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Perception, deception: beyond model homes, by
Duane Noriyuki (March 18, 2004)

An exhibition of architectural models might be expected to pose the question, "How do we interpret the world around us?"

Less expected is this question, also suggested by a show at Cal State Long Beach's University Art Museum: "What do the Unabomber and Three Stooges have to do with architecture?"

"ReModeling," at the University Art Museum through April 18, examines how three-dimensional architectural models shape perception. It also considers how blurring the line that separates art from architecture might change the way our world looks.

Rather than just display model buildings, curator Mary-Kay Lombino sought out cross-over artists whose works address principles of architecture. The first person she thought of was Seattle-based sculptor Leo Saul Berk, who asserts that architects' models shown to prospective clients are largely works of fiction, in that they represent buildings that don't exist. Oftentimes, he says, they serve more as advertisements than true representations of what buildings will look like.

"Sometimes models are better as models," explains Lombino. "When they become buildings they lose some of their mystery and appeal."

For "ReModeling," Berk designed a new entrance for the University Art Museum, complete with computer-generated graphics and a large-scale model. Built at 4/5 scale, visitors can walk inside the structure, which is made of fluted polypropylene, a common modeling material.

"In trying to sell the building, you want to make the model provocative, really desirable by using interesting materials," Berk says. "The materials [used in building models], to me, are more interesting than the drywall or the concrete or the glass in actual buildings."

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The response to his work from non-architects has been largely positive, while there have been more negative comments from architects. One described it bluntly as "ugly."

Such reactions just prove how easily non-architects can be seduced by slick models, says Berk, even if they are not based on sound architectural principles. He likens it to seeing someone else's vacation pictures. "They don't really tell you what it was like to be on vacation, just like artificial renderings don't really tell you about what it's like to be in the building."

But how effectively can any object represent something else? Artist Taft Green's detailed interpretation of a Los Angeles street intersection deconstructs perception, showing how it shifts when a scene is viewed from different angles or through different lenses of thoughts, concerns, judgments and memories.

His abstract wooden sculpture reflects how one person might notice nothing but traffic and lights while someone else might pay particular attention to the gas station on the corner but not even notice the restaurant opposite it, or the bus stop, or the billboard, or the hills beyond.

In another piece, Green gives three diverse perspectives on a Staples office-supply checkout counter.

While Green begins, in both cases, with existing structures and then offers his interpretations, architect Barbara Bestor begins at the opposite end of the process.

She starts with concepts that evolved and guided her toward the actual creation of a structure, in this case her Echo Park home.

The three models she created for the exhibition demonstrate how different "skins" on a structure create vastly different identities, even when wrapped around the same set of bones.

The models represent possibilities -- different paths she could have taken during the remodeling of her house, which was more like a shack when she purchased it a couple of years ago.

One model is skeletal, reflecting only the framework of the existing structure. Another uses glass and one-way mirrors on the outside surface, so that it literally

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reflects its surroundings, almost disappearing into the landscape. The third uses more primitive materials, heavy wooden beams, that she says give it an ancient appearance, not unlike Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski's simple cabin in the Montana woods.

The remodeled house incorporates elements of both designs, Bestor says. But the models, while they represent the building's appearance from the outside, can't show the building from the inside looking out, and the emphasis she placed on opening the interior to its natural surroundings.

Los Angeles artist David Schafer's piece, "How High Is Up?" was inspired by a 1940 Three Stooges episode in which Moe, Larry and Curly were hired as builders, resulting, as usual, in chaos. Schafer, working from a TV image, created a 15-foot sculpture as well as two-dimensional computer renderings of the Stooges' structure.

Built of I-beams, it at first appears to represent the kind of mess typical of the Stooges. But given a second look, parts of it also recall the famous Santa Monica house that architect Frank Gehry designed for himself, Lombino says. That's neither a comment on Gehry or the Stooges, she says. But it does say something about how we interpret the world.