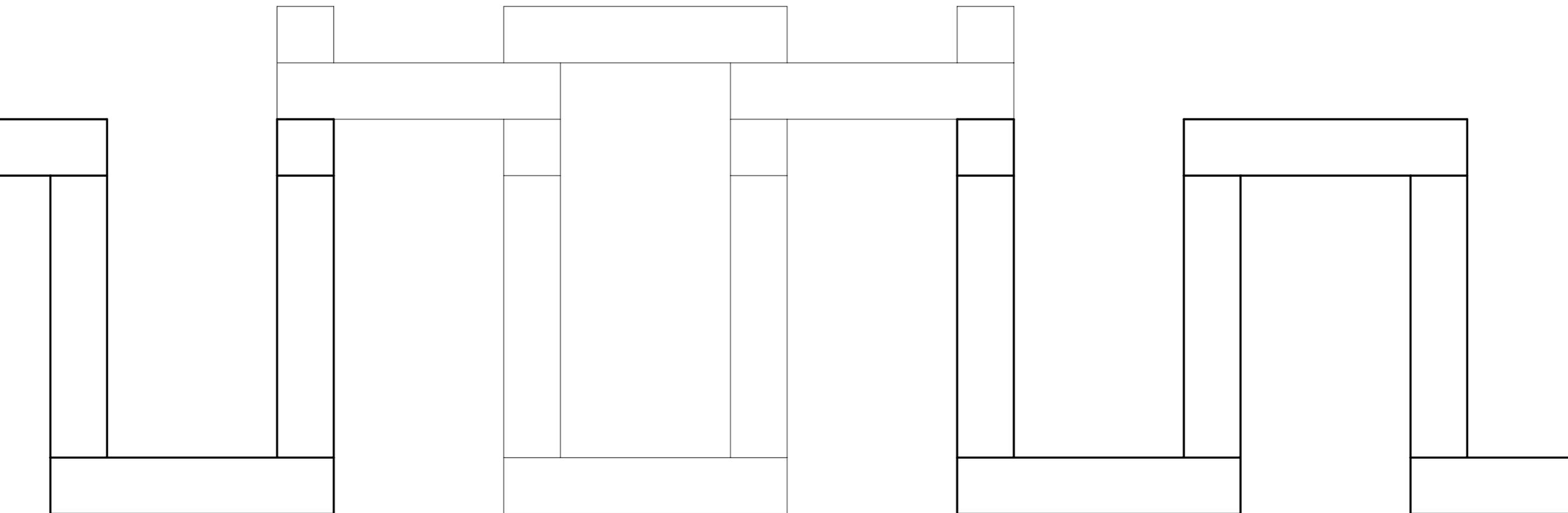


a place of urbanity

max bill sculpture pavilion

chris schellhammer
urbanism seminar
fall 2009



Many architectural discussions investigate the meaning and etymological roots of words that are used in the discussion. The dual meaning of urbanity lies in two related roots: urban – of or relating to the city, and urbane – manners and conduct characteristic of the civilized and civilized. Similar to human and humane, nearly synonymous, one focuses on the identity of a person or place and the other the character or conduct befitting of that person or place [1], [2]. The title of this essay intends this dual meaning.

Max Bill's sculpture pavilion in Zurich, Switzerland is a public place – a project of the street. It is of the city (urban) and welcomes human activity and conduct (urbane). The objective of this study is to learn what the pavilion has to teach about architecture, street engagement and place making in an urban context.

Since this is a study of architecture, an obvious question to entertain is: Is Max Bill's sculpture pavilion architecture?

This question will be addressed at the end of the essay because debating architectural definitions or describing concrete art is not our concern now. Aside from the installation's cultural contribution to the city as public art, it is necessary, for the purposes of this exercise, to consider this installation as built form in a city, just as a building is, and as such, a part of the urban fabric. With this predisposition, the installation offers architectural lessons as relevant as a building could. In other words, it is sculpture with architectural qualities that offer up spatial and architectural conditions at the human scale and the scale of the street and that commu-

nicates architecturally relevant information.

site and situation

This area of Zurich is characterized by an organic pattern of radial streets. Bahnhofstrasse, originates at the port – perhaps the original city center for trade and commercial reasons. In a modern city, it is also difficult to know if the waterways of the city influenced streets, or the streets influenced waterways. Early Zurich was a fortified city with a circular city wall. This could have set the stage for a radial pattern. **1**

