

TOM SACHS

**BEHIND THE WHITE DOOR**  
**BY DAKIN HART**

If *homo sapien* persists for another million generations, it will never invent a better passport than mutual consent. Nothing is more transporting than requited delusion and/or communal vision. In that vein, let's stipulate that the goal of the truth-or-dare variant of spin the bottle is to end up in a cramped, poorly lit space with someone(s), under the influence of peer pressure, with the expectation that something will happen. The nature of that something being widely understood to correlate in exploratory goodness with the size and lighting conditions of the space—pitch-black coat closets being preferred in most real-world situations. No one needs an academic study to back that up. Close confinement is a euphoric. Intimacy can be manufactured. Tom Sachs has been synthesizing it in the lab and sharing it out for years.

Enter *Building 3*, a high-concept hangout hut conceived to affirmatively answer the question: If you could spend six figures on a space for what is known in Mexico as *domingueando* (Sundaying): hanging around, drinking, listening to music, making out, doing nothing, would you?

The number "3" indicates that this is Sachs' third geodesic structure. (The first to make it out of the studio.) The bold, low number, screwed characteristically to the front door in none-too-tidy, black-painted plywood in NASA type also handily invokes the early, halcyon days of the space program: a reminder that genuine exploration is a low-volume endeavor.<sup>1</sup> Noah had one ark. That intrepid asshole-of-his-time Christopher Columbus set out to claim/discover/despoil India with only three ships. In the first fifty years of Antarctic exploration, only two expeditions reached the South Pole—and everyone on the second one died. If we ever get around to leaving Earth with real intent, it's going to be in really expensive, early generation spacecraft breaking orbit one at a time, not a fleet of space-going Honda Civics.

The word "Building" conveys the sort of generic anonymity we associate with secrecy: lending the whole project the vaguely illicit air Sachs usually shoots for. (If you were scripting a sci-fi thriller, the blandness of the designation would—at least in the hackneyed minds of studio executives—contribute suspense to the shocking revelation that "Building 3" was the classified lab where the AI that takes over the world was developed. In a political thriller, it would be the plausibly deniable area of the CIA black site where the really bad things happen.) "Building 3" is code for "inner sanctum."

In Sachs' world the geodesic structure is, surprisingly, new. Surprising because Sachs' interest in its principle evangelist, R. Buckminster "Bucky" Fuller, the PT Barnum of useless architecture, is of such long-standing. Much of the Messianic impracticability—or is it gleeful impracticality—of Sachs' bespoke version of progress derives directly or indirectly from Bucky's wild-ass, techno-futurist epiphanies. Bucky, who gave the impression of being progressive when he wasn't too busy overcomplicating and overselling everything, said a house should weigh and cost no more than a new Cadillac. This one does. By some margin. Where Bucky tended to think global and act global, Sachs gives the impression—both accurate, and as a smokescreen—that he pursues the refitting of SpaceShip Earth for a more prosperous and equitable future like all he's doing is hot-rodding a Chevy Caprice for his own, and his friends', amusement.<sup>2</sup>

Building 3, and the other geodesic structures sure to follow, are only the latest expression of Sachs' career-long preoccupation with the social science of intimate space. *Prada Toilet* (1997), *Prada Deathcamp* (1998), and *Chanel Guillotine* (1998) are important early occasions—if not exactly locations—for exploring extreme intersections between privacy

and consumerism, our personal confinements (voluntary and imposed) and the mazes we inhabit.<sup>3</sup> Not incidentally, so is the passenger compartment of that pseudo-clinical, white, third-generation *Chevy Caprice* (1989, ongoing, barely), long a police force standard. (Sachs' example does not feature the Interceptor fleet-optional perp cage.)

*LAV A2* (1999) initiated an ongoing series of working 747 airplane lavatories. Performing the operations necessary to defecate successfully and sanitarily (to say nothing of getting it on) at an altitude of 36,000 feet in a space often unfit for a skinny, not particularly fastidious sewer rat, may be the Sachs benchmark for human agility and endurance. *Nutsy's McDonald's* (2001), a working food cart; the command tower of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Enterprise, with its *Lord of the Flies* title, *The Island* (2006); the 1:1-scale *Apollo LEM* (2007) at the center of *Space Program* (2007, ongoing); the *Tea House* (2011-12) that anchored the garden that served as the site of *Tea Ceremony* (2014, ongoing); and several versions of *Bodega* (2014, ongoing), a customizable storefront for dabbling directly in small-time, retail consumerism, are all archetypes of close quarters, in which the strict regulation of form by specific functions, in a collectivizing activity, produces a distinct material culture that can be studied, replicated, and developed. That is also manifestly true of Sachs' studio (1990-present): a rabbit warren of discipline-specific cells, in which claustrophobia is a pressurizing tool management applies in the pursuit of high achievement.

