

## A Conversation with Sarah Oppenheimer, Part II

### Participants:

**Kevin Alter**, Sid W. Richardson Centennial Professor of Architecture, Partner,  
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**Andrée Bober**, Landmarks Founding Director and Curator

**Sarah Oppenheimer**, Artist

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**Andrée:** There have been many twists and turns in the development of your concept for this piece. It seemed like each time you came up with an idea, we'd discover new conditions that were previously unknown and you'd have to go back to the drawing board again and again. I think most artists would have cracked, but at each stage—and there were dozens of them—you seemed to thrive on the challenges and were eager to invent solutions. Can you walk us through the overall arc of the work's development?

**Sarah:** Yes, it's interesting to start with that question because there are constraints in every project. Constraint too often implies that a work is determined, shaped, and manipulated by its context. It is rarely recognized as an opportunity to manipulate these contextual parameters. But I find that constraints are profoundly generative. To imagine an artwork without constraint, or imagine anything without constraint, is to imagine it as autonomous. I'm not interested in making autonomous things.

This project in particular was an eye-opener in regard to constraints, because the work demanded I interface with a radically larger scale of operations. Collaboration with multiple players opened up a lot of possibilities while simultaneously imposing creative limits. I'm curious, Kevin, as an architect, what's your relationship to the constraints of a collaborative process?

**Kevin:** I love hearing you talk about your work this way, in part because it reinforces my desire to see what you do as more like architecture than the autonomous version of art practice that you mention. In many ways, the most interesting part of architecture is working through a project's constraints, rather than imagining a building as primarily the manifestation of the architect's desire. In this way, the building and its conception evolve as they engage constraints.

I've always been interested in sculpture, but one of the things that drove me to architecture is that I enjoy the collaborative process with clients, professionals, other constituencies, sites, regulations, etc... There is a school of thought often present in academia that these constraints are difficulties to overcome, and they contaminate the

purity of a project. However, I often find that the most interesting ideas arise because of unexpected constraints, and the effort to negotiate these concerns both inform the end result and distill the conceptual apparatus of a project.

In spite of what I can imagine were myriad difficulties in coordination and concerns about liability (especially at the University of Texas), for example, I believe that this piece is all the more remarkable because it is in the public domain, and not privatized with a rope around it, for example. That constraint, I believe, has helped this work become so extraordinary.

**Sarah:** What you're saying is so interesting. Every situation is composed of rhythmic patterns. There's a process in the development of a project where I'm looking for those primary rhythms within a situation, to play against them, or to play with them, depending on the work. Syncopation constrains and expands many of my works.

At the site of [C-010106](#), architectural alignments and misalignments orient pedestrian flow above and below GLT's pedestrian bridge, creating a rhythm, a pulse. In prior projects, these patterns of motion through a site were already in place. But in this instance, processional pathways emerged through the collaborative process between myself and others, as the architecture and the artwork developed in tandem.

**Kevin:** I like to see your work as architecture; architecture in the sense that it operates phenomenally, and through its experience invites the viewer to perceive the world with added insight. One way in which we share common ground is in the experience of a work that might allow the visitor a new perspective on, for example, their circumstance, environment, or social & cultural conditions. I think what's most compelling in architecture, and indeed in this work, is that the experience of the artifact might provide a new perspective and an invitation to action.

I'm interested in shelter; I'm interested in construction; I'm interested in beautiful things. But in the end, I am most interested in architecture when it offers positive change and provides the opportunity to see the world, or the shadows of a tree, for example, afresh. I've always thought about your work in that way; the experience is not just looking at a handsome artifact, but one that allows the viewer to see their surroundings in an enlightened way.

I don't mean to suggest that it is all choreographed. To the contrary, it's clear that the many reflections, and kinds of insights from experiencing your piece are not preconceived – but you have set the stage, as it were. I'm thinking now of ceramics and the kinds of variegation in the glazes that come out of a gas kiln. There's a kind of serendipity to it that seems similar in your work. Once it's placed in the world its effects aren't entirely controlled, and I think it's richer as a consequence.

