

THIRTEEN WAYS TO LOOK AT A SALVAGE YARD

Gean Moreno/ Ernesto Oroza

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.
--Wallace Stevens

1. If the production of form can be understood as a densification and consolidation of a pattern to such a degree that it separates from a less-refined ground, then what we may have here is something like form-production in reverse: a devolving or stagnating form that is separated from a more finely-articulated and active ground. In other words, the city grows increasingly complex with the systems it generates and the flows it sustains, while the salvage yard, like a dying appendage or atrophied limb, grows increasing less differentiated. Dilution of details, functions. It slows down. It moves at a different velocity than the things that circulate around it. Within its space, it's almost as if urban flows are reduced to stop-animation versions of themselves.

2. The salvage yard's connection to the urban space that surrounds it seems, at first glance, a one-way street. All vectors lead from the city to the salvage yard. The ones that should circulate material in the opposite direction always seem clogged. Everything in the salvage yard is for sale, but so little ever seems to go out. All inlets, no outlets. But what the mirage of unidirectionality actually marks is an asymmetry of velocities. The rates at which things enter and leave the site register at opposite ends of the speedometer. In the salvage yard, things mostly pile up, settle into strata. That seems the extent of their routine--a kind of synchronized shutting-down. But of course nothing ever stops completely; the rate of flow is just different. Things do eventually go out, in one form or another. The salvage yard only seems stagnant in relation to the higher speeds at which the city around it moves.

3. Minimal observation is enough to figure out that as a retail space the salvage yard is a failure. Factory outlet shops, street vendors, cut-rate stores that stock overflows of production and the proliferating 99-cents stores leave it in the dust. Even the ambulating ice-cream truck seems much more attuned to the way the city functions, to the methods through which to productively function in relation to it, taking into account school hours, vacation days, weather patterns, gas prices, etc. One can almost be categorical about the salvage yard as an absolute failure as a retail space, but for the customers who continue to straggle in sporadically but steadily to pick up something or other.

4. The basic operation of the salvage yard: the collection of scattered urban and industrial remnants. It puts these collected remnants through a homogenizing process of "scabbing"--crusty layers of excretions caked over crusty layers of excretions. One can't even claim that it approximates some version of Bataille's formlessness, because it's a hardened space, a container of stalled dynamics. It apes a geological economy of sedimentation without consolidating immense spans of time or indexing the natural forces that acted upon a terrain. But in its nearly-sedimented state, as a kind of massive scab, indexing certain contemporary historical and social forces rather

than natural ones, it opens up vistas on the more "refined" urban textures that shore up against its bent and rusting chain-link fence.



