

VISUAL ARTS

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

Exploring efficiency and community

Allan Wexler's new book, "Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design," is mistitled. Most of the projects described in this heavy tome — thickly packed with photographs, texts and, above all, original ideas — are extremely sensible. With the emphasis on the extreme.

Why, for example, if an umbrella sheds rain in one orientation, can't it be used to collect water when turned upside down? Need communal seating on a steeply sloped floor? Don't change the floor, change the seats and tables to serve the need by trimming legs here, propping there — or live with tilted tables but shim the dinnerware.

Wexler, 68, has been tweaking the art world with variations on what he learned in architecture school (Rhode Island School of Design, Pratt Institute) for more than 40 years. As a biography in "Absurd Thinking" describes his primary project, he "investigates eating, bathing, sitting, and socializing, and turns

these everyday activities into ritual and theater."

Absurd Thinking: Between Art and Design

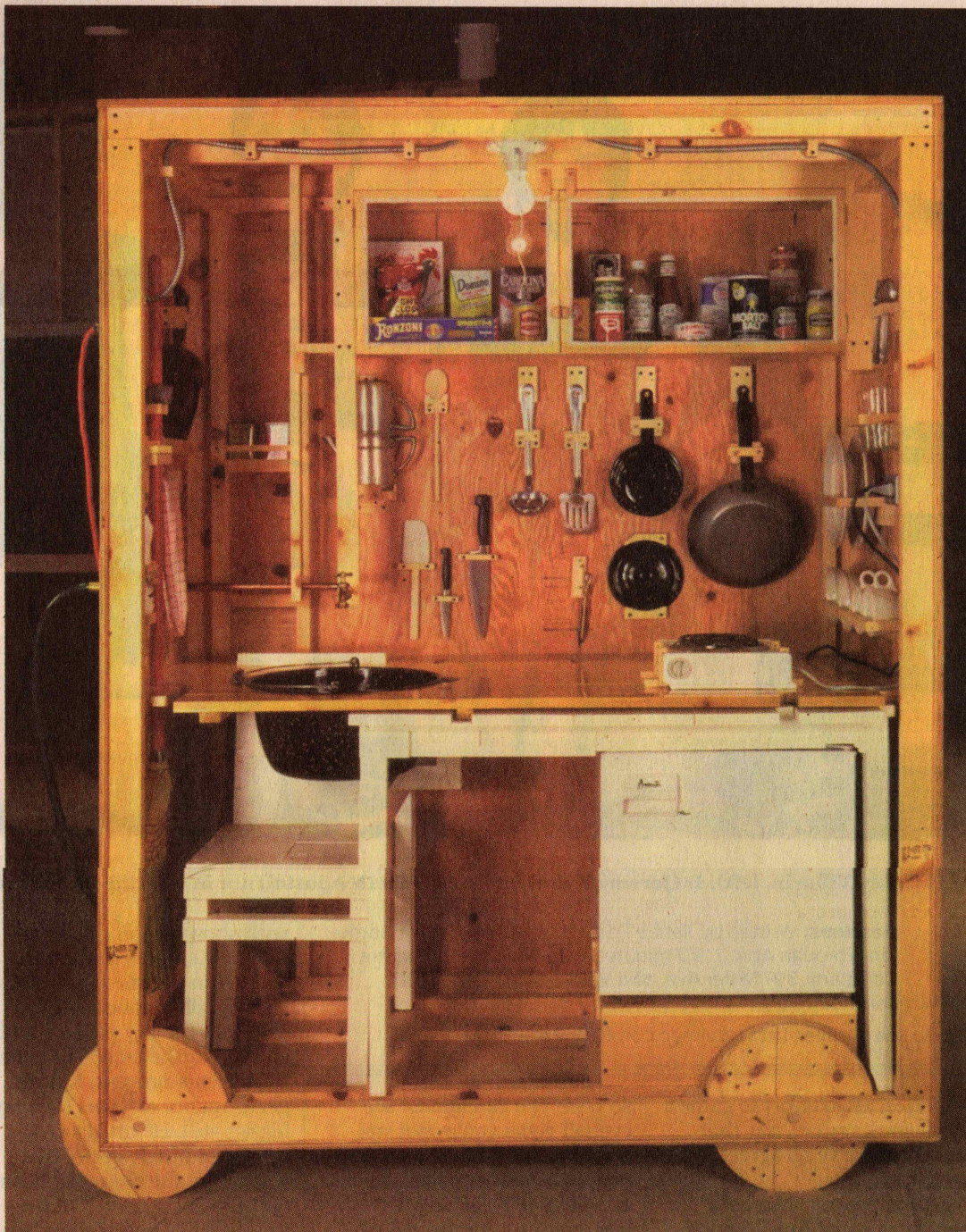
Allan Wexler, "with the close cooperation of Ellen Wexler" (Lars Müller Publishers; 296 pages; \$50)

His retrospective exhibition "Custom Built" traveled extensively,

ending its tour at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2001. (I was director of a museum that brought the show to Cincinnati, and later commissioned a permanent Wexler installation there.)

