Activating Historic Spaces
Activating Iconic Spaces: Art Intervention as a Force for Preservation

PETRA BACHMAIER AND SEAN GALLERO

Luftwerk creates immersive art installations using light, color, sculpture, and sound to augment the experiences of space and site, blending history with contemporary media to open new aesthetic conversations. In recent years, we have had the opportunity to interpret and illuminate several historically and culturally significant places. We view these art installations as interventions, forming a creative link between architectural masterpieces, their natural settings, and the audiences of today.

“WORKING WITH” GREAT ARCHITECTS
Given that we are site-specific installation artists, the concept of space has always fascinated us. In recent years, we have had the honor of “working with” great architects of modern history, which has enabled us to develop an increased awareness of space. With each project, we aim to discover and accentuate the unique relationships between architecture and environment, transforming the experience of space and site through light and color. We view our interventions with architecturally significant buildings as direct conversations with their architects and the environments they created. By researching the architectural theories and musings of modern masters such as Ludwig Mies van de Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and others, we have become keenly aware of the architects’ relationships to site and the mechanisms that informed their designs.

We believe that their buildings are important to learn from, engage with, and preserve because of the enduring nature of their iconic designs: from their bold, unconventional shapes and relationships with environment to their use of building materials.

We continue to be inspired by their philosophies and, with each new project, are excited to engage in dialogues by activating spaces that attract new and reinvigorated audiences.
PROJECTING MODERN AT THE ROBIE HOUSE

Our first opportunity to work directly with iconic architecture was in 2010 with Frank Lloyd Wright’s Frederick C. Robie House in Hyde Park, Illinois. We began our research by mining Wright’s aesthetics to gain a holistic understanding of the building itself. Inspired by his philosophies and the building as a forerunner of Modernism in architecture, we investigated the symbiotic relationship between architectural space and contemporary art. Throughout the house’s private rooms, we used walls, ceilings, and floors as canvases and frames for light interventions that literally and figuratively projected the idea of “modern” and what it means to us as artists today.

Titled Projecting Modern, the exhibition invited visitors to explore seemingly disparate video installations that, taken as a whole, spoke with—rather than for or about—Wright’s aesthetic. The exhibit became a milestone for our art practice, allowing us to tangibly engage with significant principles found within the built environment. Invigorated by the challenge of “working with” a master architect, we have since sought to work with structures that hold similar architectural significance.

FALLINGWATER: ART IN NATURE

In 2011 we were commissioned by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy to create an immersive light installation—Fallingwater: Art in Nature—celebrating the 75th anniversary of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater residence in Mill Run, Pennsylvania. Our
intervention was informed by the structural dynamism of the house and its striking integration with its natural surroundings. Inspired by Wright’s principles of “organic architecture,” we mounted a seven-channel video installation throughout the surrounding forest and, at nightfall, projected imagery directly onto the front facade of Fallingwater. The multiplaned, tiered architecture inspired the projected graphic content of geometric motion, while the waterfall on which the home sits was filmed and integrated into the video content. The projections created a performance of patterns and abstracted imagery while deconstructing the house’s architecture into multiple planar canvases. The dialogue emphasized the relationship of the building to its site, magnifying the harmonious coexistence of natural and manmade forms.

LYRICAL GEOMETRY AT THE FORD HOUSE
In 2014 Sidney Robinson, owner of the Bruce Goff–designed Ford House in Aurora, Illinois, invited us to participate in a performance with critically acclaimed music group Third Coast Percussion, activating the unique Midcentury Modern house through a projection on its distinctive dome-shaped ceiling. Through research, we learned that Goff was not only a largely self-taught architect but also a composer of music for the player-piano, and his music became the catalyst for both the audio and visuals of the performance. While Third Coast Percussion used original recordings of the music as
inspiration, we looked to the visual traits of the paper piano rolls. Each roll is marked with a multitude of perforations that act as physical “data,” controlling the output of the instrument. Informed by the spacing and fluidity of the perforations in the paper, we created *Lyrical Geometry*. The light composition spoke directly to the music featured that evening and to the vast creativity of the architect, as the Ford House’s interior dome was imbued with variations of light and motion. Since the event, the owner has moved forward with having the residence landmarked to ensure that it will be enjoyed by generations to come.

**INSITE AT THE FARNSWORTH HOUSE**

“What do you do with a revered masterwork of the 20th century?” was the question posed by Steve Dietz, who wrote the curatorial text accompanying *INsite*, presented in 2014 at Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s [Farnsworth House](https://www.farnsworthhouse.org) in Plano, Illinois. Here we were inspired by the minimalist structure of the building with its eight iconic vertical columns, horizontal floor and roof planes, and intimate relationship to the nearby Fox River and the black sugar maple tree that had so shaped Mies van der Rohe’s siting choice. Consequently, the video projections used were influenced by the geometry and natural setting of the house. The projected patterns deconstructed and reconstructed the building’s geometry,
celebrating its Modernist architectural gestures. As the building, which sits in a flood-plain, is elevated by columns, the projections further emphasized its ethereal quality of floating. The exhibition aimed to offer new perspectives on the Modernist building that has been discussed and analyzed since its creation and invited viewers to participate in a dynamic journey of visual and sonic elements specific to the house. Dietz described the artwork as:

a looping composition divided into three sections roughly corresponding to the structure of the house, the fluidity of its transparent glass walls, and the organic, where nature meets geometry. Luftwerk uses projection mapping, especially in the first movement, to highlight the horizontal structural steel beams that enable the glass walls to enclose the volume of the space with such an ethereal mass. Subsequent projections of abstracted patterns are like an artist’s MRI of the interior volume of Farnsworth, flooding it with images of fluidity created in their studio in a playful but systematic topographic investigation. In the last movement, color enters in and nature is projected within the volume of the house. Dappled sense memories from the daytime meld with the structural outline of the house, transforming it.

