Desert Rooftops: A ruin of sprawl on the streets of New York
Posted to Art, Development, Ideas on December 14th, 2011 by Gideon Fink Shapiro

To appreciate Manhattan as a landscape of rooftops, one usually has to climb pretty high. But at 46th Street and 8th Avenue, amidst the towers of Midtown, suddenly there are rooftops on eye level with pedestrians. Forming a miniaturized landscape of angled planes and spiked peaks, these gabled forms are clad in asphalt shingles and vinyl siding, just like the roofs of conventional suburban, single-family houses. They rise directly from the dirt of a vacant lot that has been leased by a not-for-profit arts organization, Art Production Fund. The sight is uncanny, as if a clump of houses got tuned up to their necks after being thrown across the country by a massive Kansas tornado.

The wizard of this scenario is David Brooke, a New York-based sculptor and installation artist who has shown an ongoing fascination with discarded or out-of-context fragments of suburbia. His work spotlights the nature-culture hybrids in our everyday landscapes and shows how seemingly mundane things can cast monstrous shadows. He has made concrete trees, an upside-down boardwalk, and a flying sidewalk, all with humor and metereousness. Desert Rooftops, the 9,000 square-foot outdoor sculpture recently installed by Brooks and the Art Production Fund, with funding from Sotheby’s, points to the unbalanced “new culture that arises from unchecked suburban and urban sprawl,” according to a statement released by Art Production Fund. “As housing communities devour more and more land and resources each year the outcome is equivalent to the very process of desertification.”
The artist describes the work as “prosaic, familiar and simultaneously forbidding.” Evoking faceless tracts of throw-away developments, Desert Roofscapes turns an alleged waste landscape into an urban dreamscape. Banal building elements are marshaled up to form a complex ruin. Haunted by past closures, these clad roofs have seemingly migrated to the city, perhaps looking for a job—and discovered that in order to survive they must, for the first time, huddle in close with their neighbors, even join with them to make a collective architectural form.

There’s one problem. You can’t climb on the sculpture and experience it as a landscape. Hands-on viewing works fine for Brooks’s gallery work, but art in the public realm raises expectations for a more engaged kind of contact. It would be nice to occupy Desert Roofscapes, if only for a few minutes. The effect might be something like the “oblique” installation designed by the French architect Claude Parent for the 1970 Venice Biennale. Of course the cost of insurance for such a work might be prohibitive expensive. But as sculpture, architecture, and landscape architecture continue to come closer together, it is hard not to see this project as a missed opportunity to engage the body and mind at once.

Desert Roofscapes winds up as something like an avant-garde garden folly to be contemplated from the orthogonal promenades of Manhattan. More specifically it is a constructed ruin, an anti-romantic ruin that transports us to a mythical time and place that is not so far away. Although Desert Roofscapes refers to biblical happenings “out there” in the jungle of sprawl, the fiscal mechanisms and environmental affects of this distressed landscape reach to the heart of New York City. How can we reinvigorate urban and suburban landscapes starting from the ground up, as David Brooks makes us ask, from the roof down?