BY TOM ALLEN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Cityscape

The House That Art Unbuilt

BY EDWARD OWEN

An abandoned farmhouse in Arlington, above, was transformed by the Art Attack collective into a strange and amusing architectural form, left, with part of its roof now floating in a front-yard reflecting pool.

By Benjamin Forgey
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It cannot quite be called a house and it isn't exactly architecture, but the empty wooden building on Old Dominion Drive is a treat for eye and mind, by day a subtle provocation, by night an eerie roadside apparition. It's an ordinary farmhouse transformed by time and circumstance and the active hands of art into . . . something else. Eye-teaser. Memory-catcher. Surreal tableau.

The latest transformation is the handiwork of Art Attack, a multidisciplinary artists' group, and it highlights the iconic beauty of the abandoned, aging, vernacular building even as it radically alters facades, rooms, surfaces, meanings. The effect is funny ha-ha and funny strange. It's puzzling, poignant and, above all, quite beautiful.

Through all the changes, the framework of the farmhouse remains legible—the simple symmetry of the gabled front, the central stairwell, the shingled roof. But the changes are substantial. A wide slice has been taken out of the roof, at the ridge. A wider slice has been taken out of the front facade, exposing the sec-

See CITYSCAPE, G8, Col. 1

New Role For an Old House

CITYSCAPE, From G1

ond-floor rooms. The wood floors of these rooms have been sawed free of their supports, so they angle downward weirdly. A radiator stands bolted to one of the floors, looking, fun-house-like, as if it should fall.

Gravity is the main joke here. Gable shape and all, the upper portion of the facade is now the lower portion, as if there had been an accidental slippage of unbelievable neatness. The minimum number of structural posts needed were allowed to remain—the house looks as if a huff and puff would blow it down. The roof of the demolished front porch now floats in a reflecting pool where the front yard once was. The exposed interior stairwell now extends with exaggerated perspective through the roof, a very rickety route to paradise.

Though one can get something from a drive-by—the address is 4749 Old Dominion Dr. in north Arlington, close to the Glebe Road intersection—a stopover is better. The turf and music rooms on the ground floor, visible only from up close, are entertaining. These are the rooms those upper floors fell on, and they're rigged with an idiot's delight of posts and beams and carpentry as raw as you'll see it. One's been sodded and the other contains a hilarious dadaist musical instrument consisting of the stringed section of a piano and a little motorized paddle wheel to hit the strings.

The motor wasn't running during my visits last week but, when on, will cause a "muted sound something like hitting a harp with chopsticks," according to Alberto Gaitan, Art Attack's musical member. Additionally, windowpanes at the rear of the house have been cut into pieces and converted into wind chimes. Together the soothing if unpredictable sounds can be expected to contribute to a contemplative experience of the place.

Art Attack, founded in Los Angeles in 1979 and partly resident in Washington for the past decade or so, is an artists' collaborative, and, accordingly, the intellectual roots of this transformed house are mainly to be found in the concepts of dadaism, surrealism, the theater of the absurd, site-specific sculpture and urban guerrilla art. The group is attracted to the poetics of found objects and the urban in-between. This house, for instance, might be categorized as a very large, real-time, real-world version of a box by Joseph Cornell.

Still, most of the group's works involve architectural settings—in Washington five years ago the artists operated on a condemned Massachusetts Avenue row house, and in Prague last winter they brought a shingled roof crashing to the floor of an old masonry farmhouse. And though the pieces they produce are nonfunctional in an architectural sense, the procedures they use have parallels in contemporary architecture.

In the emphasis on fragmentation and layering, and also in the primacy given to everyday building materials and methods, the group relates directly to California architect Frank Gehry, particularly the Gehry of the late '70s, when he was producing those little Santa Monica houses for clients with modest incomes (including, most famously, himself). And, like architectural deconstructionists such as Peter Eisenman, these artists obviously intend their works to question conventional ways of seeing and defining things—houses, walls, rooms, doors, windows.