Despite the reason, when these radials converge and or split, they produce a spatial condition within the resolution of streets and buildings coming together at acute angles. These areas are not quite streets, not quite alley ways and not quite intersections. The buildings of the city ultimately contain this space and bring form and structure to the place – a place that initially might be interpreted as placeless, a leftover, a residue, an unintended consequence of another activity: road making for the sake of movement. However, after more thought, one can speculate that this is the very thing that makes it a suitable public place. These places are ironically activated by their purposelessness. Because these spaces are coincidental, their potential function is open to multiplicity rather than a designed singularity and is therefore able to adjust to the needs of the city. Some of the most memorable public spaces occur in such situations: Times Square in NYC for example.

Thus, depending on the size of the space, these areas adapt accordingly. Paradeplatz,

a larger example of this condition serves as public transit hub. Where max bill's sculpture pavilion is located, the space is bound into a rectangle approximately 60 by 90 feet. A more modest space, its length bookended by Bahnhofstrasse and Pelikanstrasse and its width framed by buildings housing global financial service firms. **2**

the pavilion and the street

The pavilion has a clear axis and is bilaterally symmetrical. In an exceptional move, the pavilion has a gate-like element that extends out such that people walking perpendicular to the installation pass between this gate leading out to the city and a similar gate to the installation. **3** This is the pavilion's first offering of architectural relevance. First, the installation imposes its axis on the axis of the street. This intersection is the center of a spatial idea. Second, this is a space of multiplicities that compliments the complexity of its urban context. The space is part of the pavilion but it is also part of the sidewalk, and because it is not completely owned by either, it has an identity and form of its own.

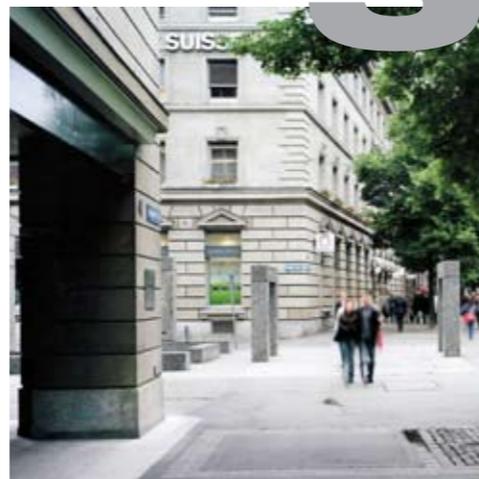
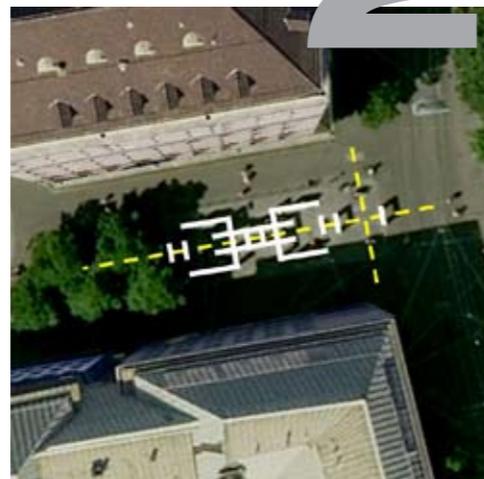
The floor of the city emphasizes this condition: an all purpose sidewalk material yields to cut stone pavers that signal a change in the street. **4** Upon this change in material, you are in an intermediate realm. This is claimed space inside the installation but of the street. Its solidarity to the sculpture and the street is counterpointed by its own identity that lies somewhere between the sculpture and the architecture of the street.

At the crossing of axis, a gate of gates is

encountered. Here, the bilateral symmetry of the installation is revealed along the longitudinal axis. **5** As mentioned earlier, two gates frame either side of the sidewalk creating a pedestrian gate for the sidewalk. One gate "leads" to the city on one side and on the other side, a gate leads to the sculpture as if to say – that way is outside, this way is inside. Thus, when observed in this manner, the pedestrian confirms the multiplicity of this space by realizing that there is a substantial intermediate realm between inside and out, a condition which typically is either defined by the material of a thermal barrier or the inconsequential spatial and temporal experience of a door.

