

FOLLY

Mark Bolland

There is something abominable about cameras, because they possess the power to invent many worlds. As an artist who has been lost in this wilderness of mechanical reproduction for many years, I do not know which world to start with.

Robert Smithson¹



Figure 1. *First Success.*

Folly is an ongoing architectural/photographic project that combines 'biotecture' and ideas from ancient observatories with a camera obscura. This essay will detail the research and experiments behind this project, from 'prehistoric' architecture to 1970s land art, historical and contemporary 'biotecture,' sun images and cameras. It will also attempt to explain how a design for a small building in the woods became a large and unwieldy art project. A 'folly' is a building in a garden or the grounds of a stately home modelled on the dilapidated or ruined structures frequently placed in the Arcadian settings of picturesque landscape paintings. It is a kind of useless building, an ornamental extravagance with no practical purpose. It is, as its name suggests, the very embodiment of foolishness.

'Biotecture' is a term frequently used by the Earthship pioneer Michael Reynolds. An Earthship is "a radically sustainable building made of recycled materials."² A more conventional definition of the term 'biotecture' would be

along the lines of “the use of living plants as an integral part of the design of a building.” For the purposes of this essay I will attempt to outline a slightly broader use of this term. I consider that ‘biotecture’ might feasibly include any structure or building that is in itself ‘living’ in some way, either because it includes living plants in its design, or because the building itself is in some sense ‘living.’ In other words, the structure does not fight the elements or seek to exist in a perpetual state of perfection, but rather it lives, grows, changes, and eventually dies. Such organic architecture was common, normal even, in pre-modern times and still prevails in many parts of the world. The fact that “the most advanced measure of sustainability in the built environment possible today” is called the Living Building Challenge³ suggests that some of the ideas inherent in ‘biotecture’ may have a large part to play in the future of a more sustainable approach to architecture. This project, then, has its antecedents in research into so-called ‘alternative’ and ‘vernacular’ buildings, both new and old.



Figure 2. Mandan Earth Lodge, photographed by Edward S. Curtis, 1908 from *The North America Indian*, Volume 5.

American earthlodges and pit houses such as those built by the Mandan and Hidatsa nations, Celtic roundhouses and Mongolian gers (yurts) – all of which feature in the 1973 book *Shelter*, edited by Lloyd Khan. Although since the 1970s all of these designs have been reincarnated in contemporary equivalents, I was more interested in their pre-modern incarnations – particularly their organic or ‘living’ qualities, including the use of roundwood and earth. I resolved to build a small structure of roundwood, earth and other natural materials to try out some of these ideas for myself.

One thing that particularly intrigued me about many of the structures I was looking at was their circular shape. A circle is the most efficient way of enclosing a space – you get the most space for the materials used – but it also has a particularly harmonious feeling, quite unlike the boxes we now normally inhabit. These circular structures also have specific symbolic significance: In the yurt, the door is traditionally oriented towards the south (northern hemisphere sun) and the internal floor plan is based on the cardinal directions. The ger is also navigated in a clockwise direction, following the path of the sun.⁶ For the Hidatsa, the earthlodge was a model of the universe, “its sky dome held up by four enormous pillars just like those of their own four-post lodges.”⁷ And there are countless other examples of the symbolic values of what we would now think of as ‘architectural’ decisions.

Whilst researching ‘low impact’ building techniques, I came across various examples of ‘biotecture’ that fascinated me. I first stumbled upon a contemporary roundhouse built in a community in Pembrokeshire, West Wales, by Tony Wrench and his partner Jane Faith. This house combines aspects of Native American earthlodges and Celtic roundhouses with more recent ideas and technologies. Wrench’s journey – as described in his book *Building a Low Impact Roundhouse* and on his website⁴ – inspired me to look into other similar buildings, such as those built by Simon and Jasmine Dale at the Lammas community, also in Wales.⁵ I also followed these buildings back to their inspirations and began researching ancient and indigenous ‘biotecture.’ I looked particularly closely at Native



Figure 3. Yurts in Mongolia, Stefan Passe, Albert Kahn archive, 1913.



Figure 4. *Reveal*, camera obscura, view from inside.