Many of Wexler's ideas — often developed, as the book's title page acknowledges, "with the close collaboration of Ellen Wexler," his wife — celebrate the idea of community. "Coffee Seeks its Own Level" (1990) connects four coffee cups with long vinyl tubes. In order for anyone seated at the table to raise a cup without causing the others to overflow, everyone must drink in unison. "Co-Exist" chairs (2009) would topple if two people did not sit at the same time. To employ the "Four-Handled Broom" (1991), you must pull while we push. And "Four Shirt Collars Sewn into a Tablecloth" (1991) would surely make for a lively party.

Efficiency is another common theme. For a 1988 project in Pittsburgh, "Bed / Sitting Rooms for an Artist in Residence," he designed furniture that rolls between two rooms through openings in a wall. Parts of the same object can serve as a sofa in one room, a bed in the other; a single reading lamp swings through a hole to serve either room.



In Allan Wexler's "Crate House" (1991), a crate rolls into an empty shed, turning into a fully equipped kitchen. Other crates convert the small house into a bedroom, bath or living room.



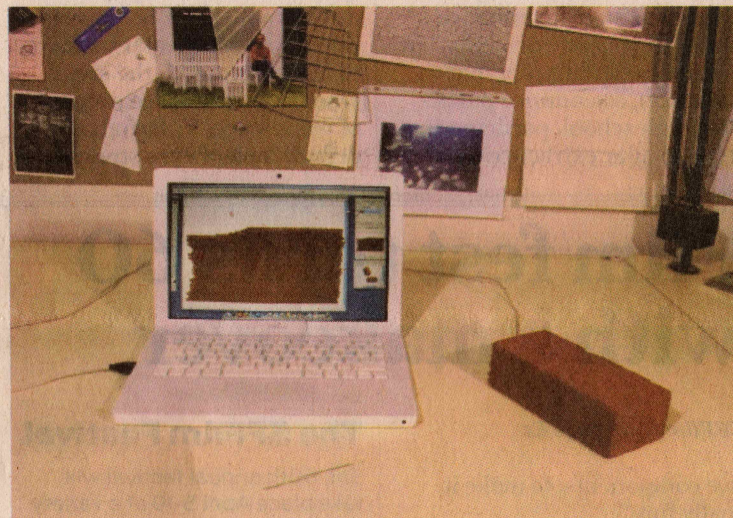
Allan Wexler

"Hat / Roof" (1994) can collect falling rain in a barrel to be recycled, and protect the wearer from the weather.

"Crate House" (1991) intricately packs all the elements of a kitchen, living room, bathroom and bedroom, each in a separate crate. A small, empty "house" has openings cut into its sides. Depending on the need of the moment, the correct crate is rolled in and the whole house serves a single

function.

"Hat / Roof" (1994) is both substantial weather protection and a wearable rain barrel to collect runoff. In 1990, Wexler built "A Chair a Day" for 16 days, each a permutation of the previous day's design. In 2007 he drew "54 Studies for Chair Transformations," developing many of them into



Allan Wexler

"How to Build a Digital Brick Wall" (2009): The heft of a brick mouse replaces what's lost in digital wall construction.

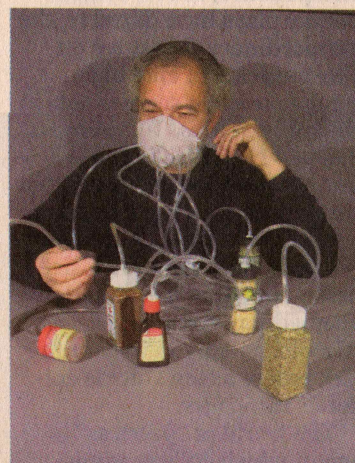
actual, three-dimensional objects.

Many of the 200-plus works documented here have a self-referential aspect, though few are as powerfully autobiographical as "I Want to Become Architecture" (2002), for which he built a faceted wall niche, designed to precisely embrace his form.



Allan Wexler

In "Reframing Nature" (2015), cuts and wedges are used to "correct" a crooked branch.



Allan Wexler

"Spice Box for the Havdalah Service" (2005) references a Jewish Shabbat tradition of smelling herbs and spices.

"I never set out to make work that is humorous," the artist writes. "It is surprising when humor appears, a by-product of looking so closely."

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