

JOSE DÁVILA: SOME PARTS OF
A WHOLE UNKNOWN
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I am looking at a work by Jose Dávila right now—well, in truth it is a part of a model, a test for a yet-to-be-realized sculpture, a large-scale public project that we have been discussing for the past five years now, and have finally found the way to bring it to fruition. Considering Dávila's work for this essay, I realize that this model, in essence, encapsulates the artist's most salient recurring preoccupations within its simple form. It is a metal frame, resembling a rectangular wall but with only the internal structure built so far; a transparent framework much like scaffolding, comprised of smaller uniform modular squares that make up the whole. The metal of this particular framework unit is powder-coated in blue (other elements of the model, different combinations of the square structural elements, are red and yellow; primary colors) and create a transparent system for what may be a complete object as is, or a potential future wall, or a solid form, or a building, or a city. It is both solidly present—sturdy, heavy material, implying a load-bearing mass (sculptural), while admittedly some dimensions are lacking, its linear outlines alluding to a digital architectural schematic (drawing). It might even be architecture, in fact—in the sense that it could be a built wall creating a spatial divide or an enclosure, but it might just as well be a playground, or a utility structure like scaffolding or urban furniture.

Like many of Dávila's works, this small model riffs off Minimalist serial systems, the idea of an unknown progression or goal with infinite potential, as well as those unfinished, incomplete real structures found in everyday life. Duplication and repetition can be as much a recipe for never finishing things, for boredom and sameness, as for potential and purpose. Dávila often uses outlines and frameworks to underscore his interest in these systems (versus the actuality of their forms), while the specificity of materials he employs keeps his investigations grounded in direct experience. His Judd box or stack series, for example, reinterprets Donald Judd's famous sculptural series in pure metal outlines or in even more humble materials such as found cardboard boxes. Other works use tracing and framework to explore how light and shadow can be as much a "material" of built forms as any other, a concept central to the architecture of Luis Barragán, whose principles shaped much of Mexican Modernism. The series *Promise of a Better World* (2010-2011), utilizes bricks and concrete as well as neon light to "build" a relationship between form and its absence, light and shadow, solidity and insubstantiality. Works such as *All or Nothing* (2002) or *Wall Games* (2004) go even further, using the existing walls of the exhibition spaces to retrace frameworks and outlines in light, paint, metal forms made meaningful by context—while also being "plans" or schematics stripped of purpose by being scaled to actual space (thus not a model, or plan), and thus "reduced" to pure form. Playing with elements of modernist architecture and art is a fundamental premise of Dávila's overall project—synthesizing referents to past theories and ideals with their often failed application through a keen observation of the systems that make up the cities he lives in and the imaginative, specific solutions to those failures. Often "tested" in more remote or economically challenged areas of the world, "... the ultimately unsolved applicability of modernist architectural principles ... "1 does continue! damage to so many working-class Latin American neighborhoods. Just as present as its systemic disappointments are the inventive solutions devised, typically out of necessity, by specific individuals to meet particular needs. This is the fundamental—and perhaps most vital—contradiction of modernism, where the actualities of modern living work in constant friction against modernism's attempt to "universalize" or flat-out ignore them. Dávila's work, *Studies for Future Buildings* (2003-2008), is a deft, light-handed inversion of this contradiction: for several years, the artist took photographs of urban objects that resembled built structures—stacks of pallets,

crushed cardboard boxes, a well-worn sign board, a cube of discarded window panes, etc.-which he then recreated in the gallery along with their image, the nowlost found object reconstructed as a blueprint or model for a new urban architecture. The inherent melancholy, and fundamental fragility in Dávila's project -this one and many others holds those contractions of modern living up higher than the isolating, unresolved universals of modernism, but steers clear of the "noble poor" condescension that characterizes many artworks through their formal abstraction, and the ephemeral beauty of his works. Like those repurposed makeshift structures, this small model that I continue to observe here in my room is just one part of a larger whole -this and many other combinations of the metal squares of different colors will comprise a giant cube, outlined in primary-colored frames. When whole, it will suggest a minimal sculpture, though that movement's desire for gestalt (as Robert Morris wrote, " ... parts bound together as to create a maximum resistance to perceptual separation" is undermined by its transparency (and future action)-clearly holding its surroundings within and through its viewing rather than creating the reflective, impenetrable form, the mute center in the minimalist arena that characterized the earlier sculptural gesture. Dávila's sculptural plan is inclusive-made specific in context, even as a whole giant square inviting one to penetrate it, climb on it, move within it, see the world through it.