These gates are 'doors' to the sculpture and demonstrate their independence, due to their separateness, as well as their partnership with the core by way of symmetry. An element just beyond, lying flat on grade and transverse suggests a welcoming respite but this element might just as easily suggest an anti-entry vis-a-vis an impassible threshold. These doors advance to the foreground with two subservient flanking elements that compliments the ambiguousness of this "entry". On the one hand, they might offer anyone cautious of entering on center another way to experience the sculpture. On the other, they enforce the axial entry like welcoming arms to the front door.

Jakob Bill, son of Max Bill, refers to these entries as such [4]. While it is obvious that these program "entries" to the sculpture are not the same as doors are to a building, the fact they are not quite either is a compelling idea for architecture. So, just as the installation as a whole reads somewhere between



architecture and sculpture, these smaller parts of the whole read similarly. Through this observation, it can be concluded there are individual parts with form and structure of their own, and these parts contribute to the form and structure of the whole. If we can again imagine the installation as a building, when these parts engage the street, the whole is extended into the public realm, making the built form an extension of that realm. To the person on the street, each part and the whole would be of urban quality – of and relating to the city: architecture ‘of’ and ‘from’ the city, rather than architecture that just so happens to be ‘in’ the city.

The engagement of the street is made absolute with the move of the additional gate. The presence of the additional gate is a curiosity. This gate does not show up on the scale model. Only the symmetrical core is represented [3]. Nor do elevation drawings represent this gate. This is especially curious given the unexpected finding that the floor of the sculpture was not in the original drawings, but added later [4]. Yet, the model does include the floor, which suggests the second gate was added later still. The rigor of the part to part relationships and rules are conveyed through the pattern of the floor. While the gate breaks these rules it is ultimately positioned based on an extension of the rules via the floor. Thus, one can further speculate that the decision to include the additional gate was based on site analysis and the opportunity revealed to Max Bill by engaging the street in this manner. Even with Jakob Bill’s writings of each of his fathers pavilion projects, it is difficult to gauge the validity of this speculation [3]. Yet the value of this observation lies in the understanding

of rules so that they can be dutifully broken.

oscillating readings of space

From a frontal view of the sculpture, an observation path orbiting the sculpture reveals a spatial condition that oscillates from clearly articulated space to an ambiguous collapsing of space. 5 This opening and collapsing of space is perceived as vertical elements fill the field of view, align and overlap to create a reference-less and depth less spatial phenomenon. This hold on perception is released as one continues to orbit their viewpoint and the vertical elements spread open and reveal the framed space within and of the sculpture. The high-polish of the granite reveals the heart of the stone and these columns and surface qualities obliquely viewed become one. The mirror-like finish also reflects the city. I can only infer through photographs and digital models that both of these material conditions contribute to this visual phenomenon.

a place for people

It is clear that this installation was intended to be visited and occupied by the citizens of Zurich [3]. The pavilion is one of many in a series that welcomed seating for those in solitude, couples or small groups. Because the pavilion has no obligation as an absolute building, or absolute sculpture, it is able to offer this generous concession. Without any sign of a typical park bench, the installation welcomes this activity without reservation. Completely calculated, this quality instructs us to consider urban architecture as a crucible for urbanity. Perhaps there is an opportunity for building form to enrich human

activities over and above programmatic obligations. When urbanity is welcomed in, it seems to reciprocate and activate architecture. 7

proportional rigor

The proportional relationships and how they are played out are worth noting. The proportions of each element are 1:1:5. The width is approximately 45cm (seating height). Thus, the granite sections are roughly 1.5’ wide X 1.5’ tall by 7.5’ long [3]. This element plays a part of a larger whole – a three part post and beam assembly. Only the gates and their partnering “bench” stand alone but in plan, they convey the spatial pattern and rules of the whole. 8 The continuous and symmetrical nature of the sculptures core demonstrates geometric operations of the elements and the post and beam, such that some are inverted, but the relationship between horizontal and vertical elements is rigorous. 9 Now the parts form a whole that is symmetrical along both longitudinal and transverse axi. The rules set up a spatial module that is made intelligible by recognizing the base geometric relationship of each element, how they are assembled to form parts, and how the parts then form the whole.

