

Trading Spaces

by David Hay

(Metropolis Magazine March 2005)

By upending our notions of space and place, artist Andrea Blum questions the nature of design and our own behavior using it.

In the late 1970s Andrea Blum made a name for herself in the Chicago art scene with architectural tableaux built from concrete and dirt and bathed in light. Steeped in the Minimalism of the time, she invited her audience to see commonplace building materials as pure artistic forms. By 1985, with her installation *Benches and Walkways*, at East Carolina University, the sculptor was beckoning onlookers to walk inside her pieces. “I had started to consider how people could live with—even in—sculpture,” she says. Two decades later Blum is designing domestic interiors and public spaces as well as making furniture. Her philosophy remains the same: every object, from lounge chair to apartment, should be seen a piece of inhabitable sculpture conceived so that we’re forced to question not only the design but our own behavior inside them. “Through sculpture I hope to change people’s intimate domestic life,” she says.

Blum’s visions of a designed life are worthy of the best dreamers. “Her sculptures are free objects created without the constraints of a client, so she is able to deal solely with the essence of a design,” Paris-based architect Odile Decq says. Unfortunately Blum’s work has yet to be embraced by the mainstream design world. Artists who offer stylized versions of conventional objects—furniture, for example—have been better received than sculptors whose work probes the very way we use such objects.

During the last decade nearly all of Blum’s commissions have been in Europe. “Andrea’s work has a very subversive and conceptual quality to it,” notes Claudia Gould, director of the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, “and Europe deals with conceptual people better than we do.”

With her newest commission, an outdoor lounge at the edge of the University of Pennsylvania campus, to be completed in late spring, Blum will reach an American audience. The 54-year-old sculptor is inviting pedestrians to see her 150-foot-long series of seats and tables as more than just public sculpture—as a commentary on design. Her lounge is a series of seating areas and pavilions made from cast concrete. Blum asks people who want to relax there to examine their behavior: many seats have their backs to tables rather than facing them. The tables and walls of the pavilions—elements that traditionally offer some privacy (remember playing footsie under the table?)—are now exposed.

The perforated steel of the walls encourages bystanders to look through them. “The students can choose,” Blum says, “between thorough privacy or forced interaction. It’ll be interesting to see them approach and start going through the decision-making process of ‘What do I want to do today? How do I want to be? Alone or with friends, even strangers?’”

Integral to her plan is the premise that design must question its own assumptions. “I want to make architecture, normally static and sure of itself, start to appear nervous,” she says. But pure questioning is a self-referential stance that Blum shares with most artists.

If she is to cross over into more mainstream design, she knows she must extend her conceptual vision beyond the art world. In her European work, Blum has done this by demonstrating how furniture can play a psychological role in our daily life, breaking down the standard classifications of rooms and areas into either public or private use. “Our idiosyncrasies are usually very exposed in private,” she says. “The idea of switching all that around is interesting to me. Think about being on a subway and seeing people putting on their makeup. All of sudden you ask yourself, ‘Where’s that barrier between your own bathroom and this subway car? What’s happened to it?’ I find that both amazing and horrifying.”

Blum’s furniture pieces play around with these conventional “barriers” between private and public. In 2003 in the French city of Strasbourg, she installed **Sleep**, a group of cast-concrete chaises in a public park. Lounging or taking a nap outside the home is hardly a novel extension of private behavior, but Blum arranged the chaises to promote chance meetings; reclining occupants slowly become aware of their neighbors. “Initially the idea behind the lounges was to play on the idea of sleeping with a stranger, sort of like anonymous sex,” she says. “But then the piece developed to where it’s more about attraction—catching something in the corner of your eye.”

Her indoor **Slide Lounge** was commissioned by Blum’s Paris dealer, Fabienne Leclerc, and first shown at the New York Armory Show last March. It’s made of two black-rubber-and-steel chaises that slide into one another in a way such that people sit nearly thigh-to-thigh while facing each other like cars at an intersection. As with **Sleep**, the piece plays with the idea of personal boundaries, although here Blum adds the element of video: A video monitor is mounted on the back of each seat. “In order to get closer to the image, you have to get closer to the other person. The lounge makes you think about that kind of decision and how exactly you want to proceed in this intimate situation.”

