LOST WORLDS

JULES PELTA FELDMAN ON THE ART OF CHARLES SIMONDS

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Above: **Charles Simonds, *Dwellings*, 1981**, clay, sand, sticks, stones, wood, plaster, cloth, chicken wire. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo: Sheldan C. Collins.
Right: **Charles Simonds's 1972 *Dwelling* and passersby, East Houston Street, New York, 1972.**

IF YOU HAVE EVER taken the stairs at what used to be the Whitney Museum of American Art—Marcel Breuer's Brutalist masterpiece on New York's Upper East Side—you have almost certainly encountered the work of Charles Simonds, though you may not have realized it. One of only two pieces in the Whitney's collection that did not head downtown when the institution moved to the Meatpacking District in 2015 (the other being Nicole Eisenman's *Exploding Whitney Mural*, 1995), Simonds's permanent installation huddles unobtrusively above the stairwell's only window. It is a miniature village, an apparently abandoned settlement of squat, ramshackle brick buildings perched on an irregular earthen protuberance.

It's difficult to make sense of the relationship between the work, *Dwellings*, 1981, and the imposing geometries of Breuer's midcentury museum, opened in 1966 to both censure and acclaim. While the building's smooth, cantilevered facade and sculptural windows still look modern and fresh, the roofs and walls of Simonds's installation are crumbling as if under the weight of centuries. Dust motes blow like tumbleweeds along the tiny paths among the rudimentary brick structures. The ensemble could easily be mistaken for an antiquated anthropological exhibit, misplaced in both space and time.

Yet its misfit quality is precisely what gives Simonds's installation its power. The artist made this work at the high point of a successful career that has been all but forgotten today. The modest installation not only testifies to what Simonds accomplished in the 1970s and '80s, but also represents an alternative chapter in the history of institutional critique, casting new light on the work of his better-known peers. Moreover, telling the story of the Whitney's *Dwellings* is a chance to revisit the origins of a building that is about to transition from a temple of art to a marketplace for it: In 2024, it will become the global headquarters of Sotheby's. Embedding his fragile, fantasy-driven sculptures in Breuer's structure—currently the temporary home of the Frick Collection, and before that an outpost of the Metropolitan Museum of Art—allowed the artist to slyly undermine the museum's architectural philosophy and to challenge its institutional authority.

The story begins downtown, miles from the genteel realm of the Breuer building. Simonds began constructing his best-known works, the Dwellings, on the streets of New York following an epiphany in his loft. One day in 1969, he sprinkled sand on a small quantity of clay and "had the feeling that I was looking upon a place."[1] Clay and sand became landscape; when

Above: **Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, 1972**, clay, sand, wood. East 2nd Street, New York.

Right, top: **Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, 1980**, clay, sand, wood. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

Right, center: **Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, 1974**, clay, sand, wood. East 4th Street, New York.

Right, bottom: **Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, 1972**, clay, sand, wood. East Houston Street, New York.

Opposite page, left: **Young person working on Charles Simonds's 1972 *Dwelling*, East 2nd Street, New York, 1972.**

Opposite page, right: **Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, 1975**, clay, sand, wood. Prince and Mercer Streets, New York. From the 1975 Whitney Biennial.

Simonds began to make bricks, these materials became architecture as well. Though he initially made these "places" in his apartment, the sounds of children playing lured him onto the streets, where the Dwellings took root. Before long, Simonds had conceived an evolving series of such structures, the traces of an itinerant civilization of invisible beings—Little People, he called them—who migrated from SoHo and wandered throughout the Lower East Side.[2] There, Simonds built hundreds of Dwellings within a few years, finding neighborhood kids and their adult relatives to be a more engaged audience than his artist peers. In photographs, the miniature architectural structures seem to emerge organically from gutters, broken walls, and empty lots—wherever the city's crumbling infrastructure afforded a place for their putative inhabitants, the nomadic Little People.

Simonds used a delivery bicycle to cart around clay and bricks he made at home. When he found a suitable spot, he transformed the space into a miniature landscape by smearing it with red clay. He constructed the Dwelling atop this surface, dipping each gray brick into a mixture of water and craft glue and placing it with tweezers. No ornament was applied save for sand and bits of twig, but his materials provided a surprising range of rich, earthy hues: grays, brilliant reds, oranges, browns, tawny beiges and yellows. Simonds spent no more than a day constructing each Dwelling, after which it was left to its fate. Some were destroyed almost immediately by playful or mischievous children or by weather. And while architecture is sometimes defined as protection against the elements, the unfired bricks returned to mud when exposed to rain. Other Dwellings were ruined by viewers' attempts to take them home—their delicate virtuosity often provoked a desire to protect, touch, possess. Few lasted longer than a few days.

