PAVILIONS
Art in architecture
Robert Ireland: You have brought up the fundamental issue of the responsibility that architects and artists have towards others in society. Could you say more?

Dieter Dietz: I refer to an ethical dimension of responsibility that we all have, as citizens and human beings. As such we have a role in society, which goes beyond ourselves as individuals. Artists play a certain role as a reflexive body that senses society's condition. Architects have a slightly different role, as the reflexive part is only one aspect of our work. Society rightfully expects architecture to contribute to the way it functions, as a means of housing our collective activities. As inventors and makers of environments architects—but also artists and literally all individuals and bodies engaging in this process—have to take on responsibility towards both society and our environment. Since these processes are highly complex and cannot be understood through analytical or deductive means alone, these collaborative processes that comprise the making of architecture should be spared any over-simplifying discourse and action. They need to be addressed in multifaceted modes of reflection, participation, conception, invention, sharing and making.

RI: Does the “right to a space” imply a participation in it? By whom?

DD: Yes, by everybody. This notion concerns literally everyone, and not only professionals and artists. We are presently testing modes of participation where it is not the most common denominator that determines an outcome, or where a pre-given problem will be discussed until consensus has been reached. Such modes sometimes tend to flatten content and constrict invention. In fact within these modes, we are usually confronted with the following: A client or society defines a problem, a budget is established, and professionals are asked to provide a solution to that problem.
What if we were to think of modes through which ideas, rather, laid the foundation for new things to emerge? The process would most likely start to function differently. First, others would have to be convinced, then resources would have to be found, and a location—a site—for the realization of the project. Such a process needs to unfold through communication, through a discussion that will convince others by means of positive arguments. Only those who are convinced would then invest resources once they realized that an idea can have a strong impact and contribute to society. In contrast to the tax-payer, who has already given his or her money to politicians elected as representatives, a committed participant will act differently because he or she might believe in an idea that is convincing. Of course, such processes also need to be given regulatory means established by society. Already having been implemented for small- and medium-scale projects, they were also included in collaborative projects with diverse stakeholders. It would be very interesting to imagine such processes for more important, large-scale public spaces.

RI: Architecture has a “face,” as you suggested during your intervention at the Symposium in Serre with the example from artist JR. A form of humanism?

DD: Here I used JR’s work, who proposed photographic portraits of women pasted onto the façades of favelas in Rio, as a double metaphor, playing on the two-fold nature of the metaphor, first as a signifier of something else, but always also referring to the originally signified. In this case JR is adding a literal dimension to the power of connotation. The face is photographic representation of the face of an individual person that thus becomes “present” in the public place. Many faces make up society. As with the face of a person, in architecture, it is less about what it looks like, but more about what it makes you feel, how you can relate to it. So quite in opposition to the idea that would put forward architecture’s face as only the superficial appearance of an object, I am more interested in this other dimension: Of an architecture that communicates through its presence, through its spatial and interactive nature, through the ways in which it participates in our everyday life, being a part of it, a means to facilitate our being together and our interactions. The face, then, is not just the external feature of something, or someone, but rather conveys a moment of its inner life.

RI: To take the example of Bruce Nauman’s Corridor (1969), your concerns seem to focus equally on the phenomenology of perception: Space incarnated in our bodies and that circulates within them. What about this experience?

DD: Space is the place of our interaction, the place where we live. Engaged in spatial conditions, we always negotiate: Within ourselves, with our environment, with others. Nauman’s installations make this condition explicit. I am aware of my body, I am aware of the space that acts upon it. I will be very aware, if another individual enters that space. Nauman says of this first corridor installation that he conceived of it after a dream. In this dream he saw himself confronted with his own self. He then introduced a camera in the corridor that films the person from behind. As you approach a monitor at the end of the corridor the image recorded by the camera becomes smaller. For me this installation is prototypical for any space in which we interact with humans, and with ourselves: One’s behavior is clearly embedded in spatial conditions.

RI: And referring to Tilted Arc (1981) by Richard Serra, you have said that this installation “creates” space.

