

“From The Drawing Board”

Disappearing Act

As architects, so much of what we are taught (and do) revolves around the permanence and longevity of the buildings that we design. We base much of this philosophy, among other things, on economics, safety, and pride. One of the important considerations with this design philosophy is the appropriate choice of building materials and the construction methods, relative to the geographic location and the intended use of the building. It's rare that we are afforded the opportunity to design a building designed to be destroyed.

As a person who has had a life-long fascination with the effects that the passages of time and nature have on structures, I will always recall a question posed by one of my college philosophy professors. He asked us to imagine what the physical state of our classroom would be in a hundred years; then five hundred years; and then a thousand years. Would the space that we were occupying still be a college classroom in a hundred years? Would it be a skyscraper or perhaps a cemetery in five hundred? Would it be a buried ruin under a forest of trees in a thousand years?

One subtle example of this philosophy can be experienced on the beach just north of Corolla, in the “four wheel drive area.” The first time I experienced it was just after I started working on the Outer Banks. I took a long walk along that stretch of beach and came upon what, from a distance, looked like the broken pilings (leftovers from a storm claimed building?) rising a couple of feet out of the sand where the waves were breaking. As I got closer, I realized that they were not the relics of an old structure – they were tree stumps. Upon returning from my walk, I asked a local friend about what I had seen. He told me that the stumps were the remains of a cypress forest that had existed there about one hundred years ago; its disappearance was the result of beach shifting over the years.

One way that I enjoy studying the affects that time and nature has on places is through the exploration of intentionally temporary buildings as a means towards architecture and making places. Three winters ago, I was awarded a study grant that allowed me to visit such a place – The Ice Hotel located at Station écotouristique Duchesnay, Quebec. (*“Imagine living in a huge and amazing structure made every year out of one of the purest materials found in nature and destined to disappear every spring: ice and snow.”* www.icehotel-canada.com) As an experienced winter mountaineer, I had knowledge of portable structures (tents designed to withstand hurricane force winds) and snow structures (cramped caves and igloos, which can be quite warm in sub zero temperatures); but I had never experienced a **thirty thousand square foot hotel** constructed in such a manner.

After convincing one of my winter loving friends to accompany me, I immediately booked a night at this luxury hotel. We arrived at dusk and were immediately amazed by the crystal like appearance that the giant ice block walls had as the lights (many were colored) bounced around its shiny surfaces; it had a warm glow. I had arranged for a private tour, and was amazed to learn that, aside from it being a grand building –

complete with ornate sculptures carved of snow and ice; and for being completely furnished with ice fabricated furniture (including the bed pedestals); the discothèque/nightclub; the chapel; and the rooms each with a different (sculpted) theme; this place was constructed completely out of snow and ice. The columns that supported the roof were made of blocks of crystal clear ice. The roof and walls had no hidden steel or wooden beams to help carry the tremendous weight. This was an enormous igloo designed and built to impress its patrons, and then vanish, leaving no trace of itself, other than its memory.

There were about forty other guests staying at the Ice Hotel that night. Bundled in our winter coats and hats, we mingled around the ice bar of the palatial nightclub; dancing and drinking beer and vodka drinks from glasses made of ice. After several hours of celebrating the moment, I retired to my Tahitian themed room and slept like a log (or a block of ice) in my hotel provided, super-insulated sleeping bag atop my ice pedestal bed. The next morning I awoke knowing that within a few weeks time, the Ice Hotel would melt, leaving the grounds available for another use during the warmer seasons; only to return as a different Ice Hotel the following winter.

Summer is on the way; and it's time too play on the beach. Is there a way to build a **giant sand castle hotel** someplace on the Outer Banks for us to enjoy until the tide washes it away, and then rebuild it again (like the Ice Hotel)? If there is, I'm not aware of it. So, in the meantime, I will enjoy the less temporary structures, and I will look forward to building a sandcastle or two, knowing that I will only be able to inhabit it within my imagination.

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Aside from designing custom houses, (and when not playing in the snow) he is currently working on designs for affordable, hurricane-defiant structures on the Outer Banks.