But the most direct precursor to *Building 3* is *Delinquency Chamber* (2004), a black box Sachs built for a 2004-05 exhibition at the Baldwin Gallery in Aspen,<sup>4</sup> later included in his epic show at Fondazione Prada (*Tom Sachs*, 2006). Reading from the Prada press release, *Delinquency Chamber* was "endowed with every comfort, to which one can retreat to drink, smoke, sit down and play the video game Grand Theft Auto, a violent and realistic game set in the city of Los Santos: inside are a refrigerator, a stereo system, a ventilation system to extract the smoke, and a waste bin."<sup>5</sup> In *Delinquency Chamber*, in his words, Sachs "accelerate[d] the indulgence of adolescence to a profession."<sup>6</sup> *Building 3*, is a mid-career expression of that (highly successful) process of professionalization, concretized in real estate development: a McMansion of *Delinquency Chambers*.<sup>7</sup>

NASA white inside and out, its technical details are, as always with Sachs, integral to understanding the material culture vernacular particular to the work. Like NASA's Apollo Lunar Module, which it formally resembles, *Building 3* consists of two main parts: a 3V 5/8 geodesic dome and an octagonal walled base.<sup>8</sup> The dome is made up of 105 triangular panels, each a sandwich of two sheets of 1/2-inch plywood around a 1 inch PET (polyethylene terephthalate) foam panel core. The foam is pre-scored and polyester resin-bonded to the plywood. On the exterior, the dome is finished with Fibertech FRP Panels and 22-ounce Woven Roving fiberglass, reinforced with polyester resin, plus a white gel coat sanded to 120 grit. The base wall, a traditional 2x4 pine stud frame clad in Fibertech FRP Panel, is anchored to the ground by ten DP-75 concrete piers with 63-inch pins driven into the earth. The unattached deck, also set on DP-75 piers and featuring Sachs Con Ed patio furniture, is made of high-grade ipe. Both the main structure and the deck are pier-secured by Kryptonite New York Fahgettaboudit Bicycle U-locks.

All exterior joints are finished with 17-ounce, 4-inch, biaxial, unwoven fiberglass tape with mat backing and 207 special-coating West Systems epoxy resin. Interior surfaces are painted Benjamin Moore Decorator's White. Power is supplied by two 20-amp GFCI-protected circuits delivering 120 volts AC and 12 volts DC. The front door hardware is a Kaba Simplex door lock. Three 8-inch, double-pane, screened porthole windows with UV tint provide natural light. Three VHF antennas: 4 foot, 8

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foot, and 14 foot, the largest rated at a maximum 8dB gain, provide for outside communications. A 10,000-BTU heat pump supplies enough hot or cold air to turn *Building 3* into an oven or a walk-in freezer. It is also capable of conditioning a substantial portion of the great outdoors when the door to the deck is secured open (in party mode). A silent, 110-CFM (cubic feet per minute) Panasonic exhaust fan at the apex of the dome scrubs heat.

*Building 3* is designed to seat six or sleep two (kind of comfortably) on a pair of banquettes occupying adjoining sides of a centrally located pipe-and-plywood table screwed directly to the floor. One of the banquettes—really a suspended daybed—forms the lower part of a loft structure, with a 2/3-mat tea room with integrated tokonoma above. The other banquette has built-in storage below. Five finger-formed ceramic half-dome sconces with LED lamps provide warm artificial illumination. All interior wiring and switches are surface-mounted. A built-in dry bar—which, like the loft and the storage banquettes, occupies two of the eight sides of the octagon—features an integrated mini-fridge, fully-stocked at the time of writing with Veuve Clicquot, Perrier, and tonic water; a flammables storage box cum vanity that doubles as a liquor cabinet and Chanel-only makeup station; NASA-branded, waxed paper drinking cup, Kleenex, and shop-rag dispensers; and a cocaine-ready mirrored top.

For entertainment, bring your iPhone and seriously good music, because *Building 3*'s powered speakers won't accept your Android's USB-C adaptor, and in Sachs' world, without a slammin', self-revealing playlist, you really don't exist.

When Vito Schnabel asked Sachs to build a Swiss mountain hut for a winter show in St. Moritz, he was probably thinking of the 153 shelters the Schweizer Alpen-Club manages—vertiginous structures such as the Bivouac de l'Aiguillette à la Singla, a cantilevered climbers' shack on stilts on a 45 degree incline at 3,179 masl (meters above sea level). Envisioning a killer Alpine hideaway: somewhere warm and dry to take friends after a day of spring skiing and collectively push the world away.

Some of us like doing that under the vault of heaven, whatever the weather. But if you and your prospective partner(s) aren't the blanket-under-the-stars sort (i.e. the chances of mutual masturbation among clouds of *braunvieh*<sup>9</sup> breath are low), what you need is the equivalent of the nautical-themed pool house in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*—the one in which Stacy (Jennifer Jason Leigh) and Damone (Robert Romanus) go all the way. A space, in other words, that makes more intimacy its own ineluctable rationale.

That is what Schnabel got. Though from afar *Building 3* resembles a science station NASA might have built in Antarctica or the Andes in the mid-60s on the chassis of a LM to test its utility for the moon more than anything you'll find in the Engadin (Switzerland's remote, sublime, relatively primitive "valley of the inn people"). Inside it's as efficiently space planned as the Apollo Command Module, if the planning had been done by someone in the business of pimping limos for Wall Street traders and hip hop producers.