DD: The Tilted Arc example is fascinating. Serra deploys one of the primary architectural elements: The wall. In the way he positions this one element, the way he forms it in relation to gravity, the way he materializes it, the way he engages it in space is so powerful that it provoked pointed and effective protests in a community, and not in a conservative provincial
town, but in New York. The piece was finally removed. I believe the controversy was largely owed to the fact that Serra’s intervention acted so decisively on space and that this spatial set up decisively intervened with human behavior. Where a barrier, such as a 6-lane street, would go unnoticed and force people to stand and wait for minutes at crossroads, the extra seconds spent walking around Titled Arc and which also deprived people of an unobstructed view was too much to bear for that community at that time. It shows how powerful clearly articulated interventions are. In Titled Arc all dimensions that can be exploited through a linear, spatial element – its gravitational vertical force, its spatial directional force contracting and expanding space through its convex and concave planes – all these converged to create a powerful spatial experience for the observer, powerful enough to incite protest.

RI: What meaning do you give to the temporary and to the event when you say that they give the architect more freedom?

DD: There are two aspects, a first one that is more pragmatic, and a second, more tenuous one. The first includes the fact that regulations are much more relaxed for non-permanent structures. Rules concerning distances to other structures, roads, or landscape elements are not necessarily valid for ephemeral interventions, while of course security regulations always remain a definite constraint. It is, for instance, possible to apprehend historic monuments more closely with entirely new technology in a condition of proximity unthinkable for regular constructions, such as for instance in Lund, our scenic installation for the St-Prex Classics (fig. 1, 2). However, more importantly, all actors involved in such ventures appear to be much more relaxed, if a structure is not meant to remain permanently.

However, in a more general sense I believe the ephemeral addresses the question of permanence and temporality. Whereas people often strive for enduring life conditions and change is often felt as a threat to their sense of security, a less permanent change is quite naturally perceived as a welcome rupture with, or diversion from everyday life. It allows you to see your own world differently while you don’t have to give up your habits, and your familiar environment will re-emerge after the event. Of course there are also those who perceive even a temporary rupture as a threat.

RI: One of the constructions, realized in Renens with the EPFL Laboratory ALICE, is a sphere. It is more or less a literal representation of the phrase, “a public sphere…”

DD: In the context of Espace TILT’s inaugural exhibition entitled État des lieux (Conditions of Space) ALICE’s proposal took the shape of a large-scale architectural installation: A wooden sphere placed at the heart of the Place du Corso in Renens. Both open and closed, the sphere “worked” a dually: From the outside, it was perceived rather as an object that gave the gallery its presence on the street, while from the inside, it quickly felt like a dynamic space, a place to rest, to play, to sit and discuss. The presence of the sphere transformed the surrounding urban area into a public space, a temporary forum for ideas and actions. And it was evident that the project’s spherical shape made it a natural space for gatherings or assemblies. It is a concise yet expansive space.

RI: In 2008, at the London Festival of Architecture you presented Overflow over the Thames: A reduced, yet highly interactive experience at the time. What lessons should be drawn from it?

DD: Overflow was an installation that made one aware of the 6m tide amplitude in the very heart of London – a phenomenon that goes mostly unnoticed given its temporality and the spatial condition of the Thames’ embankments (fig. 3, 4). The tides would transform a vertical screen of 15m length and 9m height.
Fig. 3-4: Oscar Day in Alice Dwell, 2008, view of the installations in London (GB). Photo: Alice Studio.
into a canopy over the embankment terrace. To install it we were depending on the public of passers-by, and a good 50 to 100 people were involved in that event. The installation lasted only two days, but it remains an unforgettable experience for all the students and everyone involved. It showed the potential of intervention to create common spirit. Next to winning the major prizes at the London Festival of Architecture it became a door opener for future ventures. Conceptually speaking, it is an example of those small projects capable of functioning on a very large scale: The tidal forces due to the interplanetary gravitational pull on a relatively small structure, yet powerful in the evidence of its spatial impact. A similar idea was decisive for Evolver, ("Evolving", 2009) our panoramic structure in Zermatt (fig. 5).

It is one of our main passions at ALICE to create projects that are spatially both interactive and participatory agents once constructed. We try to live with our projects throughout their life cycle: In the process of their conception during their development and their construction, then in their actualized spatial condition; and finally, in their dismantlement process, their disappearance, and their becoming a memory.