, and sound, coloring the space within and providing the inhabitant with an ever-changing inner environment for imagination and memory. Architect Charles Moore writes:

Buildings are capable of living. They can absorb human energy and store it, and when they achieve sufficient concentration of it, they can pay it back. As they live, they speak. . . . Buildings can be seen as inclusive of the life, the shapes, the colors, the recollections of the world around and its inhabitants instead of exclusive and separate.²

Philosopher Gaston Bachelard attaches more poetic, paternal qualities to the house. He writes:

... if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.\(^4\)

Both architect and philosopher see the building as a container. While Moore sees it as a storage container for human energy, Bachelard sees it as a protective shelter for the dreamer and his dreams. It is this combination of metaphor and metaphysics associated with the house that the artist finds so intriguing and has tried to convey through this body of work.

II. THE CONTAINER FORM AS ARCHITECTURAL SCULPTURE

The roots of this thesis lie in the tradition of basket-making. Though the techniques, materials, and structure of the container forms presented in this thesis are by no means traditional, it is important to keep these roots in mind. With the acceptance of crafts into the fine arts mainstream, contemporary basketmakers have begun to apply their knowledge of structure, materials, and techniques in more sculptural and conceptual directions. Patricia Malarcher writes:

The container aspect has taken on a new dimension. It seems that having thoroughly explored form, materials, and structure artists are now interested in probing the implications of an enclosed interior.5

Naturally, this investigation into the aspects of exterior structure and interior space has led some container-makers to refer directly or indirectly to architecture. At the same time, the fine arts has seen a movement toward the production of sculptural works that makes reference to architecture in form, content, and imagery. Finally, on this common ground, any barriers that remain between sculpture in the crafts and in the fine arts are quickly dissolving.

The tradition of container-making is as old as man's desire to improve his quality of life. As far back as man became aware of his need for shelter, he discovered a need for implements in which to carry

and store his food and belongings. From this beginning men and women developed skills in order to improve this craft and soon began to embellish their containers. With the refinement of form, structure, and design an art was born.

In the past thirty years a new appreciation of traditional crafts has taken place. Basket-making has enjoyed a renaissance of its own since the 1960's. Traditional materials, techniques, and forms were revived and relearned; yet, basket-making was revitalized in modern society less out of functional necessity than out of the need for artistic expression. At the point that function became secondary to art, container-making became a form of sculptural expression.

In the realm of fiber sculpture, containers have moved to a prominent position. The technical problems of structure, form, volume, and plasticity have been sufficiently ironed out, freeing the artist to explore imagery. While basketry gave birth to the move toward sculptural expression in this way, artists are now exploring avenues of thought having to do with the concept of containment. Very often, multiple references are made through form and imagery. For example, Diane Sheehan says of her baskets:

My work refers as much to my ideas about the containment qualities of clothing and architecture as it does to the notion of baskets.6

In the material researched about concepts behind contemporary container-making, reference is repeatedly made to architecture as an

inspiration for form, content, and imagery. The connection seems logical when considering that the definition of interior space by an exterior structure is the main factor inherent in both container forms and architectural structures; indeed, the desire to create this relationship is common to both architect and container-maker. Architect Charles Moore says:

The urge to dwell, to inhabit and enhance and protect a piece of the world, to fashion an inside and distinguish it from the outside is one of the basic human drives.\(^7\)

In recent years architecture has enjoyed a heightened awareness on the public level. It has become the inspiration for communication through poetry, art, and philosophy. Attitudes regarding art and architecture have come closer. Painters and sculptors have become concerned with space, place, and built structure.

A number of these sculptors construct structures in which the experience of the space is important while the construction itself is visually exciting. Other sculptors are interested in creating more narrative art, almost as if the sculptures are stage sets for the imagination.

An ever-growing group of sculptors have been concerned solely with producing narrative and experiential works that make reference to architecture through the use of symbols and metaphor. The common bond in this movement is a heightened interest in the investigation of architectural concepts and philosophies.

In the fiber arts, artists are creating works whose impact and intent are similar. Jim Grashow works with narrative imagery. He draws directly from the architectural imagery of the city for his whimsical, walk-in fabric constructions. Each building takes on characteristics of the human face with an underlying structure of plywood. The surface is given life through the use of patterned fabrics. Another fiber artist, Susan Lyman, recently constructed an experiential sculpture of fabric, wood, and reed at Artpark in Lewiston, New York. The sculpture recalls images and experiences relating to passageways and mazes. She is influenced by a background in container-making and writes:

For some time I've been preoccupied with structural concepts, particularly the interior and exterior relationships of container forms. . . . The sculptures also served as self-portraits, as vessels or containers of my ideas of structure. . . . These could be the vessels or miniature dwellings of an imaginary creature or body.8

These are only two examples of a growing movement. Fiber sculpture has matured over the past twenty years, becoming sophisticated in form as well as concept. This is apparent in the area of architectural sculpture. For some, this maturity is undeniably due to beginnings deeply rooted in the tradition of container-making.

