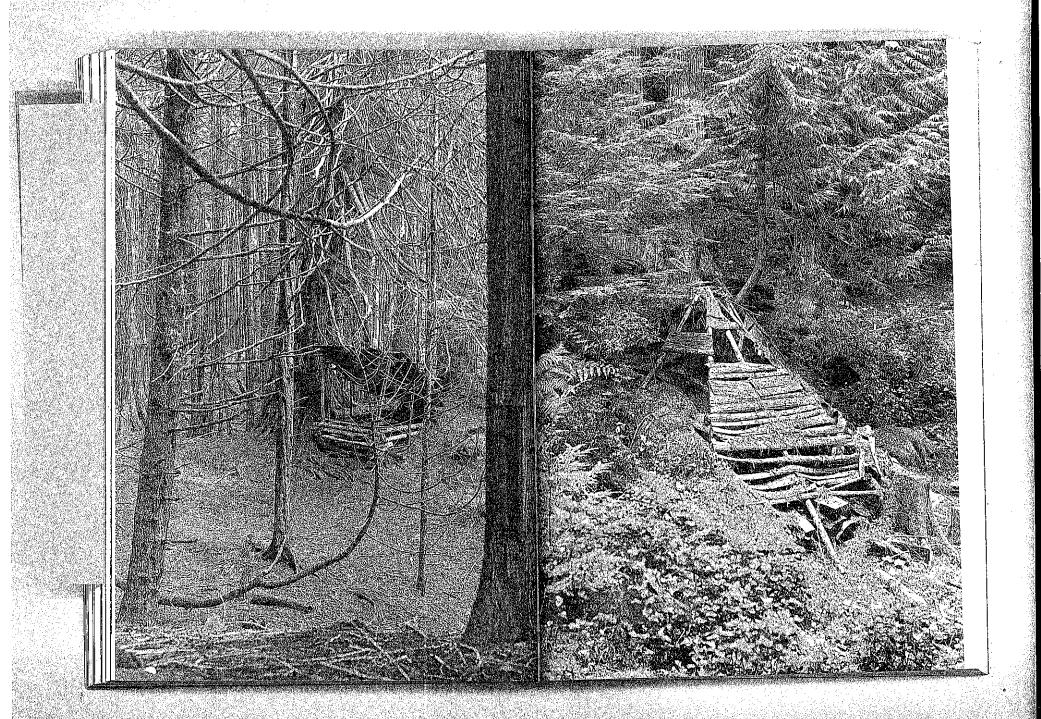
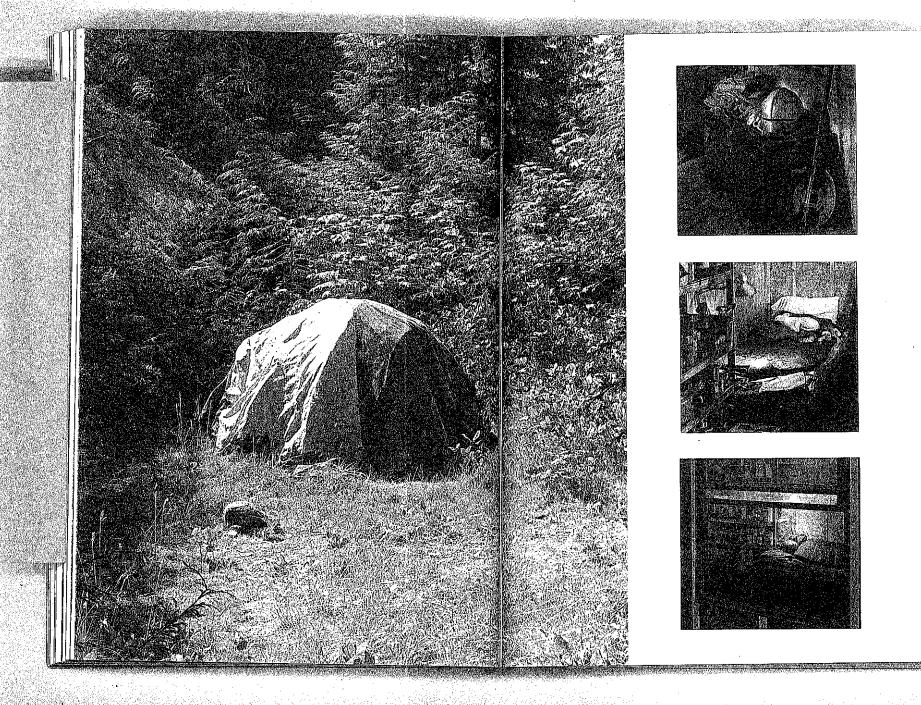
Playing House: A Brief Account of the Idea of the Shack Dossier: Photos archived and installation by Liz Magor Summer 2002. Vancouver Art Gallery and Power Plant (Toronto) asked the Office to contribute an essay to a catalogue on the work of $% \left\{ 1\right\} =\left\{ 1$ $\label{liz} \textbf{Liz Magor. Magor maintains an ongoing archive of photographs of}$ West Coast shacks. In her installation Messenger she constructs a fully supplied shack inside the gallery. The Office has lived in various shacks.





