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Q&A > David Hartt By Madeline Nusser

In David Hartt's exhibition for everyone a garden, there is no shortage of architecture and industrial design references. A Moshe Safdie book inspired the title, glass sculptures resemble French architect Jean-Louis Cheneac's module designs, and USM shelving units act as de facto pedestals. The artist – whose recent show, *Stray Light*, opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art, and is now running at Studio Museum in Harlem – uses research and photography to mine the build environment. Hartt talked to AN about design and identity – including, in an effacing way, his own identity – during his exhibit's April run at Corbett vs. Dempsey Gallery. The interview starts organically, as Hartt and Madeline Nusser walk by an artwork titled "Mutirao."

David Hartt. The word stems from the indigenous Brazilian phrase "towards a common goal." It was originally developed as a program by the Brazilian government in which the urban poor, folks who lived in favelas, were given both designs and materials for constructing their own homes to basically raise the quality of the build environment.

The Architect's Newspaper: How did this word get incorporated into your work? One of the things that set all this work of: I was reading the book *Precisions* by Le Corbusier. He had a really interesting introduction to the book called "American Prologue." When it starts out, he's on a steamship. He was invited to South American to give lectures in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro. The book actually contains the lectures themselves, but the prologue is him looking ahead- at the opportunities, what his feelings are, the idea of colonialism, him bringing his European ideas to the new world.

Did you buy the book to read it, and then stumble upon the prologue? Yes. The working title for the show was "American Prologue," but I thought that was way too removed, and people wouldn't understand the reference. At one point, Le Corbusier starts talking about how he's escaped his hosts and made his way into the favelas where he meets the real Brazilians; with *joie de vivre*, they're nice and innocent. He becomes completely enraptured. It's typical European bullshit. How the real essence is found in poverty, and his hosts are wannabes.

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That's how the International Style was formed? That's kind of sad. I don't think so necessarily. I think of my work as being about hybrid states, a mixture of all these different potentials, a way to prototype a layering of all these historical trajectories. For me it became an encapsulation of relationships – him, people of Brazil, his role in history in terms of his relationship to modernity.

So your work looks back at those layers? And sees them as a lived presence. You could say my work is a Petri dish – putting these things together and seeing how they evolved and how they influenced each other. They're all different parts of the DNA: the positive and the negative, the instructive as well as constructive. There are a lot of pieces detracting from a better possible outcome, but they're important because of what they allowed to come out of it. You need these precedents in order to move beyond them. I think of that Le Corbusier text as an accurate snapshot of a lot of divisions. There was a desire for betterment, for better or worse. He was given a lot of opportunities in Europe to develop a philosophical aesthetic, to develop a vocabulary that could be applied.

When did you read the book? Maybe ten years ago. A lot of the ideas I deal with here have been gestating for a while.

When did you start getting interested in architecture as a jumping off point for your work? There's always been an interest in architecture. But it's about the built environment as a vehicle for the layering of history. Our understanding of ourselves is deeply rooted within the spaces we occupy. There is definitely an autobiographical element. Both my parents are white and Jewish, I'm adopted. Montreal is a bilingual city, I'm biracial. With my own sense of identity, I'm always looking for ways to understand how I fit within a larger structure, and it's always getting complicated because it's never this or that – instead it's a hybrid reality.

How do you feel architecture is manifested in "for everyone a garden?" Is your connection to it personal or distant? Both. I was born in 1967. That was a time of incredible upheaval. It was a time for Canada to come out as a modern state, throw off the mantle of colonialism. Prior to 1967, the Canadian flag had the British flag on the left hand corner. The maple leaf as we know it was revealed that year. Prior to that, Montreal was a provincial colonial city... I didn't live through the upheaval, but I lived through the results – this modern city with the new-car smell still on it. It was really powerful in terms of creating an image in my mind. The potential of the built environment – it had been prioritized, and I grew up with that.

Did this stay with you, or is it something you circled back to later in your career? I came back to it later on. The research I was doing was complicated by my lived experience. That plays out in the way I understand space: I'm interested in space as a container for a specific ideology.

Space is definitely a container for ideology in your exhibition Stray Light, which uses photographs and video to capture the fiercely modern Johnson Publishing building as well as employees working inside it. What got you interested in that subject? Race was something I hadn't dealt with in my work previously. And I was trying to find an example of the built environment that encapsulated some of the things I wanted to explore in terms of understanding, specifically, an African-American experience. You couldn't find a better example of that than the Johnson Publishing headquarters in terms of a clear archive of so many things that are important to the community. It also represented this beautiful parallel strand of modernism, so it allowed me to talk about these other concerns I had, and show they could be represented in a lot of different ways. This happened to be one expression.

What other subjects have you photographed? Native American reservations in Montana; a farm that started out as a commune in Southern Tennessee; a think tank in Michigan that develops policy tools, most famously the Overton Window; a skate park in Seattle. The idea was to try to paint a picture of ideological differentiated sites looking at the possibilities – far right, far left – and find out what's in between. Johnson Publishing became one point, one note within that expression. I started photographing this work in 2005/2006.

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You also worked with a glass-maker to create some of the work in *for everyone a garden*. Tell me about that process. With the glass form, I designed the original form on the computer and did pretty detailed drawings. It's based on a composite form derived from the work of Jean-Louis Chaneac and others. I'm not a glass artist, and I don't want to be – because I don't want to be married to that form of expression. I stop short at saying its collaboration, because I'm the author. But it's about working with people whose talents you respect and whose opinions you trust, and you think they can really enrich the final experience.

What are you working on now? Right now the plan is to go to Chile to shoot a film and a group of photographs, and generate some sculptures as well. As a country, Chile is incredibly interesting and unique. During the '70s, under Allende, it attempted a socialist state, but in a unique way. They imported a lot of incredible people from the Ulm School to develop a national industrial design program. Then Pinochet came in and the rule of the military junta followed. Currently, Chile is one of the shining stars of the South American economy in terms of a neo-liberal state. I'm really interested in how it tracks across this huge ideological spectrum, and I'm interested in how that's a factor of the built environment. My idea is to really engage in those histories.

Before you work on these research projects do you know what form the art will take? No. It's very much an intuitive process. I start with research and obviously have a very genuine interest in the subject, and then I try to allow the work to evolve out of those things. For a sculptural component, I'm looking at a vehicle called the Yagan. It produced in the Citroen factories in Chile, but the exterior design was developed indigenously in Chile. It was a multinational infrastructure combined with an indigenous approach. I really love when I find those hybrids.