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III. THE THESIS

Architecture

The language that this thesis is spoken in is a language of carefully selected symbols. The development of the body of work has been a process of learning the limitations and possibilities of this language. By the time Attic III (Plate 6, page 24) was completed the artist felt she had just begun to handle the language well and could use it to express more refined ideas. Architectural symbols are the most important components of this language. These symbols have been used in this thesis to present a highly personal point of view.

Those familiar with architectural history may recognize symbols that speak about architecture and force immediate connections to certain styles. The grid in the piece House Dream (Plate 3, page 21) is one of the most obvious. Combined with the plexiglass, it relates to windows, skyscrapers, and the Greenhouse style of architecture. The grid structures in Attic I, Attic II, and Attic III (Plates 4-6, pages 22-24) refer more to lattice work, Oriental screens, and the textures of masonry and shingles.

The sculptural form that each piece assumes tends to evoke multiple architectural images and metaphors. The piece House Dream (Plate 3, page 21) is the easiest one to connect metaphorical qualities to. While its curvilinear form resembles a Victorian greenhouse or the
arcade of an ancient village square, it resembles more the form and spirit of Eero Saarinen’s TWA building in New York. Saarinen’s airport terminal evokes the image of a bird ready to take flight and is the expression of the building as a sculptural object. House Dream, on the other hand, is a sculptural expression of the building. Attic II (Plate 5, page 23) is similar. While suggesting the general form of a roof and its interior, it begins to evoke other images unrelated to architecture.

The piece, Attic I (Plate 4, page 22), draws directly from the form of an Oriental pagoda. When the container form is split and spread apart it becomes a roof with an interior attic space. This piece is probably the most straight-forward and direct in terms of metaphor relating to architecture.

The last piece, Attic III, (Plate 6, page 24) symbolizes something special to the artist. It is the most successful piece in terms of what she is trying to say about the architecture of memory and imagination. While the external form suggests a pagoda on its vertical side, the horizontal extension makes reference to the roofline of a cathedral or a Victorian house. However, it is the interior that evokes the most symbolic response. This is mainly because it is the easiest piece to experience physically. For the artist, it contains the charm of the nooks and crannies of Grandmother’s attic or the hayloft of Grandfather Joe’s barn. The images activate nostalgic recollections, such as the reflection of light off of a certain corner of a certain room at a particular time of the day. It is a memory full of a sense of comfort and familiar smells.

The architectural symbols and elements found in the body of work come from a storehouse of images that has taken the artist a lifetime to
accumulate. The work is a melting pot of aesthetic experience. This thesis is more about the architecture of memory and past experience than about any particular style or philosophy. Ironically, this ideal is a post-modern ideal. The artist can relate her work to post-modern trends such as eclecticism and allusionism. However, the artist hesitates to limit herself with labels. This body of work should be seen as a collection of architecturally related images symbolizing a personal, life-long journey.

**Containment**

The concept of containment is an essential link in the chain of ideas and processes that have led to this thesis. Container-making has been a joyful experience for the artist. The joy lies in the building process. To build the structure of a basket is much the same as to build a house. The structure grows before the builder's eyes and is given life through the builder's hands. It is the space contained by the structure that becomes the heart and soul. The interior space becomes a separate world colored by the structure itself. In this thesis it has been the artist's wish to express the mystery and excitement associated with this interior space.

It has been important in the creation of the container forms in this thesis that the interior space be a space that could be experienced physically as well as through the imagination. This objective has not been totally achieved in any of the thesis pieces, though some come closer than others.
The thesis began with House Dream (Plate 3, page 21), the largest of the thesis pieces. House Dream was an experimental piece through every step of the process including installation in the gallery. The piece was originally designed to be experienced from the interior as well as the exterior. However, the weight of the piece posed serious problems for the artist and forced some major design changes affecting structure and form. These changes eliminated the possibility of viewing the piece from the interior. Instead, the sculpture became an awesome, even intimidating, presence. The viewer could peer carefully through the three archways of the piece but dared not enter due to the projecting ends of the plexiglass. The space contained became a space which could only be inhabited by light.

The limitations of time contributed to the artist’s decision for the last three pieces to be small in scale. She was full of ideas that needed to be worked through quickly. Attic I (Plate 4, page 22) was the smallest of the three pieces. Though it was suspended in a way that could allow the viewer to see the interior as well as the exterior, it was not large enough to allow the viewer to physically experience the interior. In a sense, it was viewed as a miniature would be; the viewer could place himself comfortably inside only through fantasy and imagination.

Attic II (Plate 5, page 23) was more satisfying as an experiential piece. Its wide, arch-like form allowed easy passage beneath. In fact, the best position for viewing the details of the piece was from the interior.

By the time Attic III (Plate 6, page 24) was begun the artist felt comfortable enough with her materials to expand the scale. She intended
this piece to be viewed from the outside as a small building, while the interior would conform to the viewer's body, allowing for a feeling of shelter. It was not a piece to be passed quickly under as Attic II (Plate 5, page 23) was. It was intended to be a space for contemplation.

Some of the container forms in this thesis have touched upon the artist's ideas about containment. Others have conveyed unintended messages of their own. This thesis has served as a process for discovering solutions and making new resolutions to fulfill experiential objectives. It is the beginning of stronger and more cohesive statements to come.