Despite their brief life spans, the miniature sites often look as if they have endured for thousands of years. Simonds sees each one as "part of the story

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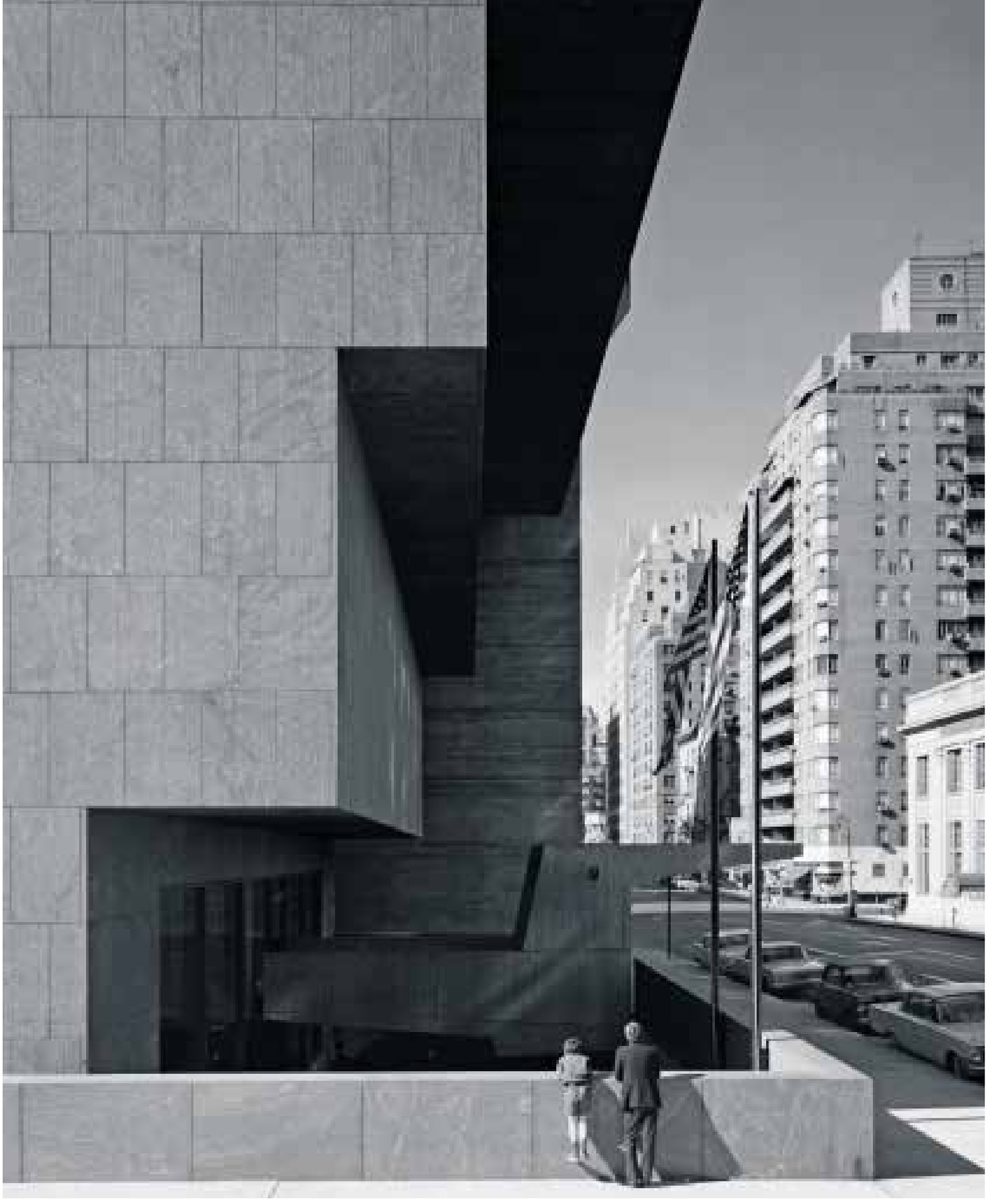
of the Little People, a different time and place in their history"; collectively, the installations represent the archaeological remains of a vast culture.[3] He recalls that people sometimes reported seeing Dwellings where none had been built, proving that the fantasy of the Little People grew larger than their material presence.[4]