Like much of the artist's work, as we have noted, it is modular; by definition a self-sustaining pattern that can grow and evolve into infinite shapes and uses, thus always suggestive of future potential and progress. Dávila's pervasive interest in Modernist architecture often cleaves to more idealistic, future-oriented theories and projects, such as Buckminster Fuller's 'systems for living,' or the visionary proposals for floating or levitating structures that released us from the constraints of Earth's gravity. Dávila's Flying City (2008) -installed in the lobby of the Bloomberg office space in London-played upon the earlier theories of megastructures. Megastructures are, in essence, large-scale modular buildings capable of infinite growth and designed to accommodate smaller, modular "plugins" that adapt to specific needs, even while the framework, was intended to last much longer than those specific moments with their particular needs. The artist translates these architectural referents into his own abstract, almost formalist language: the stacked, layered hexagonal forms (comprised of medium-density fiberboard and fluorescent tubes), are meant to be seen from every angle, through to the building that houses them, as well as from varying the different perspectives of the viewers, at times suggesting built forms, at times seeming to disintegrate and disperse. This installation, like Dávila's overall engagement with past examples, is not so much an illustration of the desires and failures of the modernist project but rather his own voice translating those contradictions into a new language.

This giant cube will, over time, disassemble into many pre-determined parts, each, like the model, with their own sculptural form and combination of modules, and disperse to different sites throughout the city (in this case Los Angeles, California, but it could conceivably work anywhere). Like the reference to scaffolding-itself an intentionally nomadic structure given meaning and purpose by context- each piece of the whole will then take on a new *raison d'être* in its new home: a series of three cubes arranged horizontally may become a bus stop bench; an uneven combination of squares, part of a playground or skate park; a cubic form may mimic (that is to say mock) the typical "Plop Art" found in corporate plazas.

Other forms will go to existing buildings in Los Angeles that are already part of its singular Modernist architectural history- the Case Study Houses (by Richard Neutra, Ray and Charles Eames, etc.), for example, and structures by other Modernist masters like John Lautner and Rudolph M. Schindler- and their cubic arrangement will resemble elements of those seminal designs. These modular sec-

tions of the cubes will reside in their new homes for a time, taking on a new life and character there, becoming or being something else by virtue of their context and use. Eventually, they will make their way home once again, to their original site, and be reassembled into the giant cube they initially comprised. Their journey-the story of the trip to their destination, the experience there and the trip back- will also become a part of the whole artwork. Time becomes an intrinsic part of their "Specific Objects," adding additional layers of meaning to this term coined by Donald Judd in 1965 to define an artwork as neither painting nor sculpture but a kind of superior hybrid of the two. Dávila's work is more along the lines of Michael Fried's interpretation of the inherent "theatricality" of Minimalist sculpture, based on its necessary engagement with the viewer's physicality and the need for his or her observation and interaction to complete the work's performance. Of course, Fried's jeremiad was a denunciation of this displacement from "pure" aesthetic concerns, but in effect this approach -further developed by post-minimalists such as Robert Smithson, and now fully embraced by many contemporary artists as stage-setting, props, locations for activity and community- is arguably the overarching principle of much contemporary artwork.

Now deliberately meant to be activated by the viewer, these gestures of social practice appear in Dávila's oeuvre as well. *The Space Beneath Us* (2012) is inspired by the layered geometric structures of a recurring referent in Dávila's work, Joseph Albers' *Homage to the Square* paintings. Here, however, they are repurposed in scale, context, and orientation, in the form of a large-scale depression with steps in a park lawn lined by traditional handmade ceramic tiles from Mexico, forming a kind of community bench/seating area. On the one hand, the work creates an inverted version of Albers' formal explorations of stacked geometries; on the other, it is a community space, completed only by viewers' use. The orientation of the steps encourages visitors to sit facing one another, encouraging interaction and conversation. Another of the artist's large-scale public projects shapes a temporary, mobile space even more emphatically: *Temporality is a Question of Survival* (2001) and *Nomadic Platform* (2005) utilize the ultimate nomadic construction, scaffolding, a space typically designated for "invisible" labor, into a site for exploration, discovery, and contemplation. The bright colors indicate a space that is playful yet inherently temporary and borderline, a liminal space of experience that suggests something about to be, or that just was. Like the model fragment I am looking at now, Dávila's work so often leaves us with a feeling of potential, but in an extremely human sense of that word. That is to say, potential is either inherently temporal ; it refers to something yet to be or to the results of time passed; its failures and foibles still visible, yet to be (presumably) corrected. It is about motion, evolution, imagination, but also about limits and challenges. Potential implies ongoing commitment and work, both individual and systemic. It is, fundamentally, about reshaping what has been, and what is yet to come.