To ensure that her work does not immediately cry out “art piece,” Blum uses simple building materials such as cast concrete and steel. “The humbler the material, the more comfortable people will be using my designs,” she says. “The more at ease people are in my pieces, the more they’re likely to reveal their idiosyncrasies.” These basic materials were critical to Blum’s first major interior-design

commission; a bedroom for French art collector Christophe Durand-Ruel. She decided that this often untidy and overly domesticated room should be reinvented as its opposite—the ultimate Minimalist cube. So she lined the walls and ceiling with plywood, creating a boxlike feel, added a built-in bed, shelves that could be folded against the wall when not in use, and a plexiglas bureau and storage units illuminated from below by fluorescent light. The overall effect was a room of such overt simplicity that it subverted the primed atmosphere of fake intimacy too often the standard design palette for the bedroom.

Blum—who says she wakes up “ready to design something almost every morning”—would be hard pressed to keep pace with her own imagination without her drawings. This parallel career started in Chicago when she created stylized architectural designs, at first in pastel and oil stick, then with sign paint on aluminum, and sometimes on large groupings of 3-by-4-foot panels. “My desire to live inside a piece of sculpture grew to seeing the whole house as sculpture, and the best way to realize that was to draw it.”

Using the computer Blum can now imagine on an even grander scale. In her surprisingly conventional Soho loft, the sculptor has covered one wall with brightly hued images of futuristic apartment buildings, elaborate storage units, nursing homes, and beach houses. One image is of **Nomadic House**: an elongated perforated-steel unit that contains a series of sliding elements—a bed that when pushed to one side doubles as a sofa, a table that can act as a desk or a dining table, and stools that serve both the living and sleeping areas. Designed for an empty room, the unit provides someone with no furniture an instant solution to their living needs.

Another large computer-drawn model shows a multicolor **Murphy bed** featuring a fold-up side table and closet. Blum’s design for a circular apartment rotates on a pinwheel base. To take advantage of the sole window, each pie-wedged room can be spun around when you choose to look outside. “It’s a way of adjusting the rhythms of your space to the day,” she says. “I’m interested in presenting alternatives, whole other ways of living that will match up better with your daily behavior.” In **Elevation House**, major pieces of furniture such as the bed, desk, and sofas can be cranked up toward the ceiling, affording more space below.

Many of Blum’s drawings are beautifully executed personal fantasies with little or no practical application. But they act as conceptual building blocks for her commissioned pieces. “The drawings push my work,” she says. And yet they don’t all serve as pure provocation; some arise directly out Blum’s own need for a design solution. Pointing to her rendering of a baby-boom retirement home, where individual pods surround a communal area, Blum says, “When my mother was dying and I was looking after her, I realized we have few spaces to accommodate not only the sick but their caregivers. At the same time I saw that in my building in Soho there was already a lot of swapping of regular care duties, such as looking after kids, watering plants, and so on. So I came up with a design for living for

when we all get older that was about community, about extending our ability to care for one another.”

This drawing is a long way from Blum’s more conceptual work, which makes users acutely aware of how design impacts their behavior. Although such work may be a necessary conceit for the artist, it is not always welcome in a design world where clients rule and objects are given the humbler goals of “fitting in” or adding flavor. “Andrea never has to compete with the aesthetic of a client or an existing interior,” Decq says. “That’s the luxury of being an artist,” Blum concedes. “Immediate practicality is rarely the primary issue.” Indeed a piece of furniture prompting a change in behavior—increased intimacy, for example—may be too threatening for the ordinary home. Form following function is comfortable and comforting; but form that changes function is not as easy to live with on a daily basis. Blum, however, remains implacable: sculpture is a way of life. “Once you got it off the pedestal, and then into the room, and then outside, sculpture was already on the road to becoming a whole different story. Using it in domestic design is simply an extension of that.”