Like the Hidatsa earthlodges, many other ancient structures are also symbolic representations of the world around them. The most famous and spectacular example of this is the Great Pyramid at Giza, which is perfectly orientated to the points of the compass and accurately models the earth itself as well as various mathematical phenomena, including pi and phi (the golden section or golden ratio), and so on. Also, many prehistoric and megalithic sites and structures are based on astronomical principles and were used as sun and moon calendars and observatories. Some of these structures, particularly the Neolithic 'passage tombs' of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, closely resemble earthlodges in their outward appearance, *and* also perform calendric functions.

Some of these monuments, such as those at Newgrange in Ireland and in Gwynedd in North Wales, have been shown to map the solstices and other astronomical phenomena by channeling sunlight down a passage into a dark chamber. I quickly realised that these structures are a kind of camera obscura. As with any building that contains an oculus, the most famous example of which is the Pantheon in Rome, all one needs to do is to reduce the size of the entrance to a small aperture, and an image of the sun would be projected in the space, not just a shaft of light. I soon discovered that others had noticed this and that there is ancient evidence to substantiate the idea: Cairn T at Sliabh na Calliagh at Loughcrew, Ireland, has "[c]ircular solar pictographic engravings on the backstone [which] demarcate the diagonal movement of the [image of the sun] across the stone [at the spring equinox]."⁸

One of those who has proposed this use of the camera obscura to draw the movement of the sun across the sky, American artist and teacher Matt Gattton, has also suggested that the principle of the camera obscura has been employed for much longer than we have previously thought. Gattton's suggestion is that some of the Paleolithic images of animals found on stone and bone plaquettes, as well as in caves, are derived from camera obscura images.⁹ Gattton hypothesises that, as Paleolithic people lived mostly in tents covered with hides, they would surely have seen images projected by small holes in the hides and cast on various surfaces in the dark interior.

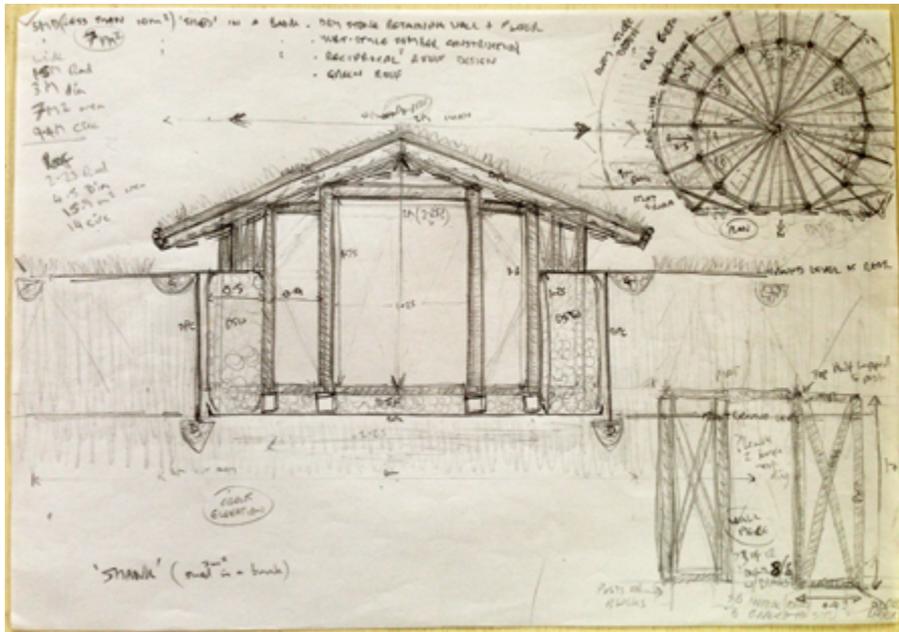


Figure 5. Early drawings for "Folly".

It was the bringing together of all these threads that enabled me to fully conceive of this research as the beginnings of an artwork. What started as a vague notion of building a small structure inspired by ancient techniques had collided with my research into camera obscura images that has been ongoing, if intermittent, for around 15 years. Suddenly, I realised that various artworks that had taken my fancy by James Turrell, Robert Smithson and others that seemed connected to my building project were nagging me for a good reason – this was going to be an artwork of some kind.