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- The subject has always just left the shack. What a shack remembers is previous shacks. Also, each shack leads to the next shack. So the shack is a series. Because we are suburban we understand shacks.
- 2. Literature tells us we will remember the house of our childhood, with its nooks and garrets and stairs and passages and so on, as if this house were singular, but we were born in a series. We were born in the suburbs, or our childhood was distributed across that serpentine landscape. Suburbs are recurrent dreams. Each house repeats the singular wilderness. In the suburbs we learned to understand what is virtual and now we invent the beginning, again and again. This is not nostalgia. Or, it is nostalgia turned inside out. We distribute origin across the virtual. We don't guard it. What we crave is not Rousseau's solitude but the excellent series of origin dwindling on ahead into the future. Thus we love shacks. Each leads erotically to the next. One sojourns, or starts out, rather than settles, in a shack. Domestic duration, like childhood, is transient, serial. A shack is always timely. Typically an account of the history of architecture will begin with a shack.
- **3.** Thickets, a cave, a hut of boughs are the components of land-scape that conventionally provide primordial coverage. Structurally the shack is a thickening, a concentration, an opacity in the lucid landscape. This lyric site of nature's contraction is the minimum of shelter. Laugier, the French architectural theorist

writing in 1753, followed Vitruvius and Alberti by posing the shack or hut as the first principle of architecture, the idea from which all theory extends. Filmically he described the primitive's trajectory - from repose on the idyllic lawn to the anxious retreat to cover, and ultimately to the organization of components of the landscape into architecture: 'He is in need of a place to rest. On the banks of a quietly flowing brook he notices a stretch of grass; its fresh greenness is pleasing to his eyes, its tender down invites him; he is drawn there and stretched out at leisure on the sparkling carpet, he thinks of nothing else but enjoying this sparkling gift of nature ... But soon the scorching heat of the sun forces him to look for shelter. A nearby forest draws him to its cooling shade; he runs to find a refuge in its depth, and there he is content ... The savage in his leafy shelter, does not know how to protect himself from the uncomfortable damp that penetrates everywhere; he creeps into a nearby cave and, finding it dry, he praises himself for his discovery. But soon the darkness and foul air surrounding him make his stay unbearable again. He leaves and is resolved to make good by his ingenuity the careless neglect of nature. He wants to make himself a dwelling that protects but does not bury him. Some fallen branches in the forest are the right material for his purpose ...'1

Laugier tells a simple story: the retreat from lucid pleasure to protective opacity, then to willed structure. Is architecture a monument to the failure of pastoral utopia, whose greeny bliss only passes, like a tempest? The shack as first principle seems to be a protection against weather and against time.

4. The landscape includes the material detritus of previous inhabitations and economies. Typically the shack reuses or regroups things with humour and frugality. The boughs of a tree might become a roof. A shack almost always reuses windows, so that looking into or out of the shack is already part of a series, or an ecology, of looking. In this sense a shack is itself a theory: it sees through other eyes. This aspect of the shack's politics prevents shack nostalgia from becoming mere inert propaganda. The layering or abutment of historically contingent economies frames a diction or pressure that is political, political in the sense that the shack dweller is never a pure product of the independent present. He sees himself through other eyes.

5. When Thoreau gathered the materials he would need to build his shack at Walden Pond, he bought the shanty belonging to an Irish labouring family who were moving on. The Irish wife described the Irish shanty with exemplary frugality: 'good boards overhead, good boards all around, and a good window.' For these good items, to be removed by small cartloads to his own site, Thoreau paid four dollars and twenty-five cents. And in his catalogue of materials he lists 'Two secondhand windows with glass ... \$1.25.' Each shack dweller is an economist who thrives in the currency of the minimum, the currency of detritus. The economy of the shack enumerates necessity, or more exactly it enumerates a dream of necessity, using what's at hand. This improvisatory ethos is modern. It is proportioned by the utopia of improvised necessity rather than by tradition. How much

would we need? The shack is always conditional. The disposition of things is an economy in time. The shack is in flux.