NASA's Apollo program, the model for much of the human exigency and solutioneering Sachs aspires to, was conceived around two habitable volumes: the 210 ft<sup>3</sup> of the Command Module and the 245 ft<sup>3</sup> of the Lunar Module. Each of those spaces translates to a volume approximately six feet on a side. If you've seen Tony Smith's Die, a 6 x 6 x 6-foot steel cube that three-dimensionalizes the bounding box around Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, you'll understand how limited the maximum physical extent of a single human being really is. What Sachs proves again and again is that the surest way to jumpstart our exploration of our own

scope is artificially compressed social interaction. The interior of *Building 3* is, roughly speaking, three times that single human cube—though, due to the inconvenient presence of gravity, only two of them are usable on Earth.<sup>10</sup>

*Building 3* is currently perched like an alien craft on a sandy, links-style hillock above the 18th hole of a Hamptons golf club for gazillionaires, with a stunning view of Noyack Bay and unimaginable entitlement. It looks pretty much the way the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María must have beached on Watling Island in the Bahamas in 1492: not just from another world, but an alternate reality. How *Building 3* ended up on the 18th hole of a golf course in the Hamptons is a funny story.

Even funnier, when we arrived to make a pre-launch inspection, we found a section of the fuselage of a Bombardier Global jet parked in front of the clubhouse. NetJets was onsite marketing its services to likely buyers. Which they do by trailering in most of an actual plane. At the time, the parking lot was packed with cars that made the handful of Aston Martin V-12 Vantages present look mundane.

A thousand satirists at a thousand iPads would have a hard time coming up with a better backdrop for Sachs' hand-crafted transporter room. A Bombardier Global can take you anywhere on Earth in just one stop—at least that's what the leasing agent said—but how many of the people who can afford to buy time on a Global have minds that actually still travel with their bodies? The very purpose of the prodigious luxury and convenience NetJets provides is to ensure that travel never has to feel like going away.

The essence of *Building 3*, on the other hand, is its self-contained sense of remove. It's a spaceship designed to take you anywhere, despite being unable to move. It's a tent on the face of Half Dome, the treehouse in your backyard, a cabin by the lake, Matsuura Takeshiro's one-mat room, the basement of that friend whose parents are always away, Yoda's hut, your bandit hideout, a sweat lodge in the high desert, the cabin of an Airstream somewhere on Route 66, a tea house in a temple in the Five Mountain System, Keck Observatory on top of Mauna Kea, the ascent stage of the Lunar Module on the moon, and the living room of the Millennium Falcon, whose interior it vaguely resembles.

Make a list of all of the reasons you usually want to get away—all the things on that *Delinquency Chamber* list and more: to think, drink, read, get high, play games, converse, stage superhero antics, make out. With someone, someones, or by yourself. *Building 3* is all of that possibility manifested in a kaleidoscopic form of psychic transport. Wherever you want to be, whoever you want to be with, whatever you want to be doing—to Sachs' way of thinking, of course, the less socially acceptable the better—making it so is *Building 3*'s reason for being.

Beam me up, down, over, and out.

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<sup>1</sup>The Apollo program ended for many reasons, but one of them was surely number fatigue; too many sequels for anyone to be excited about continuing. Walking on the moon is objectively awesome, but being the 11th person to do it is situationally kind of shitty--which may partly account for why Jack Schmitt, who doesn't believe in climate change and calls environmentalists communists, is such a dick.

<sup>2</sup>Not that there's anything wrong with a 1989 Chevy Caprice that a car crusher can't fix.

<sup>3</sup>Does anyone believe that death or the colon are now, or can possibly remain, safe zones in the war to commodify humanity?

<sup>4</sup>*Dedicated to the Memory of Joe Ben Plummer 1968-2004.*

<sup>5</sup>Sachs Studio. "Press Release for Tom Sachs at Fondazione Prada." 2006. Tomsachs.org.

<https://www.tomsachs.org/exhibition/tom-sachs> (accessed August 15, 2018).

<sup>6</sup>Tom Sachs quoted in Stewart Oksenhorn. "Dedicated Delinquency." *The Aspen Times* (December 30, 2004). [www.aspentimes.com](http://www.aspentimes.com). <https://www.aspentimes.com/news/dedicated-delinquency/> (accessed August 14, 2018).

<sup>7</sup>Sachs is currently working on one of the most horrifically claustrophobic environments ever conceived by man: the passport office.

<sup>8</sup>A 3V dome contains three different sizes of triangle, which are smaller and more numerous than those in a 1V or a 2V dome, which essentially provides more resolution, allowing for a more finely contoured, more hemispherical shape. "5/8" describes the portion of a sphere the dome represents: in this case slightly more than half.

<sup>9</sup>Swiss Alpine dairy cows famous for their hardiness and milk production.

<sup>10</sup>Didn't someone famous want to be known for always saying "One's company, two's a crowd, and three's a party"?