As he became more involved with the people he met on the Lower East Side, participating in local activism and "sweat equity" projects, Simonds's interest in the art scene from which he had emerged diminished. "I was not against the art world, but it seemed so pointless. . . . I was so busy and happy doing my thing that there didn't seem much that it could offer me."[5] The art world embraced him nonetheless—or tried to. When curator Marcia Tucker invited Simonds to participate in the 1973 Whitney Biennial, he refused. He was unconcerned with establishment legitimization and felt that his sculptures were most effective when encountered by surprise.[6] "To put the [D]wellings in a gallery would be to destroy them," he said.[7] Undeterred, Tucker asked again for the '75 Biennial, and this time Simonds agreed to participate—at a distance. He contributed a Dwelling in a parking lot at the intersection of Prince and Mercer in SoHo; a plaque within the museum announced its existence. Of course, by the time viewers sought out the work, there was likely very little to see. Over the next few years, Simonds's work appeared in many exhibitions, including solo shows in New York, Paris, and Berlin, where he received a prestigious residency. He took part in Documenta 6 and exhibited a major piece in the Museum of Modern Art's "Projects" series. He came to appreciate art exhibitions as opportunities to experiment with more elaborate architectural designs. Nonetheless, he still felt that "the experience of a Dwelling was greatly diminished if the audience of the Little People went to 'see' a Dwelling with that concept in mind," instead of encountering it by chance in the street.[8] Asked to exhibit at the Whitney once again, for the '77 Biennial, he finally agreed to show his work within the museum—but only if the curators supported his plan to focus viewers' gazes beyond it.

In deciding to exhibit his work at the Whitney, Simonds took on a formidable challenge. The unauthorized street Dwellings were as dependent on their surroundings as any architectural structure and benefited from the anonymous landscape of nineteenth-century brick tenements downtown, which allowed them both to hide and to be discovered. Breuer's Whitney, an inverted Brutalist ziggurat surrounded by genteel brownstones, is both a hard-edge geometric sculpture and an instrument fine-tuned to the cerebral Conceptualism and sober Minimalism that Simonds had deliberately left behind when he left his artist peers in SoHo for the Lower East Side, where responses to his work were not constrained by art-world trends.[9] At the Whitney, Simonds would be compelled to reckon with a forbidding modernist icon that embodied a strict separation between art and the life of the city. While his contemporaries' works thrived under such conditions, the Dwellings threaten to wither away in the Breuer building, deprived of the surprise and mystery that kept their legend alive on the street.

When the new Whitney opened in 1966, critics praised its functionality as a museum, noting its innovative movable gallery walls and flexible lighting



Opposite page: **Marcel Breuer, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1966, New York.** Photo: Ezra Stoller.

Right: **Marcel Breuer, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1966, New York, May 1988.** Photo: David Churchill/Arcaid Images/Alamy.

Below: **2016 renovation of Marcel Breuer's 1966 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.** Photo: Peter Aaron/OTTO.

Breuer's Whitney is both a hard-edge geometric sculpture and an instrument fine-tuned to the cerebral Conceptualism and sober Minimalism that Simonds had left behind.

system.[10] Many modernist architects understood their mission as the design of ideal buildings for an idealized modern life, and Breuer—a protégé of Walter Gropius and a Bauhaus master in his own right—here sought to provide optimal conditions for works of modern art. To curtail visual distraction, he not only minimized ornamentation within the galleries but also made efforts to sequester the art within from an urban environment too complex and variegated to meet high modernism's demands for purity. As critic Paul Goldberger noted in 1989, "the building's essential architectural idea is its own aloofness." Breuer used a high concrete wall to shield the Whitney from its neighbors, ensuring that it "would not even appear to touch other structures."[11]

Breuer's philosophy of hermeticism is clearly announced by the concrete bridge that physically separates the museum's entrance from the sidewalk. The effect recalls that of the reinforced concrete columns, or *pilotis*, that Le Corbusier hailed in his Five Points of Architecture and which were intended to replace supporting walls. In such structures as his Unités d'Habitations, the pilotis appear to seal off the building from contamination. Fredric Jameson noted that the pilotis seem to negate the possibility of an entrance.[12] Breuer's sunken sculpture court performs a similar function, evoking a medieval moat spanned by a drawbridge.