6. A shack describes the relation of the minimum to freedom. We consider that the idea of the minimum, the idea of freedom, the idea of the shack, shape our beliefs. The freedom from accoutrement popularly stands as liberty. Here we sing along with Joplin's cover of 'Me and Bobby McGee,' and we understand our own youth as a pre-economic myth. Thoreau's image of prelapsarian shelter pertains to the innocence of Romanticism's child: 'We may imagine a time when, in the infancy of the human race, some enterprising mortal crept into a hollow in a rock for shelter. Every child begins the world again, to some extent, and loves to stay outdoors, even in wet and cold. It plays house, as well as horse, having an instinct for it ... It was the natural yearning of that portion of our most primitive ancestor which still survived in us. From the cave we have advanced to roofs of palm leaves, of bark and boughs, of linen woven and stretched, of grass and straw, of boards and shingles, of stones and tiles. At last, we know not what it is to live in the open air, and our lives are domestic in more senses than we think. From the hearth to the field is a great distance.'4 It is the task of the shack to minimize this distance, in the service of an image of natural liberty. We play house in shacks.

7. Thus the shack is the natural language of architecture. By natural we mean original. If architecture is writing, the shack is

speech. Like a folk song it stores a vernacular. What is the minimum necessary? What is a monad? — an elementary, unextended, individual spiritual substance from which material properties are derived. Architecture is derived from the unextended shack, as language is derived from a vernacular. Or the monad is a spiritual shack. It stores belief. Like any etymological construction, each shack is a three-dimensional modification of belief.

8. When the shack dweller lays in supplies, she is composing a politics. The shack demonstrates the site-specific continuum between belief and the perception of necessity. We like to remember that politics are collective experiments in belief. It is said that catalogues comprised the first ideological poetry. Here is a list of the contents of a particular shack: '3 saucepans, skillet, kettle, cutting board, toaster, lightbulbs, wineskin, 3 plates, 2 mugs, a thermos flask, a bed made on storage boxes, a tarnished mirror, a toothbrush glass, a cooler, a stove, a desk lamp, a medieval visored helmet and axe, a contemporary military helmet, combat clothing in camouflage fabric, a thin nylon sleeping bag, an ammunition box, a kitchen grinder, two grenades.'5

Thoreau, on the other hand, catalogued his shack's furnishing as follows: 'A bed, a table, a desk, three chairs, a looking glass three inches in diameter, a pair of tongs and andirons, a kettle, a skillet and frying-pan, a dipper, a wash-bowl, two knives and forks, three plates, one cup, one spoon, a jug for oil, a jug for molasses, and a japanned lamp.'6

We read the shacks' inventories as legends or indices to their political aspirations. The two shacks, one a paranoid extrusion of its puritanical ancestor, communicate via their lamps and their markedly diminutive mirrors. We wish to note also what these shacks exclude: the textile arts have no place in the ur-hut. Windows are never curtained and floors are not carpeted. It is as if fabric would screen or muffle a shack's sincerity. Thoreau explains: 'A lady once offered me a mat, but as I had no room to spare within the house, nor time to spare within or without to shake it, I declined it, preferring to wipe my feet on the sod before my door. It is best to avoid the beginnings of evil.' Was the evil mat hooked or braided or woven? Did it perhaps spell out welcome?

9. The shack fulfills the combined function of cellar and porch, but primarily, like a cellar, it defends an idea of existence: it must house and protect the catalogue of necessity. Crusoe and Thoreau dug their cellars before erecting their roofs. Each shack is also a bunker. In Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, written the year Laugier's controversial and popular treatise was published, Rousseau associated the first shack with the birth of social envy and conflict. Where Laugier had aligned the shack with a structural ideal of simplicity and purity, Rousseau conceived it as a defensive barrier against a conflict it also instigated: 'Men, soon ceasing to fall asleep under the first tree, or take shelter in the first cave, hit upon several kinds of hatchets of hard and sharp stones, and employed them to dig the ground, cut down trees, and with the branches build huts ... This was the epoch of a first

revolution, which produced the establishment and distinction of families, and which produced a species of property, and already along with it perhaps a thousand quarrels and battles. As the strongest, however, were the first to make themselves cabins, which they knew they were able to defend, we may conclude that the weak found it much shorter and safer to imitate, than to attempt to dislodge them ... '8 Here primal shack-envy stimulates mimesis, which Rousseau configures as the technical compromise of 'the weak'; architecture inaugurates itself as social rhetoric by framing the family and symbolizing ownership conflicts. This is to imagine sociality in terms of capital and weakness in terms of lack. Certainly the shack can perform this function. But we experience weakness as pliancy, the structural ability to welcome desire and change.

