Benedikt Boucsein

Folly Suisse

Garden Folly:
James Wyatt, *Broadway Tower*, Cotswolds, 1797,
state 2004, photo by Michael Reeve.

Layman Folly:
James V. Lafferty, *Lucy the Elephant*, Margate
City/New Jersey, 1882, state ca. 2005.

1 For more information see www.follydock.com,
state August 2006.

Follies

The first Follies were architectonic objects mainly built to express a concept
and not necessarily to serve a practical purpose. They made their appearance
in the 17th and 18th centuries, designed to charm and entertain promenaders
strolling through the parks and gardens of large estates. These *Garden Follies*
were built in the form of artificial grottos, mock ruins, temples, or small castles.
Their creators primarily aimed at instilling a mystic atmosphere into the over-
all theme of the park.

A second form of Follies, which thrives to this day, dates back to the 19th
and 20th centuries. Found for the most part in private gardens and backyards,
these bizarre, unplanned, spontaneous objects are often made of scrap materi-
als. These structures are inexpensive to build but they are labour-intensive.
They are most often built by amateur architects, driven by a strong desire to
express their personalities. In some cases, the Folly becomes its architect's
residence, while in others, the architect transforms his existing house into a
Folly. Like the Garden Follies, these *Layman Follies* blur the borders between
art and architecture.

In the 1970s and 1980s, several architects utilized the dual nature of Follies
to explore architectural ideas. The most influential among them was Bernhard
Tschumi, whose Follies played a central role in the concept for the Parc de la
Villette in Paris. Free of any functional constraints, Tschumi was able to test
spatial and formal concepts. He assigned each object a form before establish-
ing its function. Like their predecessors 200 years before, these *Concept Fol-
lies* complemented the overall concept of a garden built solely for pleasure and
entertainment.

Recently, the *Follydock IFCR Competition* took up the theme of Follies. The
winning project is to be erected on the Heijplaat, a former harbour area in
Rotterdam. Its completion is set for the start of the *Architecture Biennale Rot-
terdam* 2007. The objects submitted for competition should seek to "overcome
the restrictions of professional practice and to stretch the boundaries of fantasy
and reality" and not be built solely for pleasure. They also should function as
catalysts for urban redevelopment.[1] Like Bernhard Tschumi's concept, the *Fol-
lydock IFCR Competition* extends the use of Follies to contemporary notions
of architecture and urbanism. The following describes a similar method of
using Follies as urban interventions, explored during the EASA Workshop in
Bergün, Switzerland.

A Folly for Bergün

Urban visitors very often arrive in Bergün loaded down with preconceived notions about remote Swiss mountain villages. Consequently, they tend to think and act in stereotypical fashion. They see what they expect: a classically picturesque Swiss village set in a quaint landscape, well-stocked with all the necessary conveniences such as restaurants, hotels, and ski lifts. As a result, the town's spatial, social and historical complexity remains hidden to these city-dwellers cum visiting tourists. What they than expect: a typical *Potemkin village*. The local board of tourism certainly also does its best in fostering such notion. According to Bergün's current tourism director, it is more important to have local residents keep village streets alight when it gets dark than it is to have them interact and chat with visiting tourists.[2]

Unfortunately, Bergün and its surrounding landscape are actually not overwhelmingly picturesque. Possibilities for skiing are limited and the altitude is not high enough to justify a wellness resort. These factors have prevented the village from sprawling cancer-like out into the hillsides as it is already the case in St. Moritz and Davos. Yet, it is doomed to being little more a cheap family vacation destination. Clearly, Bergün doesn't stand much of a chance as a Potemkin village. Its only hope is in drawning from its strengths of originality and historical depths.

Within the framework of the EASA005 Workshop, a Folly seemed to be a suitable way to tackle this dilemma. First of all, in contrast to larger, more sophisticated interventions requiring detailed research, a Folly can be conceived and constructed within the short span of just two weeks. Second, the above-desribed phenomenon is largely one of perception, and Follies are specially suited to triggering emotional and subjective responses. And third, it is the workshop group's belief that placing an artificial and alien object in the village is the best effort a group of international architecture students can make: any attempt at adaptation to local customs or typologies would be pointless.

Concept Folly:
Bernhard Tschumi, *Parc de la Villette*, Paris, 1986–1993, state 2005.

2 Reto Barblan, Bergün Tourism Director, in an interview with the author, July 6th, 2005.

Bergün, aerial view, state 2005, photo by Edvin Bylander.

Workshop participants, *Folly Suisse*, Bergün, 2005, photo by Benedikt Boucsein.