So much of the focus in architecture is on just addressing the constraints – the problems of shelter, of order, of budgets, for example – that I think architects often get distracted from these more meaningful aspects of the field. The Roman architect Vitruvius is often cited for stating in his [Ten Books of Architecture](#) that architecture was firmness, commodity and delight. Firmness and commodity are easy to define and because it is more ephemeral, delight all too often is forgotten – but delight is where beauty and meaning are inculcated in architecture, and as a consequence is the most important aspect of Vitruvius' three elements.

**Sarah:** That's raising all sorts of associations for me; it's a very interesting notion of how architecture performs.

**Kevin:** I think if you asked a layperson what a modern building is, they'd probably answer with something like it's white, it's a simple form, it has a strip window. It is simple; abstract. However, I think if you asked the same layperson what modern art is they might point to [Picasso](#) or [Braque](#), where one sees a portrait as well as that person's profile; it shows them in movement as well as what they're thinking. There's a richer understanding of a person than what a previous portrait would have portrayed. I feel like the best modern buildings are the same. For example, glass is transparent, it's reflective; but it is most interesting when it is transparent and reflective simultaneously.

**Sarah:** So are you saying that in some ways the strength of the modern is in its ambiguity?

**Kevin:** I think so; in its ability to address multifarious concerns and readings simultaneously. To be clear, I'm not particularly interested in work that is complex in its form, but rather in work that has a complexity to the way it is perceived and understood; the artifact might be abstract, but its experience is complex.

**Sarah:** Yes, that's right. About twenty years ago, I travelled to Gifu Prefecture in Japan to Arakawa + Gins' [Reversible Destiny Project](#). They realized an architecture that was intended to reverse aging and undo death – an astonishing conceptual conceit. One of the most astounding pieces was an inverted hole covered in AstroTurf, approximately ½ km in diameter. Decaying Caligari-like house forms interrupted the convex green ground. There was a beauty and wonder in the structures' material decay. It amplified the magnitude of Arakawa and Gins' extraordinary claim.

There's something fascinating about conceptual architecture, and it's potential to generate radical, unimaginable change. Does the material instantiation need to exist? Can the conceptual conceit do it alone? These questions are linked to the modern, and how we make relations between things both linguistically and spatially. That's what I think about associatively, when we talk about the promise of architecture to create a psychic or practical alternative.

One related phenomenon I've noticed and tried to absorb in my work is that by greatly reducing the complexity of form, I am far more able to set up extremely complex relationships. If you begin with simple forms, you can explore the relationship between them, as well as the relationship between them and their environment. But when there's deep intricacy in each element, you lose the relational as a primary drive of inquiry.

**Andrée:** Something that struck me in your description is how great complexity and dynamic forms can arise from simplicity. It reminded me of when you were developing the concept for this commission. There was a moment where you pivoted from a much more complex proposal to a radically simplified form.

**Sarah:** Yes, that was such an important moment. I'm often preoccupied by the challenge of enmeshing a work, while allowing it to be distinguished from its environment. So that there's some kind of bracket that indicates "this is not everything". On the bridge, the artwork extends beyond its visible edge. Steel anchors are hidden beneath the pavers, structural rebar is buried in the slab. But the visual boundary between the artwork and environment is an essential perceptual bracket.

In an early draft of this project, the visual boundary of the artwork dispersed into the bridge's paved surface. This blur between bridge and artwork limited the work's potential. It became apparent to me that if an artwork aims to establish a relationship with a situation, it cannot become the situation.

**Kevin:** I appreciate that observation. I think one often finds a desire, probably more among architects than artists, to control everything. But as you point out, if the work is fundamentally about setting up a relationship with the complex circumstances of this particular place – the people, buildings, and landscapes – then it must have its own identity and a distinction of its boundaries.

**Sarah:** Over the past several years I've been interested in doorways, and prior to that I was extremely interested in apertures, specifically windows. Doors and windows function as thresholds, and thresholds are dependent on their environment to perform. A frame sited in an open field is not a doorway: when it's decontextualized it becomes a ready-made. A threshold is distinguishable from the space around it and dependent upon the space's variability – it's both integrated and distinct.

I often imagine architecture as a hinge, a distinct condition that is not separate, a radial spoke in a wheel, or a switch in a larger network.