Inside the Whitney, climate and lighting were artificially controlled—a relative novelty at the time—so natural light was only a distraction. Breuer himself referred to his few windows, asymmetrical trapezoids protruding from the facade, as "psychological"—they were meant to "dispel feelings of claustrophobia," not to provide illumination or a glimpse of the outside world.[13] Ada Louise Huxtable called the Whitney "a superb artificial environment for an art . . . that thrives best in hothouse isolation."[14] Her botanical metaphor posits the museum as conservatory, nurturing specimens that are unable to compete for sunlight or other resources in the wild.

This concept of the museum as an autonomous habitat was profoundly well-suited to contemporary directions in art. Conceptualism, then in its infancy, had already established that anything—any object, phrase, or idea—could be a work of art. Yet outside of a dedicated art space, such works may well be invisible as art. In fact, during the installation of the Whitney's inaugural exhibition, Huxtable reported, it was "sometimes difficult to distinguish art from artifact. . . . It is rumored that a shovel stood by a wall for a week before its status was settled."[15] The Breuer thus represented the distillation of the very climate that Simonds had hoped to circumvent by working on the Lower East Side. In building Dwellings at the Whitney, he confronted the opposite problem faced by many artists of his generation: Simonds's work was at its most effective when it escaped the connotations of art. Uprooted from the street, the Dwellings might not survive the rarefied air of the museum.

Accordingly, Simonds's decisive move was to break the Breuer's hermetic seal. On the fourth floor of the Whitney, he exhibited *Quarry*, 1976, a mountain of jagged cliffs with a soft, visceral center. This sculpture spread across the floor like a miniature work of Land art, providing a strikingly textured contrast to Minimalist works by Ron Gorchov and Jackie Winsor in its immediate vicinity, and bringing some untidiness into the pristine environment. He constructed an elaborate group of Dwellings against one of the asymmetrical windows that are a signature of the building—and another across Seventy-Fifth Street, on the facade of an apartment building. In the few extant photographs of the indoor sculpture, this second Dwelling can just be seen at the far corner of the Whitney's window—a lumpy irregularity amid the austere pediments of the residential structure. If Simonds's

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Dwelling for the 1975 Whitney Biennial had asked museum visitors to chase the Little People through SoHo, this latter group prompted them to look beyond the museum's walls and out into the street.

Curator Patterson Sims was sufficiently convinced by Simonds's contribution to the 1977 Biennial to commission a permanent installation, an unusual undertaking for a museum at the time. Sims recalls having been inspired by Alan Saret's permanent installation at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center (now MOMA PS1), *The Hole at P.S.1, Fifth Solar Chthonic Wall Temple*, made for its inaugural exhibition, "Rooms," in 1976.[16] Saret intervened in the very fabric of the building, excavating in the wall a pointed oval that terminates in a tiny aperture, letting in the air and light of the outside world. This precedent may have helped Sims imagine how an essentially anti-institutional artist who worked in the street could create an artwork for a museum. Saret's work brought the outside in, as would James Turrell's better-known *Meeting*, just down the hall from *The Hole*; Turrell's work, which frames the wide-open sky as an aesthetic experience, had already been commissioned by P.S. 1's Alanna Heiss but would not be completed until 1986. Simonds's *Dwellings*, too, connected the world outside the museum to the art within it, but unlike Saret and Turrell, Simonds sought to send viewers out into that world. Saret's *Hole* and Turrell's *Meeting* are both negative spaces, literally defined by—and reliant on—the substance of the museum. The *Dwellings*, conversely, undermined the necessity of a dedicated structure for viewing art just as such structures were taking on unprecedented authority.

In reviewing "Rooms," Nancy Foote reflected that such site-specific installations represented "a risky business for museums to get into. . . . (Imagine, just for fun, Gordon Matta-Clark sawing the Whitney in half, or Alan Saret knocking a hole through the wall at MOMA.)"[17] Matta-Clark had indeed sawed a building in half with *Splitting*, 1974, but many of his "building cuts"—including *Doors, Floors, Doors*, his contribution to "Rooms"—were internal. These dealt more with the interior structure and experience of architecture than with the building's relationship to anything outside of it. (Simonds, too, took part in "Rooms"; he built Dwellings on the roof, where they venturesomely confronted the Manhattan skyline.) Foote's parenthetical aside is "just for fun" because such interventions seemed impossible at a prestigious and pedigreed institution like the Whitney. But Simonds did not need to gouge into the walls or ceiling in order to erode the Whitney's program of separation.

