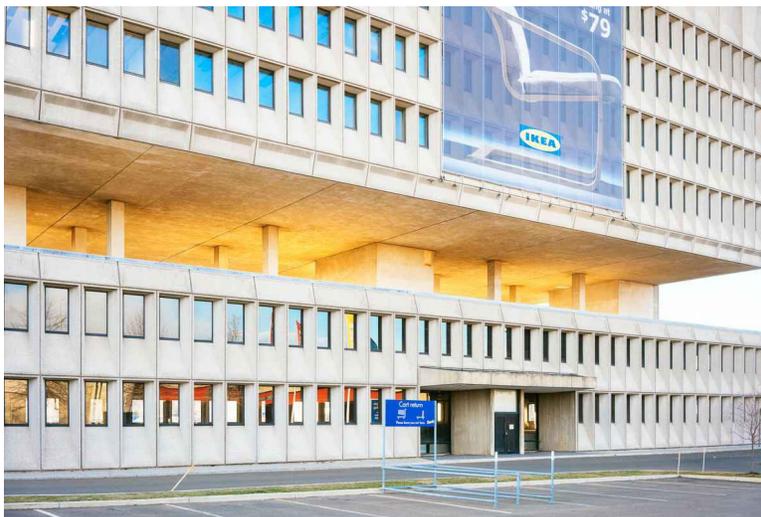


PIN-UP

Panorama: Interview with Artist Tom Burr



Marcel Breuer's Armstrong Rubber Company Building in New Haven, Connecticut.

Tom Burr is considered one of the most influential visual artists dealing with the notions of queer space and otherness. Since his *début* in the early 1990s, Burr has focused on the exchange between public and personal experiences of our environment. He deploys a post-Minimalist approach that has included public art, sculpture, text, and appropriation. In early 2017, the 53-year-old New Yorker began a year-long occupancy of Marcel Breuer's Armstrong Rubber Company Building in New Haven, Connecticut, Burr's hometown. Abandoned since the early 2000s, the seven-story Brutalist property (also sometimes referred to as the Pirelli Tire Building) now belongs to the local IKEA. For Burr, the project is a complex homecoming of sorts, set within a knowing framework of new currents in scholarship about American Brutalism — notably, that it is rooted in queer identity since it was driven by the posthumously outed Paul Rudolph.

Sheri Pasquarella: The juxtaposition of skin and concrete and Brutalism figures a lot in your work. I would like to start by talking about *Brutalist Bulletin Board*, a work of yours from 2001 which featured appropriated images of Jim Morrison alongside black-and-white photos of Brutalist buildings in New Haven. Let's discuss those two images: sexy, curly-haired Jim Morrison of *The Doors* and the sexiness of concrete.

Tom Burr: Yes, very sexy. There were actually three *Brutalist Bulletin Boards*, and several buildings were mixed within the three. They included four buildings from New Haven: Paul Rudolph's Art and Architecture Building at Yale, which is now just called Rudolph Hall, Kevin Roche's New Haven Coliseum, which has since been taken down, and Roche Dinkeloo's Knights of Columbus building, which is still there. And also Paul Rudolph's housing for the elderly [George Crawford Manor]. Then, Jim Morrison... It came out of

this notion of radical juxtapositions, putting things together that maybe don't appear to go together immediately, but which create a third meaning, or another meaning, or a layered meaning. Jim Morrison may seem arbitrary, but there is a connection: he was arrested in New Haven.

SP: Wasn't he arrested for public indecency?

TB: I don't think he showed his penis there, but he said "Fuck the police!" Growing up in New Haven, this was something you were really proud of — it was really cool. He even incorporated the incident into The Doors' song *Peace Frog*: "Blood in the streets in the town of New Haven..." And then he was also a figure that I was extremely attracted to. I don't just mean physically — he had this intellectualism around him at the same time he had this sensuality about him. I thought a lot about his skin, I thought about him as a body and as a performer, and the performative aspects of his work coming up against the notion of the skin of a Paul Rudolph building — the envelope of a building and how it performs and embodies certain ideas.

SP: As part of Bortolami Gallery's ongoing Artist / City program, you now have a one-year lease on Breuer's Pirelli building, which sits in the middle of the parking lot of New Haven's IKEA. What are the logistics of this project and what does it represent for you personally?

TB: I was in conversation with Stefania [Bortolami] about her Artist / City program generally, which I find very exciting. We talked initially about some sites in California, but nothing really seemed to click for me. And then Stefania said, "What about New Haven?" And I remember going home and thinking, "That's actually the most brilliant thing, or it could be the most horrible thing." But the fact that it could be either seemed ripe for the taking. For me to get excited about it, it had to have that level of perversity, and my hometown happens to be this very banal strange place that is actually very conflicted as an urban center.

SP: Is part of the reason for the conflict the presence of Yale University?