**Kevin:** I'm excited that you identify doorways or windows as an interest. I think thresholds of all kinds are full of possibility. They are the elements that negotiate between different worlds, and I would argue that it is the threshold that identifies and

defines them. Akin to [Robert Irwin's](#) early studies or the edges of so much of [James Turrell's](#) work, we recognize how the frame both shapes the perspective of a space beyond and negotiates between different worlds.

I've often felt that much of an architect's attention should be focused on the threshold; the moment that both separates and defines distinct spaces, as well as what is inside and what is outside. Modern architecture often tried to blur this relationship such that thresholds were ambiguous, and its authority often rested on the consequent intimate relationship of an interior with the immediate surroundings. Likewise, the physicality and a person's engagement of a threshold matters in this relationship of circumstances. Grasping hold of a doorknob and cracking the door open is different than throwing it open entirely; as is the resistance that the door poses to opening. One becomes instantly aware of what is framed, what is not seen, and what constituencies are engaged.

I love thinking about your work in that way, as a threshold defining, connecting and highlighting the many conditions of its circumstance.

**Andrée:** I'd like to ask a question about thresholds. One thing that intrigues me about your piece is that you've taken this material—glass—which has a very high surface tension and is an amorphous solid. And you're inserting this fragile substance into a bridge which is inherently dynamic. This seems to create a new kind of threshold because we're not accustomed to those materials being in relation to one another. How did you become interested in this juxtaposition? Did your interest arise more from the materiality, or from the logistical challenge, or from some other place?

**Sarah:** There are probably many answers to this question, but let's start with materiality. For decades I've been interested in how a piece might engage with our built environment. When I first began manipulating architectural surfaces, I made everything by hand. Conceptually, the handmade acted as a citation of historically familiar processes of fabrication. This imprint of the hand had affect, a sort of cloud of nostalgia. I wanted to move past the imprint of the hand and integrate each piece into the material flows that comprise the built environment now. To do that, I had to acquire new tools and change how I worked. I learned new fabrication technologies and taught myself to manipulate 3D modeling software platforms. This process led to a very different relationship to materials. It has allowed me to integrate the materials of our contemporary urban environment - concrete and glass - into this piece.

In the last ten years, I continued exploring the structural and conceptual possibilities of glass. In 2012 I completed [W-120301](#), a permanent commission at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Like [C-010106](#), the Baltimore piece is composed of two glass planes that pass through a hole in a concrete floor, ricocheting sightlines into the space below. Unlike [C-010106](#), the surrounding wall of [W-120301](#) is opaque and the structural support

is obscured. In [C-010106](#), the vertical glass planes operate as a transparent structural wall. The interior reflective relationships are legible – and the cross section of the reflective planes is diagrammatically present. You could say that glass transforms the structure into a drawing.

**Kevin:** That's a beautiful piece. It's interesting to hear you talk about glass and concrete being familiar; the norm. I agree. When you were talking about the Japanese architects and the pilgrimage you made, it seems to me that you were evaluating the presence of something unfamiliar, and I wonder if that interest had a role in this piece as well; that 'normal' elements were de-familiarized in the way that they were employed.

**Sarah:** Yes, that's a really important tool I've used, the process of de-familiarization. I want to introduce a sense of the unfamiliar into the relationship between a human actor and the situation. I want the unfamiliar to cause a recalibration of our relationship with the built environment without resulting in radical separation or alienation.

**Kevin:** That seems important.

**Sarah:** I want to refer to something you said earlier about serendipity, which is such a beautiful word. I am eager to see [C-010106](#) completed. The work is not yet open to the public; I haven't had the opportunity to watch people engage with it. So, I'm incredibly curious about the serendipity that will emerge from these interactions, especially because the design process predicted many of the possible relational patterns.

**Kevin:** I think that it is brave to release control over the composition and invite the vicissitudes of circumstance to play a significant role in determining the character of the work. But it is this invitation that both allows a dynamism to the composition and focuses its relational content. I love the many overlapping relationships that are created through your piece, and how it is experienced with all the inclusiveness and serendipity of life, weather, people and place.

**Sarah:** And that goes right back to the beginning of our conversation, to the notion of constraint and how it holds potential for liberation from the autonomous object. Constraints direct chance operations. They make serendipitous encounters possible.