A Straight Line is Broken

The workshop was conducted by the author as part of a diploma elective course under the chair of Prof. Dr. Ákos Morávanszky. We discussed the various aspects and implications for the Folly, such as symbolism, poetry, the global/ local dichotomy, and most important: the meaning of place. We then selected texts and examples and established a strict timetable. The result was a 'group design blueprint' served to guide workshop participants. It provided a series of exercises, excursions, and suggestions, but no formal predeterminations were made.

Ten highly motivated students were selected as participants. Intense discussions arose as the group's activities progressed more or less according to the timetable. The location and purpose of the Folly were determined, and several architectonic ideas were developed. On the fifth day, participants set out to formulate the final design. Groups of two participants worked on different designs aimed at creating a unique Folly. Further into the day, however, the process appeared to be grinding to a halt – the task of developing a fully resolved proposal in a few hours seemed impossible to manage. Time pressure mounted as building materials needed to be ordered in a timely manner. As the situation began to reach crisis proportions, everyone was summoned together.

We were confronted with a variety of sensible and intriguing ideas. None, however, was strong enough to justify discarding the others. Only one option remained: to combine all of the ideas into one collective design. Suddenly, things took off, and the Folly was conceived and sketched up in less than ten minutes.

This unexpected move turned out to be the only way the participants were able to create a Folly as a group. The original course of action aimed, more or less, at an architectural object, would have never lead to any real Folly. Its achievement only became possible through a course of random and unpredictable actions. It was a collaging of absurd and unrefined ideas which gave the Folly its uncanny and slightly irritating character. It shifted away from the comprehensible and attributable, over into a realm of its own – somewhere between art and architecture, as initially intended.
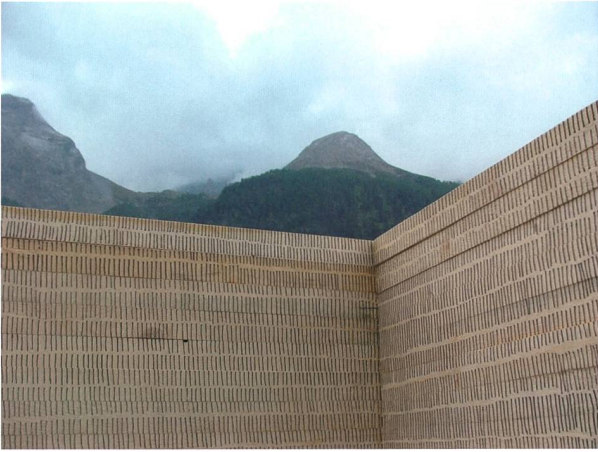
Workshop participants, *Folly Suisse*, interior view, Bergun, 2005, photo by Benedikt Boucsein.

Workshop participants, *Folly Suisse*, construction photo, Bergün, 2005, photo by Benedikt Boucsein.

Upon Completion

A visitor arriving at the train station has difficulty locating the village center. Looking for signs the Folly pops into view, a strange object seen in the distance, appearing to float in the air. As the visitor draws nearer, more houses coming into view; the Folly aligns with the Roman tower standing in the village center. It first appears as an extension of the tower before masking the visitor's views upon arrival at its base. The images covering the Folly`s exterior become discernible: a photo montage of Bergün's inhabitants and the surrounding landscape. As the visitor walks up the stairs, uncertainity sets in as the steps gradually tilt and become harder to climb. From a bent position, the visitor enters the Folly through a low opening, encountering an interior lining of wooden laths marked with hundreds of black lines. The walls form a frame, blocking the view of the village, leaving only the mountains visible. After a period of contemplation, the visitor concludes that exiting the Folly is the far more comfortable choice of action. Strolling into the village, the experience still fresh in the visitor's mind, mystical tales of the Folly appear in bars and restaurants around Bergün. Perhaps the visitor now sees Bergün with different eyes.

Wet Ending

Unfortunately, it's not clear whether the Folly would have worked in the above-described manner. Heavy rain set in the moment the task was completed. Tourists were hindered from entering Bergün, and soon thereafter, villagers were impacted by major floods. Three days later, almost all of the EASA objects were permanently dismantled.

Despite this abrupt conclusion, we can now claim to have added a fourth type of Folly to those mentioned at the beginning of this article: The *Group Folly*.

Benedikt Boucsein conducted the *Folly Suisse Workshop* in Bergün in conjunction with the EASA005 Annual Workshop Series. He is a PhD student at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) Zurich. He is also a member of *bhsf Architekten*, Zurich.