In plan, these part-to-part relationships are easy to see and the floor pattern articulates this spatial module. 10 As this is played out, the modules form a larger module. A set of 3 X 3 modules becomes a 9-square module that is repeated 3 times and completes the plan structure. While clear space is observed, the interstitial space that corresponds to the thickness of the elements is equally important. While this condition is in-

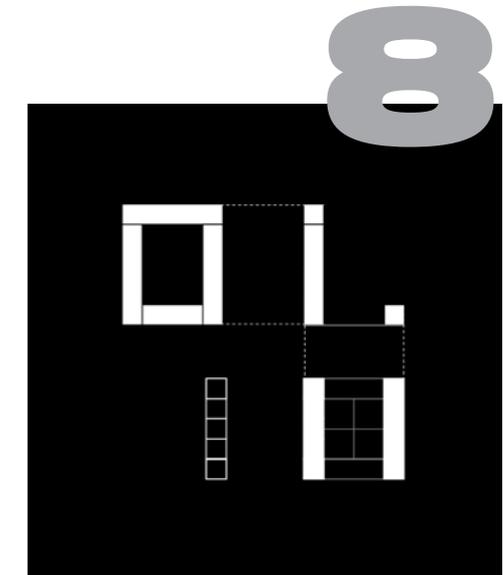
nate based on the element and how it is put to use, the lesson is still relevant. That the thickness of walls, roofs, etc.. are opportunities for habitation. If the installation was a building, then the architectural theme might be described as one of thresholds. 11

As earlier mentioned, the additional gate violates some of the rigor applied to the sculpture. Whereas all other elements, even when separated, are only separated by a single span equal to the length of the solid element in situ with other elements, this gate is spaced using a distance equal to 3 times the element length – the distance of the larger 3X3 module. In other words, the field of rules that dictates the bilaterally symmetrical core of the installation is extended – like an expanding field. The extension of these same rules in this field determines the position of the additional gate.

conclusions

The installation has been described as a “knot in space” [5]. This reference is open to many interpretations. The elements are not continuous so one has the liberty to consider various interpretations. Using form, relationships and rules can be observed: 1) pairing, 2) equality, 3) synchronization and 4) symmetry.

The reference of a “knot in space” means more than one of material relationships. Is it insinuating a self-referential knot? Based on the phenomenon of compressed space mentioned earlier, one might consider the pavilion a sort of visual knot. A knot of space is conceivable where spatial volumes are



contained and manipulated by material boundaries. Or, a place where knots of habit and time are woven – human habits crossing other human habits – a daily dance as part and parcel of the urban condition. **1 2**

The complexity of the city warrants an interpretation equally complex – one that combines material, space and human activity. In Coy Howard’s essay “The Richly Designed Street”, he describes the street as “a simple episodic multi-plotted sequential juxtapositional background foreground, perspectival, peripheral, textured, acoustic, olfactory, surprising, suspenseful, and an occasionally erotic thing [6].

The knot reference is an appropriate metaphor that inexorably ties all of these conditions and complexities together. Thus, are these qualities of the sculpture pavilion, the street, or the people that use them?

I submit that the answer is each and all: these knotted parts of a whole place - belonging to the richly designed street and fabric of the urban environment [6].

Afterward

Is Max Bill’s sculpture pavilion architecture?

Well, it does seem to stand somewhere between sculpture and architecture but it is certainly not a building. It can be inhabited. Over 40 people can have a seat. It has an inside and an outside. There is a floor and its footprint is large enough to suggest an architectural scale. It has perceptible openings. It organizes habitable space. Scholars have referred to the sculpture as a Greek

temple [4]. Are ruins architecture? In other words, is a thermal envelope necessary for such a classification? Even Max Bill’s career of multiple mediums and modes includes concrete art and architecture, making this a difficult question to answer. Is it architecture? It might be more fruitful to ask, as Norman Goodman might, “when is it architecture?” [7].

“When” brings time and situation to the question and changes our point of view. For example, Is it architecture when two columns support a beam between them? Or, some might argue that the installation is architecture when people use it as such. They may sit, eat, converse, etc...as they might a café in a traditional building. Yet an equally compelling position confirms its dual nature as it is clear about what it is but at the same time, mysterious. As such, the installation changes states between an object of sculpture, and activated architecture.