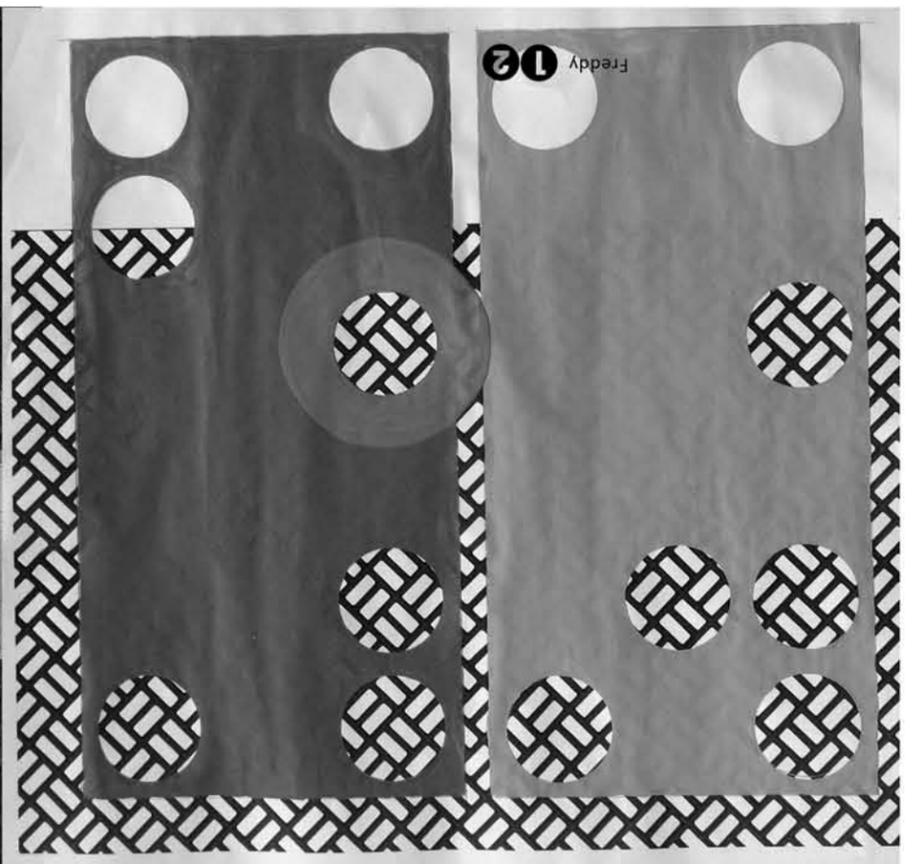
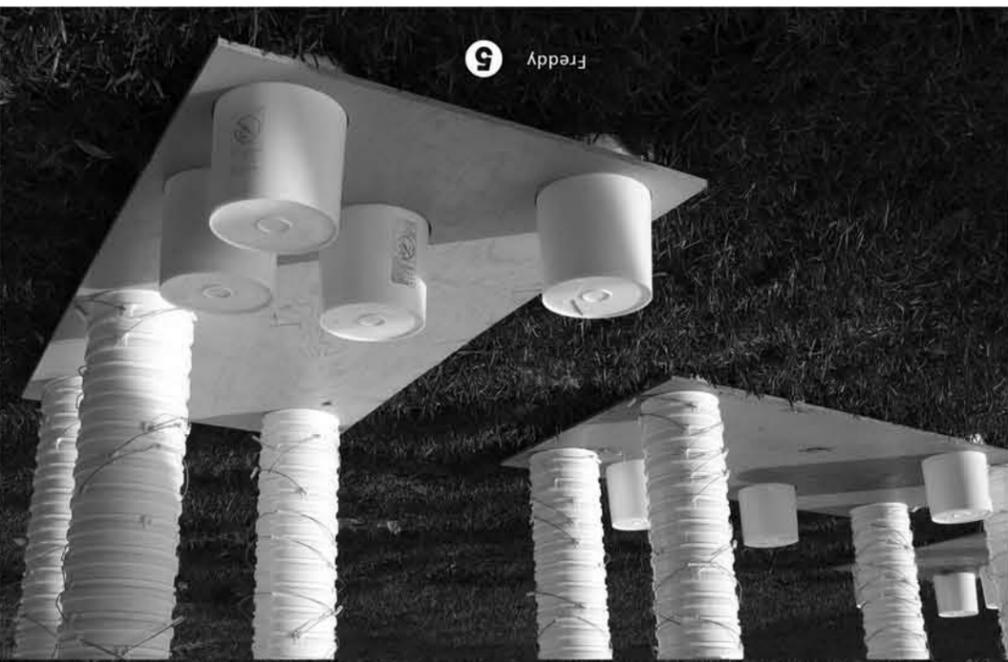
5. The salvage yard simply gathers the materials that the city disposes. But not its waste. This isn't a dump. It's artifacts that mark a sudden shift in fashion or technology or code enforcement, or an error in production--what hyperactive technological development leaves in its wake. It's residue that hasn't been transfigured into rubbish; indices of sharp turns in industrial production routines, brusque changes in the tides of fashion and technology. Social driftwood.

6. Hardened and sluggish, nearly comatose as a structure, perhaps, but the salvage yard isn't a completely broken down machine. These notes are, in fact, an effort to understand what it can still do with some efficacy. We found it pregnant with the urge to hoist on those who engage it this mandate: to look at the salvage yard as a way to get a different kind of glimpse on the urban spaces beyond it. A relay point where thinking can be intensified, the salvage yard is where urban flows have been reduced, as proposed already, to something like stop-animation. A different look on them opens up as a consequence. The salvage yard is a discontinuity that casts in sharp relief the contour of all that moves about it.

7. Unable to unload at a successful speed the products it accumulates, the salvage yard would also have trouble boasting of internal circulation. There seem to be very few active vectors through which the gathered materials can move within the space itself in order to be repurposed or exploited in some way. No metabolic dynamic seems to exist within its walls. Sometimes a TV will be on for the attendants, a fan spinning if summer has rolled in, but little else moves here.