**Technology**

It has been important to the artist throughout this thesis to make statements about the technological era she lives in. She has used the loom for the production of container forms, a process that has traditionally been done by hand. The materials used are products of a high-technology. The local hardware store has been utilized more often than the local yarn shop. Philosophically, the artist feels an obligation to confront technology rather than ignore it, to challenge the loom and her materials with innovative ideas, and to look to the future with the creative process instead of over her shoulder.

The loom has been an essential tool for the production of this thesis. Along with many other fiber artists, the artist has accepted the challenge to stretch the possibilities of the loom in unconventional and nontraditional ways. Some artists are using the loom for the
production of three-dimensional forms. Kay Sekimachi, Diane Sheehan, and Dorothy Gill-Barnes have each been employing the loom for the production of container forms. In each case the pieces are woven flat and are given form and volume by methods including warp and weft manipulation (Plate 1, page 19).

Since entering the School for American Craftsmen in the Fall of 1983 the artist has been experimenting with the loom as a tool for the production of container forms. The first experiments were with weaving a multiple-layered, tubular piece of fabric to be manipulated and given volume as a three-dimensional form (Plate 2, page 20). Subsequent experiments included warp-pulling and supplementary warp techniques. The artist found that these techniques were time-consuming but satisfying in that they conveyed the idea of basketry through surface texture and form.

After intensive experimentation prior to the thesis quarter the artist began to think in terms of weaving many modular units which would be constructed in a way similar to that of a log cabin. This simple technique combined with the right materials gave the visual and structural results desired.

The most unusual use of the loom occurred during the production of the first thesis piece, House Dream (Plate 3, page 21). The weave structure for this piece was plain-weave threaded on four harnesses. A decision was made to use a simple supplementary warp on a fifth harness consisting of seven strands of heavy sisal rope spaced evenly across the forty inch width. The use of the supplementary warp required that the loom have two warp beams. This posed a problem in that the large Macomber looms are only equipped with a single warp
beam. To solve this problem, two looms were placed back to back and clamped together. One loom was dressed front to back with the primary warp while the supplementary warp was beamed on the second loom. The supplementary warp was then threaded and tied on with the primary warp.

A dominant inherent quality in woven fabric is the presence of the grid system. This interwoven structure is virtually impossible to ignore or cover up. For the thesis the artist chose to capitalize on the grid and to over-emphasize its presence. This fit very nicely with the theme of architecture and lent itself to the resulting geometric forms. The grid woven into the surface of House Dream (Plate 3, page 21) is a prime example. While it aids in the structural strength of the piece, it is visually important as well. The grid creates contrast with the plexiglass while its geometry contrasts with the overall curvilinear form of the piece.

At the same time that the artist was experimenting with loom controlled techniques, she was searching for materials that would best convey her ideas and images. While her images were connected to past experiences, she wanted her materials to acknowledge technology and the future.

Through experimentation the artist found that plastics could provide her with the visual language she had been searching for. Plastic possesses the strength and structural qualities required for geometric forms while it is flexible enough to be sculpted. Plastic can reflect, refract, and absorb light, making the sculptures visually interesting from all views. In a sense, light can activate the form.
Plastic has a philosophical connection to technology as well. Often thought of as a cheap, second-rate, and disposable material, it was challenging to the artist to make a precious object from this material. For example, in *Attic I* (Plate 4, page 22), she found it exciting to create a jewel-like form from surgical tubing, electrical cord, and antenna wire. When removed from their ordinary, mundane functions these industrial materials could be presented to the viewer in the form of an art object.

Throughout this thesis the loom has been the machine for the production of images. The woven materials have helped to convey important messages associated with these images. It has been necessary to find a balance between past and future, nostalgia and high-tech, and tradition and technology. For the artist the challenge has been in creating this balance and maintaining it as a common thread throughout her work.
CONCLUSION

So many words have been used in this thesis paper to attempt to describe the many images, thoughts, ideas, brainstorms, successes, and failures that have transpired over the past months. An attempt has been made to apply some logic to the work that has been done, to intellectualize about the process, and to analyze its successes and its short-comings. In the end, however, the artist is the only one who can truly understand her growth, her direction, and her goals. While it is the artist's hope that she has struck a chord in that illusive everyman, in all honesty this thesis has been a self-centered endeavor towards self-expression and self-fulfillment. Sainte-Beuve said it very well:

It is not so much for you, my friend, who never saw this place, and had you visited it could not now feel the impressions and colors I feel, that I have gone over it in such detail, for which I must excuse myself. Nor should you try to see it as a result of what I have said; let the image float inside you; pass lightly; the slightest idea of it will suffice for you.\(^9\)

There is so much left to do, so much left to say, and so little time for doing and saying. It is time now to move on.

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PLATE 1
V-Form
Diane Sheehan, 1982
11"×21"×8"
PLATE 2
Container Form I
1983
10"×6"×6"
PLATE 3
House Dream
approx. 12'×15'×15'
PLATE 5
Attic II
approx. 40"×20"×30"
PLATE 6
Attic III
approx. 45"×50"×18"
WORKS CITED