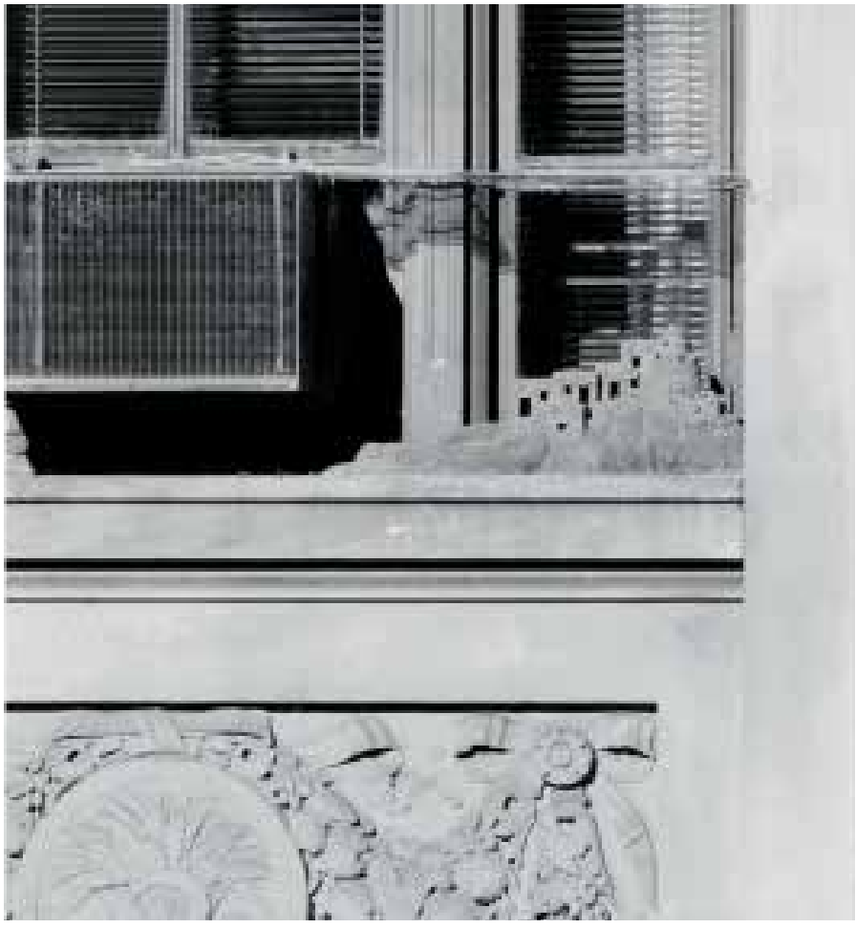
For the permanent installation, he again proposed a multipart sculpture that would reside both in and outside the museum. In 1981, he installed another miniature municipality—this time, not in a space designed to display art but instead tucked away in the building's dimly lit stairwell, where the rough-hewn clay brick of Simonds's construction clashes magnificently with Breuer's elegant modern design. Two other groups of brick habitations were placed across the street on the facade of 940 Madison Avenue, then a branch of the Chemical Bank, where sharp eyes can find them today. (Simonds restored them in 2015.) One small cluster sits on a second-story windowsill, the other atop a chimney. These settlements are just visible from the Breuer building. The sight lines suggest that the Little People could see and perhaps signal to each other across Madison Avenue, emphasizing

Above: **Charles Simonds, *Quarry*, 1976,** clay, sand. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From the 1977 Whitney Biennial.

Below: **Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, 1977,** clay, sticks, stones, sand. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From the 1977 Whitney Biennial.

Opposite page, left: **Charles Simonds, *Dwellings* (details), 1981,** clay, sand, sticks. Madison Avenue, New York. Photos: Jerry Thompson.

Opposite page, right: **Charles Simonds, *Dwellings*, 1981,** clay, sand, sticks, stones, wood, plaster, cloth, chicken wire. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo: Jerry Thompson.



by extension that they are part of a larger network of Dwellings extending out beyond the museum. This element of exchange, however fictional, suggests a more reciprocal relationship to the outside world than Saret's and Turrell's installations at P.S. 1, where the communication only flows in one direction.