**Kevin:** That's a beautiful turn of phrase, liberation from the autonomous object, while at the same time being so carefully composed. I had two more questions, albeit at opposite ends of the making of the piece. First, were there particular constraints that were formative, or more consequential in the final iteration of the piece? And second, on the more technical side, what elements of the construction were most consequential? I understand that there is some very precise engineering and detail that allows the final sculpture to appear almost effortless. I suppose that I'm contemplating the constraints

that might be understood as consequential irritants – like the grain of sand that encourages a pearl to grow inside an oyster.

**Sarah:** Well, one of the most positively generative constraints was the ADA code. ADA regulates the flow of bodies through buildings—establishing a range of horizontal datums shaped by human motion. For example, handrails must be between 34 inches and 38 inches above walking surfaces. I used this code requirement as a design parameter: instead of putting a stanchion around the piece, the uppermost edge of the lower sloped glass became the guard rail.

I also used material to set up its own kind of constraint game. By deciding that each apparatus would be constructed from four pieces of glass, our engineers had to focus on developing a modular connection detail between glass planes that allowed for material movement. These decisions constrained which engineers and fabricators I collaborated with, who could fabricate within certain tolerances and at certain scales—so much was driven by this material choice.

**Andree:** That answers a question I had about whether the conditions drove material decisions, or if you chose the materials independently. In hindsight I recall those moments when we realized that if you were going to take this direction, then there were two fabricators who could reliably make the fittings, and only one glass manufacturer.

**Sarah:** It was exciting to get to work with this group of fabricators. It was an extraordinary fabrication challenge.

**Andrée:** I remember, Kevin, when we were on the bridge and you pointed out how fine the quality of the glass was, and contrasted it with the building glass.

**Kevin:** In the United States we tend to manufacture Insulated Glass Units (IGU) with tempered glass rather than laminated glass, and as a consequence they're not entirely flat and bow, so they appear a little wavy when you look carefully. You might not notice it otherwise, but the reflections in the laminated glass of Sarah's piece acts as a kind of datum against which one can measure the waves in the glass of the building.

**Andrée:** I loved that you pointed that out on the bridge, because you're looking with an architect's eye and I doubt that I would have spotted that detail.

**Kevin:** I so hope that when this work is published that it will include documentation of the construction details that are mostly concealed and covered up with pavers. They are so very thoughtful and beautiful in their own right – and they address the very real differentials in expansion and movement between the glass and the bridge. They allow the piece to appear almost effortless, slicing through the bridge. In reality, that must have taken a great deal of thought and effort and precision.

**Andrée:** It's an interesting question—how to share information about the structural thinking behind this piece, especially with students?

**Sarah:** I have a thought about this quite a bit. Materials expand and contract at different rates. Gravity and wind loads create dynamic change. So the project engineers had to develop systems that allowed materials to move. This occurred on many scales. The structural connection between the concrete ground plane and the glass planes had to allow each element to shift and yet remain tethered.

**Kevin:** Additionally, you had to contend with the other problems being outside of the controlled environment of a gallery. Environmental factors and social occasions add to the constraints with which you engaged. I think that publications tend to want to define the form of art and architecture as directly emerging from the will of its author. In contrast, I imagine that over the long period in which you worked on this piece that incorporating these other constraints that weren't part of a generating idea, became part of its conceptual apparatus and presumably made the piece richer.

**Sarah:** Yes. For many years now I've had an ongoing conversation about joints with the architect Julian Rose. This dialog has allowed me to think about architecture and the built environment as a site of constant flux. Everything I make, whether we think of it as still or moving, is always accommodating changing motion. And this has been one of the most interesting aspects of integrating work into the built environment: the work has located itself conceptually in the joint, between things.

**Kevin:** I think that is really astute. Moreover, I think the joint is most interesting when it is not the focus of visual attention and a form to elaborate upon. At the scale of ameliorating the artifact to the bridge the joint allows movement to happen without drawing attention to itself. Similarly, the whole piece is like the joint in a much larger circumstance, and it is that circumstance that is framed and highlighted.

**Sarah:** Exactly. If you make it really simple, then that joint can behave very complexly.