Twentieth-century earthworks and land art practices of various kinds have often been connected with pre-historical art, monuments and structures, perhaps because there seem to be no other precedents for this work. To me, these links are both obvious and sensible, but also dubious. While some land art from the 1970s and onwards is obviously related to or inspired by ancient structures, the connection should not be made simply for the sake of historicism, "the new being made comfortable by being made familiar."¹⁰ The ancient structures are not sculpture and had a use value: art, as Walker Evans once put it, 'is useless,' and ancient monuments and structures existed outside the culture of Western art that forms the basis of our understanding of 'sculpture.'¹¹

The most famous explication of the context for the new kind of sculpture usually connected with ancient earthworks is found in Rosalind Krauss's essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," first published in 1979. Krauss clearly illustrates the fallacies of genealogies constructed over millennia and lays out a now well-established path – modernist sculpture abandons the "logic of the monument" and becomes "nomadic" before becoming defined in negative terms as "the addition of the *not-landscape* to the *not-architecture*".¹² She goes on to detail the "complex" of sculpture after modernism in positive terms, as *both* landscape and architecture. Such an idea existed long before the end of the 1960s in other cultures, she says, but Krauss also provides something else. She offers one of the most lucid explanations of what 'postmodernism' means for the artist: "within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium [...] but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium [...] might be used."¹³ This is the perspective and attitude that brought me from sculpture to photography, and also forms one of the sources of my dissatisfaction with the photographic image.



Figure 6. Construction of "Folly" in progress.

Camera obscura images obviously share their technological principles with photography – they both frame and flatten the world, replacing it with its reproduction in two dimensions. But camera obscura images also have a certain quality that is irreproducible. As such, they are the opposite of the photographic image. In the camera obscura – one that is a building, not a portable object – the image moves, but the camera does not; again, this is the reverse of the photographic camera. Also, a camera obscura seems to fit very well into the definition *not*-landscape and *not*-architecture, or *both* landscape and architecture: it exists to simultaneously exclude the landscape and to bring it inside in image form. It is not architecture as such, nor is it the actual landscape, yet it is both. What we now see as pre-photographic technologies, like the camera obscura, magic lanterns, and so on, are diminished by the historicist perspective, which relegates them to part of the genealogy of something else, a step on the path to something modern. This attitude excludes the *experience* of these images. It is precisely this experiential nature, or this experience *of nature*, that is the focus of this work, this *Folly*.

Perhaps I should have realised sooner, but after several years of drawings, designs and diagrams, none of which resulted in a finished plan, what had begun as a design for a small building in the woods has metamorphosed into something quite different – a camera obscura made of natural materials that attempts to put the viewer in the landscape and in the picture in a way that a photograph cannot, by definition, achieve. A series of operations, to paraphrase Krauss, whose cultural terms range from ancient observatories to 'biotecture,' via Enlightenment spectacle and wonder; all for the purpose of trying to create an experiential artwork that can immerse the viewer in nature – in this case nature ruined and reborn, second-growth New Zealand 'bush' – whilst simultaneously enacting and deconstructing our modern habit of reducing the experience of nature to an image.

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- 1 Robert Smithson, "Art through the Camera's Eye," in Eugenie Tsai, *Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- 2 <http://earthship.com>.
- 3 <http://living-future.org>.
- 4 Tony Wrench, *Building a Low Impact Roundhouse* (East Meon, Hampshire: Permanent Publications, 2001; 4th ed. 2013); and <http://thatroundhouse.info>.
- 5 <http://lammas.org.uk>.
- 6 See Becky Kemery, *Yurts: Living in the Round* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2006).
- 7 Peter Nabokov and Robert Easton, *Native American Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 38.
- 8 Matt Gatton, *Megalithic Camera* (2010), <http://www.paleo-camera.com>.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), 30-44, at 30.
- 11 Walker Evans, "Oral History Interview with Walker Evans, 1971 Oct. 13–Dec. 23," *Archives of American Art*, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-walker-evans-11721>.
- 12 Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," 34-6.
- 13 Ibid, 42.