The outdoor works may be tough to spot, but the stairwell installation allows close observation. Nestled in a corner, several stories of pueblo-like structures rise from mounds of reddish clay that form a bulging, corporeal landscape. These fleshy lobes, which seem to sprout from the austere gray planes of the stairwell, lend the ensemble the appearance of a parasitic growth, or perhaps an anthill. The Little People are invited guests here, but they appear to have sneaked in through a crack in the concrete. Despite their modest size and easy-to-overlook locations, Simonds's Dwellings effectively subvert Breuer's plan to seal out the city.

The artist's choice of location within the museum also contributes to this subversion. On the streets, the individual characteristics of the Dwellings' host buildings are softened, if not obliterated, by the very decay that renders them suitable for Simonds's purposes: Missing bricks and eroded walls provided the Little People with caves and plateaus for their settlements.[18]

Yet given the chance to intervene in the intimidatingly distinctive environment of Breuer's Whitney, Simonds did not choose neutral or anonymous spaces that would allow his Dwellings to stand out. Rather, he confronted the architecture directly by intervening in two of its most striking and celebrated features: in 1977, on the ledge of one of the building's signature trapezoidal windows, and in 1981 in its staircase, praised by architects and critics for its elegance in proportion and materials.[19] Bush-hammered and board-formed concrete reveal the processes of construction, while the cantilevered stairs are embellished with dark green granite treads and an elaborately joined teak banister. The cool darkness of the staircase lends particular magnetism to its single window. Robert F. Gatje, a partner

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in Breuer's firm, called the staircase a "magical place," and claimed that "when we were fighting to save the Whitney from its expansion plans" (of which more shortly), "more than one architect went out of his way to say, 'Whatever they do to the building, make sure they don't monkey with the great stair.' "[20] The permanent installation's home may be a modest, tucked-away corner that declines to call attention to itself, but the location is also the consummate reflection of the building's design philosophy.

Ultimately, the Dwellings defy both the reigning museum ideology and the architect's own ideas about how a work of art might interact with a building: "I welcome art as an addition to the architecture," Breuer once said, "the same way that I welcome people, flowers, books—signs of living and usage for which the space is the container."[21] Rather than the tasteful ornaments imagined by the architect, the Dwellings are more like weeds, sprouted from seeds that infiltrated the museum from the wilds beyond it. Despite their diminutive size, they undermine the very idea of the building as a sealed container and suggest a potentially endless network of similar structures beyond its confines—for, like weeds, they are liable to pop up anywhere. If Conceptual works are fragile specimens requiring the controlled hothouse environment of the museum, Simonds's wild Dwellings served to contaminate their pristine soil. In a building designed to isolate art, these ruinous little habitations still insist, as he did, that "the art world is only part of the real world."[22]

In 1981, the year Simonds's permanent installation went on view at the Whitney (and the year Breuer died), the museum unveiled a plan for a major expansion by postmodern architect Michael Graves. His proposal, which positioned the Breuer building as a sort of pillar for a massive structure that would occupy the entire block, seemed as calculated to cause a stir as Breuer's had been. Many commentators decried the design as bombastic and kitschy, but Goldberger noted with relief that the central cylindrical "hinge" Graves planned between the Breuer and his new "Graves wing" would not entirely obliterate the Whitney's beloved staircase, "which may well be the most endearing aspect of the Breuer building"; instead, "it would merely cover its windows."[23]

For Goldberger, the loss of the view of and from the stairwell was an acceptable compromise; it wouldn't mutilate the building itself. For Simonds's *Dwellings*, however, this would have been fatal: In covering the stair window, Graves's expansion would have severed the connections between the Little People within the building, nestled above the window, and their fellows across the street. In short, it would have destroyed the sense of vitality and connection to the outside world that Simonds managed to smuggle into Breuer's modern cloister. Graves's plan was ultimately rejected, and as of this writing, *Dwellings* is safe. It remains part of the Whitney's collection regardless of the Breuer building's current tenants, though the work will be on loan to Sotheby's once they occupy the premises.

The paradox of Simonds's practice is that it combines ephemerality—sculptures destined to survive a few short days—with a deep sense of time that reaches toward an achronological conception of art. He saw his personal mythology as a "tool to fracture the present" and the narrowness of art-world trends.[24] But if his story has been almost lost today, even as his friends

Above: **Charles Simonds, *Dwellings* (detail), 1981**, clay, sand, sticks. Madison Avenue, New York. Photo: Jerry Thompson.