The stack of cinderblocks in the back will never be part of the walls of an office; the dust-coated speakers will never be dragged out to the curb and be made to blast slinky Caribbean music to "hook" the passerby. A logic for an incorporation of this sort doesn't seem to be there. Once in the salvage yard, things meet stillness. They find their place and settle in the vicinity of similar specimens until they fuse into a momentary top-most layer of scab that in time will be covered by new strata. But, again, one has to tread carefully and refuse one's conclusions any absolute character, as there is a kind of recuperation at work in the salvage yard. It just happens exclusively in the proximity of the people who work there. The attendants create small islands of functionality amid all the stalled layers of materials. The turned-on TV, the spinning fan, the sofa dragged in front of the TV, the old receiver and speakers plugged in to replace the TV's faltering audio, the Formica cafeteria booth used as dining table--they form a functional assemblage, almost a stand-in for a habitat. They orchestrate a tiny reactivated space, buzzing and blinking, like an infected patch, frenzied with contained bacterial activity, within the larger scabbed landscaped of piled-on urban remnants.



lack in the flow of resources. Zones of necessity, [continues on page 7]

Flowing through changing environments, objects release a series of trapped energies, actualize latent potentialities, and enlarge the functional range assigned to them. The circumstances that invite this cracking open of uses are often tied to moments of compression or

improvised responses that these demand. even seductive, but easily challenged by immediate needs and the stances. Ideal uses are like ideals in general: precise, undeniable, and move through and function in a quotidian world of changing circum- were never part of the equation. They are condemned, after all, to ed for, they settle in geographic and socioeconomic contexts that imagined in, they become tools to satisfy needs they weren't intend- themselves. Objects often drift into places they have never been fictional space than the actual circumstances in which artifacts finds enous conditions, in the life of the object, start to designate more a ficing flexibility to optimization. But these controlled and homog- circumscription may be necessary to keep the design focused, sacri- the blurry margins around the diagram that traces its functions. This possibilities and contexts available to the artifact are displaced to and limited in the designer's idealized scheme. It's as if all the other ational conditions in which it is supposed to function are invariant spond to new stimuli, goes unaccounted for or is repressed. The situ- of its design, something like its nervous system, it's ability to re- in the range of an object's functionality, imagined at the moment encoded in the artifact.

considered, instantly trapping unexpected uses as new information pushes the object to functionally "bend" in a way that hadn't been new uses may emerge at the moment in which a situational force duction. It's not that an indeterminacy of function emerges, but that were perhaps unimaginable, during the processes of design and pro- act with points of stress and strain that remained unconsidered, that plastic space, as open equation, as malleable plane, bound to inter- We are dealing, then, with an object's functional range recast as "improvised" functions unfolds as a moire pattern.

as misaligned axes. A diagram of this field of "legitimate" uses and provisional seating, planter, decorating tool, etc.) can be represented field, then using this very same logic its improvised uses (as table leg, If an object's range of functions can be diagrammed as a gridded

MOIRE OBJECTS

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Climbing the sloping streets that lead away from the historical core of Santo Domingo, one notices that the tiled floors of the houses overflow onto the sidewalk all the way to the street. The house dwellers' cleverness also overflows in this process. It's a furtive way to lay claim a little more space for the family; to remove space from the abstract realm of *the public* or *the social* and pull it into the concrete and unambiguous one of the home. It attempts to privatize space *that supposedly belongs to everyone*.

In front of one of the houses we came upon, it wasn't tiles that were making this claim. It was series of rings that had been stamped with a bucket on wet concrete--a homemade pattern connecting sidewalk to house with an even more austere and lucid economy than that of the tiles. A run-of-the-mill bucket was used as a tool for decorating and demarcating. The gesture gives expression to a latent potential in the bucket that was surely unthinkable during its design and production. Who knew that the energies consolidated in it could be release to *also* do this? And was this the beginning of a prolific display of new or potential uses?

A bucket used in this way--with its sentence to serve exclusively as a container, as a facilitator of movement and storage, momentarily suspended--is part of a transaction that drives the object off the functional course assigned to it from the moment it was conceived on a computer screen to the moment it arrived at the point of retail. Moments of strain and concrete contextual opportunities may divert the energies consolidated during the production of the artifact toward unexpected forms and tasks. The object is "derailed": it does things it wasn't intended for. Its utilitarian range swells, dilates, suffers irrevocable and irreversible enlargements.