Text Sources

1. House, R., Dictionary.com. © Random House, Inc. 2009, Based on the Random House Dictionary.
2. Harper, D., Historian, Online Etymology Dictionary. 02 Mar. 2009.
3. Moos, S.v., [1940-]; Frei, Hans.; Gimmi, Karin.; Rüegg, Arthur, [1942-]; Bill, Max, [1908-1994.]; Bill, Jacob.; Aerni, Geogr., Max Bill, arquitecto = Max Bill, architect. 2G: revista internacional de arquitectura = internacional architecture review, 2004, n.29-30?, entire issue (274 p.), 2004: p. 274.
4. Thompson, S., The relevance of floor in Max Bill’s Sculpture Pavilion 2009: Blacksburg. p. In a conversation with Steve Thompson and Frank Weiner, the relevance of the floor of the Max Bill Sculpture Pavilion was discussed. While the context of this discussion was to question the motivation behind modeling the pavilion (is it a model or a replica?), I continued to speculate that the sculpture sprang from the idea behind the floor pattern of the installation. Not so, explains my mentors. The floor was in fact a provisional decision made contingent by the City of Zurich - not Max Bill. The understanding that the actual installation is different than the authors representations not only suggests that the idea for sculpture existed well before the site and/or any commission, but also revealed an additional question - the presence of the asymmetrical gate that bridges the sidewalk.

5. Schmid, E., max bill - the master’s vision. 2009, Ariadnefilm GmbH: Switzerland. p. 93 minutes.

6. GmbH, J.V., Multiple City, ed. S. Wolfrum. 2008, Berlin: jovis. 343.

7. Goodman, N., Implementation of the Arts. The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 1982. 40(3): p. 281-283.

Image Sources

1, 2

Google. Google Earth. 2009; Available from: www.google.com.

5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12

Author’s Study Models and Diagrams

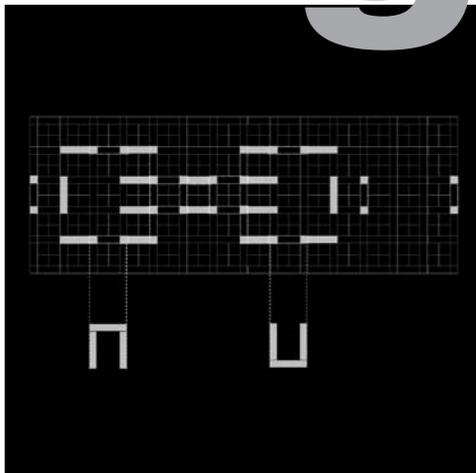
7

flickr.com/photos/viernullvier/3370713566

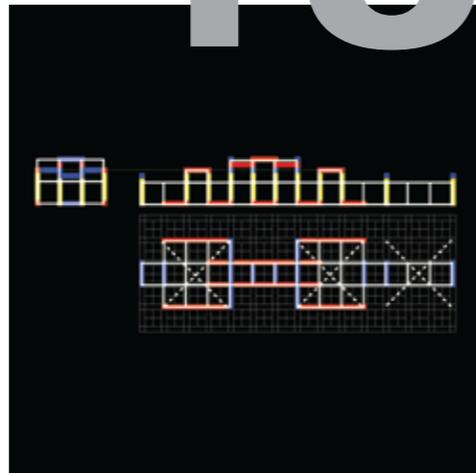
3, 4, 8

Moos, S.v., [1940-]; Frei, Hans.; Gimmi, Karin.; Rüegg, Arthur, [1942-]; Bill, Max, [1908-1994.]; Bill, Jacob.; Aerni, Geogr., Max Bill, arquitecto = Max Bill, architect. 2G: revista internacional de arquitectura = internacional architecture review, 2004, n.29-30?, entire issue (274 p.), 2004: p. 274.

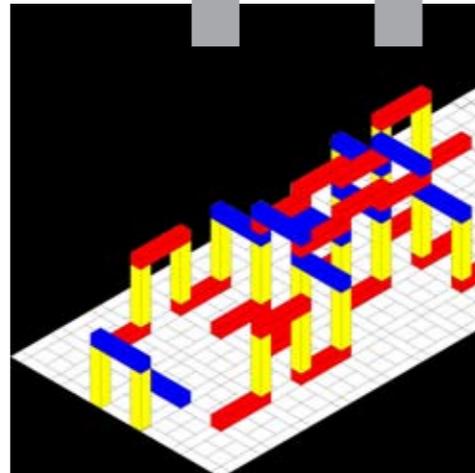
9



10



11



12