Left: **Michael Graves, Whitney Museum Expansion Scheme 1, Madison Avenue elevation, 1985**, color pencil on yellow trace paper, 16 × 16".

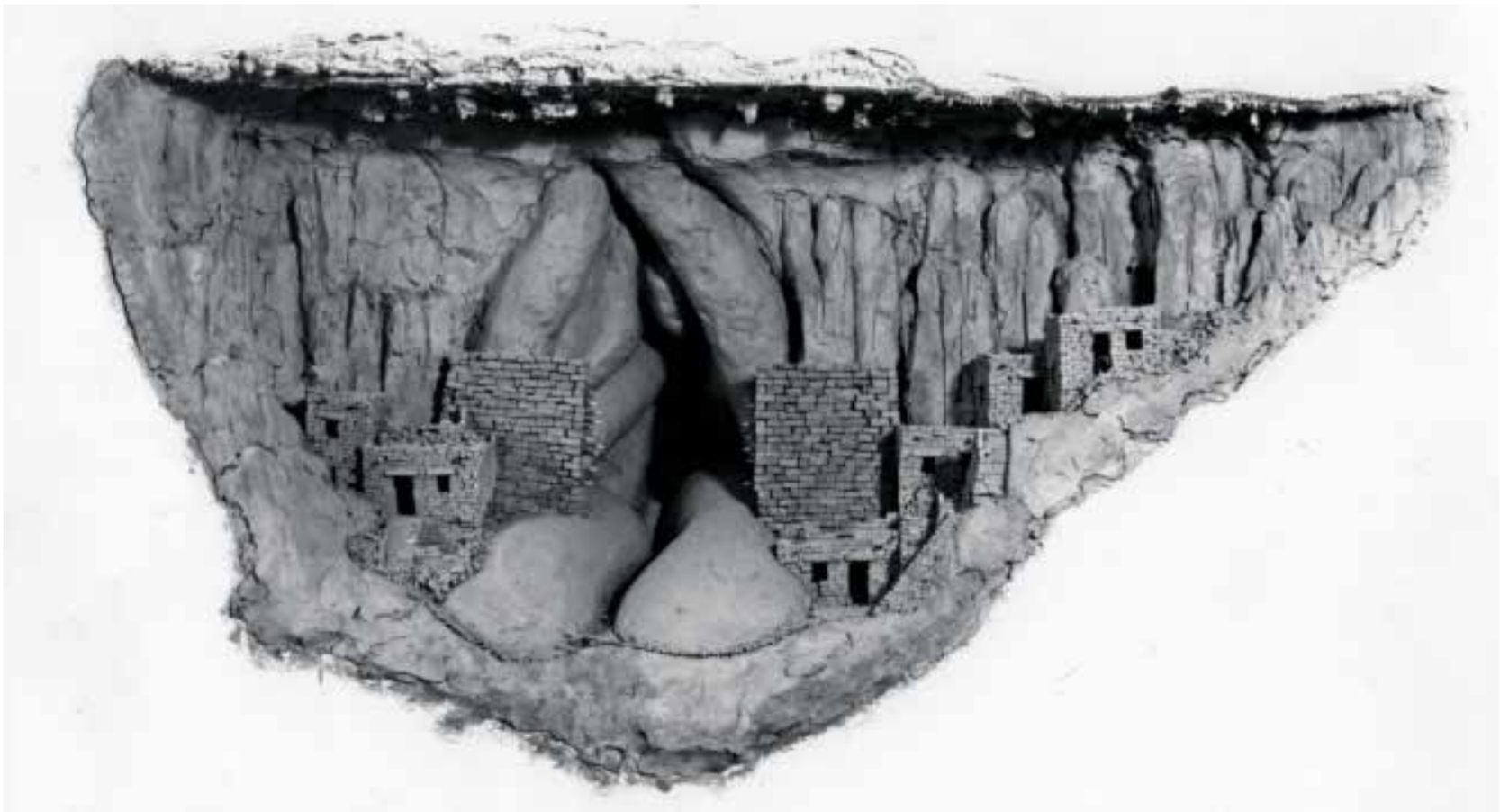
Opposite page, top: **Charles Simonds, *Age*, 1982–83**, clay, plaster, wood, sand. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1983. Photo: Charles Simonds.