As ingrained as its functions may have been in the mind of all who worked to shape and build this artifact, these ideal uses only partially define the object. Another way to say this: the object's dominant functions, which organize its entire production and distribution, never reduce completely its range of potentialities, allocated unintentionally and perhaps only obvious, visible and available at the right moment. The uses the "to-come" manifest themselves only in those concrete situations and at that precise moment in which the individual will places new demands on the artifact. [continues on page 6]

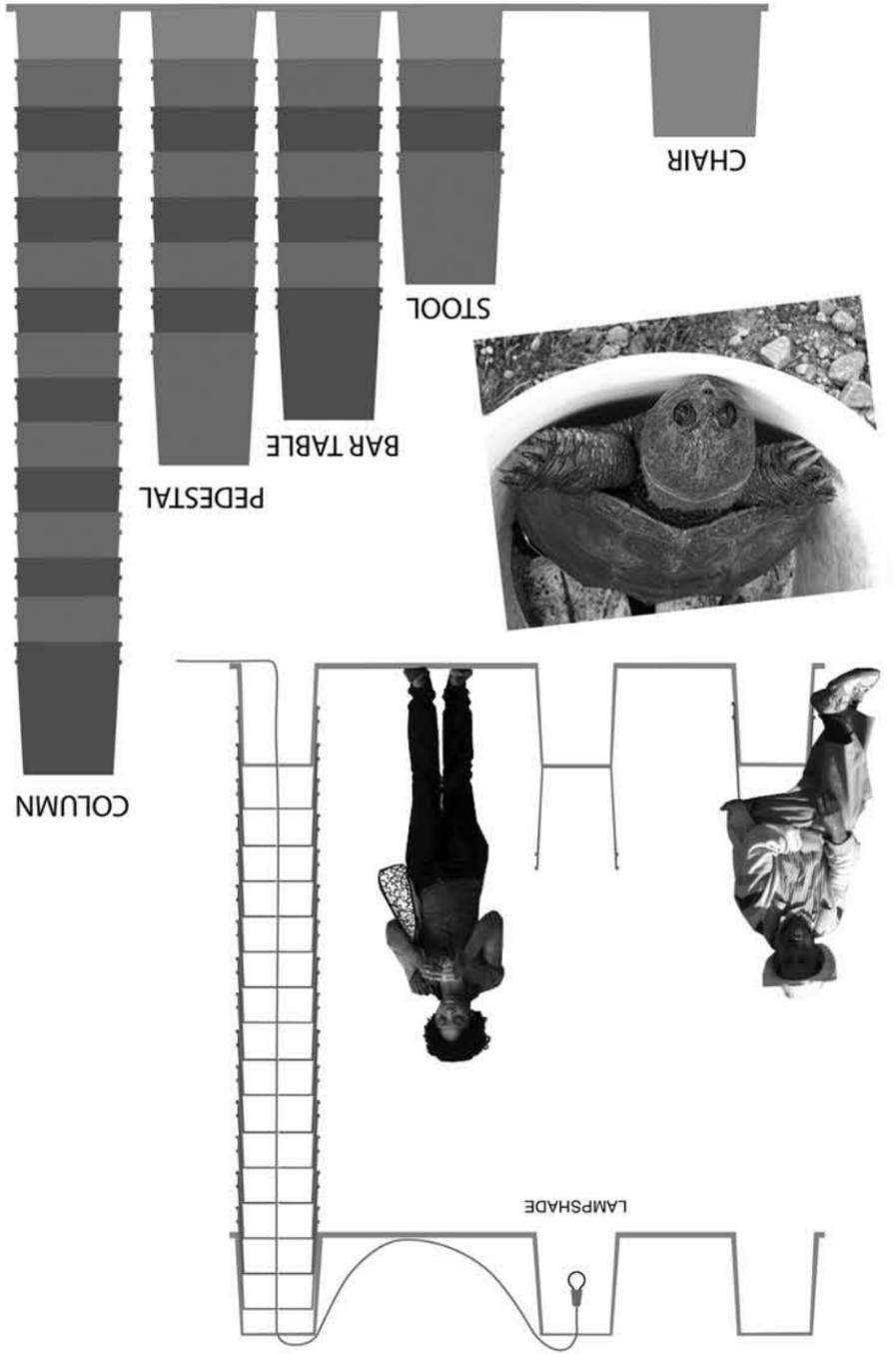
where you will go to celebrate your team's victory. ■