10. Therefore it is not our intention to focus solely on the shack's protective carapace at the expense of its inner ecology of gesture. In Alberti's account of the first shack, in *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, published in 1450, the original architectural gesture is not the erection of defensible barriers, but the disposition of interior spaces according to their use: 'In the beginning, men sought a place of rest in some region safe from danger; having found a place both suitable and agreeable, they settled down and took possession of the site. Not wishing to have all their household and private affairs conducted in the same place, they set aside one space for sleeping, another for the hearth, and allocated other spaces for different uses.'9

Only then did Alberti's first shack dwellers erect their roofs. In the assignment and ordinance of its interior functions, the shack choreographs bodily habit. Recall the film An American in Paris. In the artist's studio (one of the city's variations on the selfsufficiency of the pastoral shack), Gene Kelly danced this quotidian gestural economy with the architectural surfaces and furnishings themselves. In the shack, the implied trajectories from bed to stove, from stove to door, from door to larder shelf, animate space with the vivacity of the body. The subject, absent, is nevertheless immanent in the shack's surfaces and in the ordinance of its spaces. In this sense the shack preserves the epistemological structure of classical nature. Absent cause inflects material with a spectrum of functions and interrelations. The voyeur or naturalist identifies herself with causality. The shack is an allegory of origin. We need only study the matter to discern the structure of beginning. By identifying with its disposition, we retroactively become the cause of the shack. We wonder if there exists a body the shack could not imagine.

11. For Vitruvius the shack follows from the sociality of speech. In his shack story, at the beginning of On Architecture (27 B.C.), language facilitated men's first social relations. They gathered together around fire and learned to name by imitating one another. The partition and structure of communicative speech and its mimetic transmission was a necessary precursor to architectural structure: 'After thus meeting together they began to make shelters of leaves, some to dig caves under the hills, some

to make of mud and wattles places for shelter, imitating the nests of swallows and their method of building. Then observing the houses of others and adding to their ideas new things from day to day, they produced better kinds of huts.'10

We find in Vitruvius a social generosity lacking in the republican myth of the shack: here mimetic building is not the guarded site of security, but a form of engaging speech. In the long series of the Vitruvian shack, mimesis constitutes a creatural social pleasure, a collective communicative agency, contrary to Rousseau's figuration of mimetic art as lack. At the threshold of the Vitruvian shack, architecture's choral function knits the commons.

12. A shack tentatively supplies a syntax for temporal passage. The shack is the pliant site that adds to our ideas new tropes, gestures learned from neighbours, creatures, moot economies, land-scape, and the vigour of our own language in recombination. We wish to reimagine the city through the image of the Vitruvian shack. Here citizens inflect shelter with their transient and urgent vernaculars, which include the mimetic lexicons of technology in the service of the frisson of insecurity. Here insecurity figures, not as terror, but as erotic collective being. We love shacks because they pose impossible questions. How can we change what we need? How can we fearlessly acknowledge weakness as an animate and constructive content of collectivity? The city is the shack inside out. It choreographs the delicious series of our transience. This is the future.

NOTES

- 1 Marc-Antoine Laugier, An Essay on Architecture, trans. Wolfgang and Anni Herrmann (Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls, Inc., 1977), 11.
- 2 Henry David Thoreau, Walden, ed. Stephen Fender (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 40.
- 3 Ibid., 45.
- 4 Ibid., 27.
- 5 List of shack contents from author notes on Liz Magor's Messenger installation for Vancouver Art Gallery, 2002.
- 6 Thoreau, Walden, 60.
- 7 Ibid., 61.
- 8 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract and Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, ed. Lester G. Crocker (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), 216.
- 9 Leon Battista Alberti, On the Art of Building in Ten Books, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1988), 7.
- 10 Vitruvius, On Architecture, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Frank Granger (London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 79.