

## Desert Rooftops: A ruin of sprawl on the streets of New York

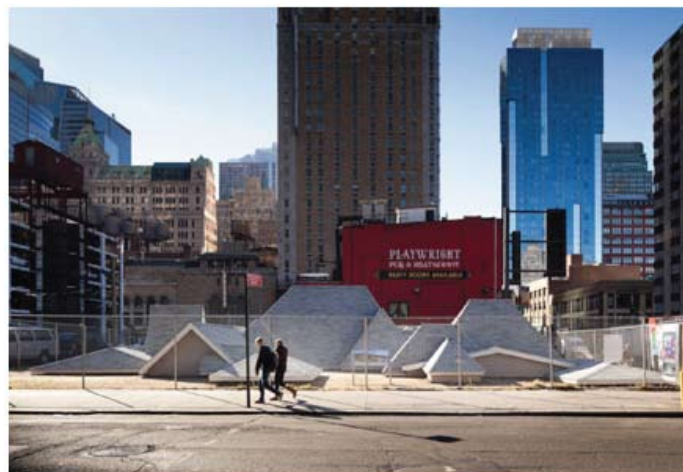
Posted to [Art](#), [Development](#), [Ideas](#) on December 14th, 2011 by [Gideon Fink Shapiro](#)

8 + Share 15 Like 148



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 miniature 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 buried up to their necks after being thrown across the country by a magical Kansas tornado.

The wizard of this scenario is David Brooks, a New York-based sculptor and installation artist who has shown an ongoing fascination with displaced 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 meticulousness. *Desert Rooftops*, the 5,000-square-foot outdoor sculpture recently installed by Brooks and the Art Production Fund, with funding from Sotheby's, points to the unbalanced "monoculture 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 "picturesque, familiar and simultaneously foreboding." Evoking faceless tracts of throw-away developments, *Desert Rooftops* turns an alleged waste landscape into an urban dreamscape. Banal building elements are mashed up to form a complex ruin. Haunted by mass foreclosures, these drab 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-off 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 Rooftops*, 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 prohibitively 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 Rooftops* 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 Rooftops* refers to troubling happenings "out there" in the jungle of sprawl, the fiscal mechanisms and environmental effects of this distressed landscape reach to the heart of New York City. How can we recultivate urban and suburban landscapes starting from the ground up or, as David Brooks makes us ask, from the roof down?



David Brooks, *Desert Rooftops*. Photo: James Ewing. Courtesy of Art Production Fund