the stadium. Or part of the pavilions in the main square downtown they will be part of the stop where you wait for the bus that takes you to used as the columns of the dugouts that shelter the baseball teams. Or their capacity to stack is astutely exploited, we'll find that they are being tomorrow be part of an entire bleacher system. And by next summer, as provided seating arrangement in any number of small businesses will to- being a construction module. The buckets that today form part of an im- out anyone noticing, the bucket will go from being a decorative tool to spread so far that the limits of the neighborhood risk erasure. And with- sidewalk, can one day begin to move vertically, to climb walls, jump over as decorative tool, at the moment moored to the horizontal plane of the growth, in turn, opens the object to new design processes. The bucket sures make the object drift until the range of its uses grows, and this and needs obsolete.) Changing circumstances and new situational pres- nomic shifts and new products on the market can render certain uses- axes" can be added to it. (Or, on the contrary, new technologies, eco- tern that forms an object's field of functions, too, mutates. New "use- And since nothing is every really inert, it's obvious that the moire pat- moire object--real or always in potential.

hood, a constellation of needs, a set of values, etc) that interests us as tion and energy, interacting with an active field (the city, the neighbor- tional ranges of the object employed. It's the bucket, as stored informa-

And how this response "swells" the object. Or better said: the intersection of con- textual demands and an act based on the information and energy trapped in the bucket allows a response from the user; a response that, at the same time, enlarges the func-





where sheer survival demands a constant overhauling of habitual and normative modes of behavior, prove fertile terrain for the introduction of these new functions of artifacts. But it's not poetic improvisation with the object or the typical bricolaging of artists that are of interest here. It's the necessary and recurrent responses to situational pressures and quantifiable needs that force the artifact to behave in ways other than those established by its "inherent" uses.

This all pivots on the object's performative potential. A user arrives at a solution only when a situation demands it. And it's a solution bound to a previous line of actions that have occurred in the user's environment and to a series of local values that support his decision. For the owner of the house in Santo Domingo to arrive at the decision to stamp the wet concrete in front of his house a number of circumstances aligned. It's not the stamping of the concrete on its own that is interesting, but, rather, how this gesture embodies a response to specific needs and the values of a specific context. [continues on page 11]

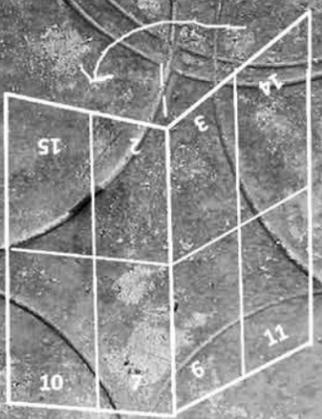
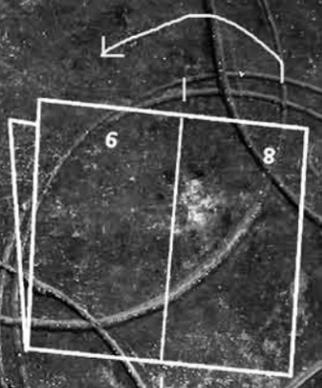


Coordination: Denise Delgado and Miami-Dade Public Library.
 This publication was part of a tabloid that accompanied Gean Moreno and Ernesto Oroza's exhibition *Driftwood* at Miami-Dade Public Library
 Concept, text and design: Gean Moreno - Ernesto Oroza / Textos Moiré © 2010

Freddy was published in June 2010, in a run of 1000 copies.

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FREDDY

Gean Moreno - Ernesto Oroza

8.

The salvage yard lacks the kind of “intelligence” that the city demands—a willingness to overcome inertness and plug into the flows of exchange. It stratifies, instead. It seems set aside from the swathe of urban activities, excluded from the routes of circulations. It is, in this way, that the salvage yard becomes a kind of sub- or parenthetical-terrain, something that sinks below or is pushed to the edge of the city. It is, of course, not physically beneath or always on some literal periphery of the metropolitan spread. It’s internal rules of accumulation adjust to what the city releases. The city is the ecology it parasitically feeds on. This economy of dependence determines the salvage yard typology.

9.

The sheer number of repeated objects in the salvage yard is enough to make them take on new qualities—or shed old ones. Innumerable windows pressed against the wall, hundreds of toilets set out in the back and hundreds of unconnected lamps hanging from the rafters, dozens of doors and just as many stoves, stacks of televisions, bins filled with vinyl records, drums overflowing with marble tiles. The massive accumulation of individual artifacts drains each of them of certain social and cultural values; it anonymizes or de-differentiates them in a material way. It’s almost as if the imprint of the industrial process that produced them could be washed out or relegated to an insignificant secondary level. It releases information from the form, disarticulates the encoded range of tasks it was programmed for. The abandoned vitrine, among a dozen identical versions of itself, hardly seems the optimal display structure it must have once been under a department store’s even and inviting lighting and a toilet is no longer the same as the indispensable toilet we sit on. The fact that the latter is kept outside, unprotected from the elements—that is, reduced to a piece of impermeable porcelain that won’t suffer outdoors—makes the toilet feel like *raw material*. Cultural or social value has been drained from it; properties bloom that were dormant in other contexts. It is no longer a commodity in some fundamental way. It’s figural integrity feels somehow violated when it is set amid hundreds of copies, in a presentational situation we are unaccustomed to.