TB: Absolutely. I didn't go to Yale, but my family was associated with the university. I had a lot of emotional thoughts about this that are hard to deal with. On the one hand, I have an awful lot of snobbery that I inherited from this academic background, and on the other I have just as much snobbery against that. So when Stefania and I finally looked at spaces in New Haven, I kept thinking about this building. I assumed that it was impossible, or else it would've been done already. And then we got up the gumption to just go for it. And strangely IKEA, who owns the building now, was ready for it. It's a weird, incredible culmination of many things for me. There are many, many layers here.

SP: Let's go into some of the layers of New Haven. How did you start thinking about what you were going to do there?

TB: One of the things I never really talked about in relationship to my work is my relationship to my family growing up, specifically to my younger brother. He was born in 1968 and suffered from muscular dystrophy. He died when he was 18 and I was 23. My upbringing was very complex because of this, and I've never really spoken about it. I don't

know how it's going to manifest in this project, but I wanted to fold this in in some way. Also, my older brother is gay, and we like to believe that my younger brother was gay too. We don't know that for sure because his sexuality was immobilized due to the disease. So this project somehow opened this story up for me, because we had so many issues regarding access to this building. We've had to think about ramps, we've had to think about codes. Ned and I — my brother's name was Ned — used to do floor plans back and forth to each other. I would send them to him, he would send them back to me, because he never moved away from my parents' house obviously, but he wanted to move to New York when I moved to New York. He was very good at as much drafting as he could do (this was before computers). For him it was always about the elevators. It was always about access. And space was organized in a very particular way because of that. And I found that fascinating. A lot of that has come back to me with this project, where I have to think about differentiation and "publics" in a different way.

SP: How will you occupy the building? Are you going to build a studio there, or are you imagining it more as an exhibition space?

TB: I'll use it as an exhibition space. We will definitely be occupying the first floor, and potentially the second floor as well, at some point. I'm going to be bringing in work that will all be made in relationship to that space. Some things are going to be highly site-specific in a classical sense, in that they're actually using the architecture of that space. Other things will be sort of contextualized there. It's for the duration of a year and the exhibition will evolve, there will be several iterations. We're trying to do a public event once a month: maybe a conversation like this one, or my friend, the artist Lena Henke, coming in to do something else, or the writer Andrew Durbin coming in to speak, for example. We're also very interested in connecting with Yale University as well as with the local arts community outside of the university, which exists in New Haven. And I want to understand the city's role as a satellite to New York.

SP: Do you already have an idea of what kind of art you will be making?

TB: The first phase is my response to the need to bring the building up to code. These are sculptural works made of steel and plywood that use site-intervention strategies while also technically and legally responding to mandates for opening the building to the public. Imagine bannisters, bars, or railings that cordon off or make inaccessible a seemingly indiscriminate or arbitrary open plan within the first floor of a former office. After that, I'll be installing works that are influenced by Sol LeWitt's iterations of a cube — white-aluminum, free-standing sculptures that revisit forms from my own work, but revised in color and context. I'm thinking of them more as strange architectural and psychic possibilities in relation to clinical spaces and hospitals. I think my strongest New Haven memories are of Yale New Haven Hospital and the Yale Health Center. These were constant institutional spaces in my life growing up. I had an extraordinary responsibility there because I was one of the caretakers and I had an intercom in my bedroom should I have to get up in the middle of the night and take my brother down. So those kinds of things were very structural conditions of my adolescence. I find that fascinating.

SP: I find that *really* fascinating.

TB: But these memories didn't come up for me while in New York. They only came up very profoundly when I spent more time in New Haven. And it affected the way Stefania and I started thinking about the building from a very practical standpoint. Every time we visited, we thought about how we'll have people come in there, and we had to start thinking about building codes. I started to think about carrying bodies and the weight of people and that sort of thing. I'm probably making it seem very conscious, but it wasn't so conscious. These things started to permeate my thought process.

SP: We've talked a lot about personal and public experience in the built environment, both on an individual level and in a universal sense. Now that you are yourself the builder of the space, how are you negotiating the experience of the personal and the public?

TB: I'm a big believer in all of the activities that go alongside art-making, whether it's a talk like this, or a private conversation when I might happen to say, "You know what this comes from?" I think art history is built of those almost anecdotal moments. I'm always struck by people who say, "Let the art speak for itself," and who don't want to know anything about the background to the art. To me that's bullshit because everything speaks about the art. We get it from all sorts of sources. That's the way we learn art history, and that's the way we understand an exhibition. You need context, and gossip, and all levels of that. So for this project I'm interested in the fact that you may go into the Pirelli Building and not see anything. But you may have heard of my brother and my relationship to my brother, and you will potentially, as a footnote, experience that in relationship to some of the issues that I might be dealing with. And those issues might have to do more generally with access. Ultimately I'm not interested in dwelling on a highly personal situation that only applies to my particular biography. It's only really interesting to me, and only really relevant to me, if it speaks to a larger context. Otherwise, it just feels indulgent in a way that doesn't inspire me.