SOLARISE: A SEA OF ALL COLORS AT GARFIELD PARK CONSERVATORY

Our most recent project is solarise: a sea of all colors, currently on view at Chicago’s Garfield Park Conservatory through September 2016. The conservatory is considered a civic gem in the “emerald
“necklace” that is the city’s unique boulevard and parks system—a place for the public to rest, wander, explore, and connect to nature. With this exhibition, we were inspired by the innovative vision of Jens Jensen, the conservatory’s designer and the godfather of naturalistic landscape and conservatory design, aiming to create a series of art installations that would echo his call for public interaction with nature.

To better understand the DNA of the space, we connected with conservatory staff to learn the history of the building and its plant collection. To further inform our designs for each of the installations within the conservatory, we researched the ways in which different plants grow, adapt, and flourish in certain environments. This helped ensure that our installations are in conversation with the environment and enhance the feeling of wonder as viewers experience the plants and artwork. Being one of the largest greenhouse conservatories in the United States, Garfield Park Conservatory hosts multiple “houses” for collections, which presented us with the opportunity for multiple points of intervention. As we developed the exhibition, each artwork began to reflect the different qualities of its specific site, resulting in five large-scale installations in direct dialogue with their surrounding natural environments. Specific examples of our work integrating with the architecture of the conservatory include The Beacon and Florescence.

When Jens Jensen conceived the design for Garfield Park Conservatory, he was inspired by the tall prairie grass landscape of the Midwest. With the shape of the prairie haystack in mind, he developed the long, horizontal front facade. In response to Jensen’s design approach, we created The Beacon—a dynamic, moving light installation featuring 526 computer-programmed LED light nodes that run vertically along the interior of the Palm House dome.

Luftwerk’s Portal installation, part of solarise: sea of all colors at the Garfield Park Conservatory in Chicago. Framing the legendary “spring song waterfall,” which crowns the lagoon of the Fern Room, Portal draws the viewer’s gaze directly to the heart of the conservatory. Floating above the surface of the reflection pool, the installation reflects its natural surroundings. PHOTO BY PETER TSAI
The content of the programmed LEDs is a recording of prairie grass blowing in the wind, and the piece is activated by anemometers that gauge the course and speed of wind passing across Chicago, affecting the vibrancy, speed, and dynamics of the installation. *The Beacon* is designed to create a fluid gesture of light that aims to mimic tall prairie grasses swaying in the breeze.

With *Florescence*, we were inspired by how plants perceive light. Specifically, we learned that the red and blue spectrums found within light are most vital to the growth process, with red prompting flowering and blue determining the direction of growth. This led us to create a sculptural intervention of red and blue petals hung canopy-like in an optical pattern. As sunlight passes through the translucent petals, colorful shadows are cast throughout the entirety of the Show House, creating an immersive experience that changes visitors’ perceptions of the colors of the plants, heightening their awareness of the processes by which nature unfolds. By flooding the space with red and blue, we aimed to create an atmosphere referencing growth and blossoming, placing the viewer in a “charged” environment and accentuating the ways in which people, plants, and color interact with light energy.

A site-specific response to the conservatory, *solarise* invites new perspectives on light and nature while heightening visitors’ awareness of the natural surroundings, the relevance of Jensen’s visionary landscape, and the significance of the building and its grounds.

*Luftwerk’s Florescence* installation, part of *solarise: sea of all colors* at the Garfield Park Conservatory in Chicago. PHOTO BY JOHN FAIER
ART INTERVENTION DRIVING PRESERVATION

Through these projects, we have seen firsthand how art can be a transformative tool providing a unique point of access to engage and invigorate viewers with new ideas, aesthetics, and perspectives. We have also found that the value of integrating art as site-specific programming includes, but is not limited to, finding creative ways to educate the public about historical importance and contemporary relevance, developing new audiences and driving increased traffic, generating publicity through exhibition reviews, aiding in fundraising efforts, and more. For example, INsite was made possible by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Northern Lights.mn, and the National Endowment for the Arts, but we also used a Kickstarter campaign to raise awareness both for financing the project and for the site itself. Doing so provided necessary seed funding as well as a platform to speak about the relevance of landmarks such as the Farnsworth House, develop audiences for the project, and spur subsequent press coverage. Further, through online video documentation and social media, we have been able to reach people worldwide, creating new audiences not only for our practice but also for the sites we work with.

We are excited to continue having these conversations with architects—as well as with the people who steward these iconic places today—and presenting refreshed dialogues and new perspectives by way of contemporary art. FJ

PETRA BACHMAIER and SEAN GALLERO met during Performance Art studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999 and have collaborated since 2000. The artist duo formed Luftwerk, based in Chicago, in 2007.