10.

This, then, is perhaps one of the traits of the yard: it’s a machine that saps certain values from the artifacts it houses. It nullifies. It pushes toward a homogeneity that can be sensed just below the surface differences of the actual objects: everything is returned to the condition of raw material, to a kind of value-free blankness. But this, in turn, clears the way for potential new capacities to appear. It’s probably more feasible, considering current mores and taste, that the toilet seats will be smashed and end up as tesserae in a mosaic in a children’s museum than as functioning toilet seats in a condo. (Of course an entire series of forces underscore and lubricate that shift.) This erosion of social and cultural values that seem so entrenched in the object—their “de-lamination” was once inconceivable—is a kind of entropy that involves not a loss of energy from a system but a loss of value from an artifact. An axiological entropy, if we are allowed the metaphor; a process of value-drainage, a blanching-out which may unlock other trapped potentials.

11.

Rows and rows of pastel-colored toilets. It almost looks like a display of pastries, a parade of pink and blue and white birthday cakes. Like a Wayne Thiebaud painting. Here, metaphors and analogies grow wild. But we don’t want to treat this as a poetic or literary space. It’s the materiality that is significant. The objects themselves. Not what they suggest tropologically, but what they suggest diagrammatically, once they are plugged back



Tabloid No.9

First printing

Editors: Gean Moreno and Ernesto Oroza
Design: Liliam Dooley

This issue was published in conjunction with the exhibition
Driftwood, Miami-Dade Public Library.
June 10th-September 7th, 2010

into the circuit from where they came. Once, that is, we backtrack and imagine them again in the single-family, suburban houses that they came from. Each toilet is a point of interface through which the house dwellers connect to the services that the city’s infrastructure provides—not only to its water main and its sewage lines, but to its nutritional flows. And always, ineluctable, into other flows and constraints that also form part of this infrastructure—on the one hand, the tax brackets that determine the cost of these services, the demographic distribution that often determines the tax bracket; and on the other, the system of code enforcements and the range of tastes. Sitting on the toilet, each of the house dwellers is plugged into the city, each is a multi-pronged elbow (like a plumbing elbow) that facilitates movement through the intertwined networks of the infrastructure. The accumulation of toilet bowls here signal the number of points of interface that a city has. It stands in not only for all the other toilet bowls out there, functioning and discarded ones, but for all the computer consoles, ATM machines, TVs, radios, telephones, Wi-Fi hotspots, Blackberries, etc. A pastry parade of toilets that invites one to redraw the city as *infrastructure*.

12.

It’s not only changes in technology, fashion, taste—alterations that we can locate in the space of the social—that mark the salvage yard. Dozens of front doors piled up, their shape not very different from those that are currently hinged to the endless proliferation of single-family homes and townhouses, force us to turn to things that slip beneath the threshold of obvious visibility. These doors haven’t ended up in a salvage yard because taste has rendered them passé or technological advancements have replaced the hinged door. Perhaps this is a local’s understanding, but it is obvious that these doors landed in the salvage yard because a change in building codes has made them “useless.” And building codes change, most likely, because a natural force has rendered what was produced under the previous code insufficient and insecure, if not fatal. Earthquakes are followed by code changes as much as by aftershocks. Hurricane categories explain wind speeds as much as help predict the range of legal alterations that will happen in the storm’s wake.

13.

The pile of doors has a second effect: it invites one to imagine an entire suburb folded like an accordion, like stage scenery that folds in order to be put away. It’s almost as if the houses these doors were attached to are tucked between them. Single-family homes like collapsible tents. The suburb as a kind of tent city that, rather than following, anticipates devastating natural disasters. The suburb built to wait for the hurricane that will drag it away. It is *always* hurricane season. It’s the city not as a series of architectural statements but as a pliable territory attempting to anticipate and absorb the upheavals that are coming at it from the future. The salvage yard becomes part of this economy of absorption.