Opposite page, bottom: **Charles Simonds, *Dwelling*, 1981**, clay, wood, plaster. Installation view, Kunsthaus Zürich.

and peers of the ’70s downtown scene have been eagerly devoured by the canon, it may be partly because few of his works have lasted long enough to make this point.[25] Though many of the Dwellings were meant to decay and disappear, the marvelously intricate installations meant to be permanent have not always fared better. An innovative piece (one of Simonds’s first “wall cuts”) embedded in the wall of the Kunsthaus Zürich in 1981 was purchased by the museum only to be subsequently entombed within the wall, never again to see the light of day. A multipart installation commissioned by Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art, also in 1981, was abandoned and ultimately demolished after the museum moved to its current building in 1996. And Simonds’s large freestanding sculpture *Age*, 1982–83, was partially destroyed when he could no longer afford to store it; only the top portion remains. As the episode with the failed Graves expansion shows, the fate of the Whitney’s installation is tied to that of its former home, but the Dwellings’ continued endurance there may also be partly due to their unobtrusiveness, their apparent diffidence in the face of art-world machinations. Simonds’s works exemplify the difficulty of historicizing artists and artworks that resist institutionalization. But their story also offers an alternative pathway through well-trodden annals of art history, reminding us of just how much we lose when we lose sight of the Little People. □

JULES PELTA FELDMAN IS AN ART HISTORIAN, CRITIC, AND CURATOR. THEIR BOOK *CHARLES SIMONDS AND THE SEVENTIES* WILL BE PUBLISHED BY HATJE CANTZ IN 2024.

For notes, see page 237.



NOTES

1. Charles Simonds, *Dwelling* (Cologne: König, 2015), 11.

2. Kate Linker, "Charles Simonds' Emblematic Architecture," *Artforum*, March 1979, 32–37.

3. John Hallmark Neff, ed., *Charles Simonds* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1981), 152.

4. Charles Simonds and Lucy Lippard, "Microcosm to Macrocosm / Fantasy World to Real World," *Artforum*, February 1974, 37.

5. Oral history interview with Charles Simonds, July 31–August 14, 2012. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

6. Patterson Sims, interview with the author, March 22, 2018.

7. Simonds and Lippard, "Microcosm," 39.

8. Simonds, *Dwelling*, 44.

9. Artists were not, in Simonds's words, "the people who were giving me something new." Charles Simonds interviewed by Ethan Swan, Bowery Artist Tribute Interview, New Museum, New York, June 21, 2012.

10. Charles W. Millard, "The Great Grey Whitney," *Hudson Review* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1967): 618.

11. Paul Goldberger, "The Whitney Paradox: To Add Is to Subtract," *New York Times*, January 8, 1989, 31.

12. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 41.

13. Barry Bergdoll, "I. M. Pei, Marcel Breuer, Edward Larrabee Barnes, and the New American Museum Design of the 1960s," *Studies in the History of Art* 73 (2009): 119; "Ziggurat for Whitney's Art," *Architectural Review* 61, no. 15 (1966), 100.

14. Ada Louise Huxtable, "Harsh and Handsome: The New Whitney Is Superbly Suited for an Art That Thrives on Isolation," *New York Times*, September 8, 1966, 57.

15. Huxtable, "Harsh and Handsome," 57.

16. Sims, interview.

17. Nancy Foote, "The Apotheosis of the Crummy Space," *Artforum*, October 1976, 30.

18. The Little People struggled to find building sites in orderly, well-kept neighborhoods. When invited for an exhibition at Münster's Westfälischer Kunstverein in 1978, Simonds had trouble building Dwellings in the tidy West German town.

19. One Breuer scholar calls the Whitney's staircase "one of the best examples of Breuer's ability to make staircases into functional sculpture." Robert McCarter, *Breuer* (London: Phaidon, 2016), 318.

20. Robert F. Gatje, *Marcel Breuer: A Memoir* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2000), 171.

21. Paul Heyer, *Architects on Architecture: New Directions in America* (New York: Walker and Company, 1978), 272.

22. Simonds and Lippard, "Microcosm," 39.

23. Paul Goldberger, "For the Whitney, Adding Less May Result in More," *New York Times*, August 11, 1985, H31.

24. Daniel Abadie, "Charles Simonds Interviewed by Daniel Abadie," in *Temenos* (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1977), 14.

25. New Yorkers may know a more recent work, *Dwelling*, permanently installed in the lobby of the Museum of Arts and Design in 2011, though its consort across the street has since been removed.