

## Print Article



The opening of David Byrne's "Playing the Building," May 30, 2008



Creative Time director Anne Pasternak negotiating with the police



David Byrne at the opening of "Playing the Building"



Visitors play the organ in the Battery Maritime Building's Great Hall

## BUILDING BLOCKS

by Ben Davis

David Byrne, "Playing the Building," May 31-Aug. 10, 2008, at the Battery Maritime Building, 10 South Street, New York

David Byrne's *Playing the Building* project, sponsored by Creative Time and set up in the decrepit, dramatic Maritime Building in Battery Park, is a crowd-pleaser -- for the picnic celebrating its opening on May 30, the line stretched around the parking lot astride the Staten Island Ferry terminal, advance hype butting up against fire code restrictions that apparently limit occupancy of the building to 150 people at a time. Energetic Creative Time director Anne Pasternak deftly negotiated with the local constabulary, keeping things moving smoothly, if slowly. Meanwhile Byrne, lingering outside with partner Cindy Sherman in tow, looked considerably more relaxed than he did a quarter century ago onstage in *Stop Making Sense*.

Byrne's creativity would seem to be driven by discomfort, and on the face of it, *Playing the Building* gives the sense that he has settled into a groove of oddball experimentation that is a little too comfortable. In a nutshell, the current project is this: Byrne has taken an old air-powered organ from his basement, plopped it in the middle of the derelict building's Great Hall, and attached it by means of various cables and tubes to different structural elements. The result is that visitors can, as the title so sagaciously suggests, "play the building," with the lower section of the keyboard causing girders to produce grumbling noises, the mid-section causing various hammers to ring against pillars and radiators, and the upper register sending air coursing through various pipes to create eery flute-like sounds.

The project is off-beat and ingenious, though it is not exactly what you would call challenging art. Still, there is more to it than meets the eye. Byrne has said that he resisted doing any art project that incorporated music for a long time, as the former Talking Heads frontman did not want to be pigeonholed as a musician-turned-artist. And the thing about *Playing the Building* is that, despite the fact that it centers around playing a musical instrument (of sorts), it is not really a musical project.

For one thing, the sounds produced are not particularly musical. I have met at least one person who claimed they wrung something like an organized sound out of it; however, mastering the art of rocking out on the building would certainly take more than the one minute that each guest is allotted at the keys. Though each of the different sectors of the keyboard offers something like a range of notes, these seem to be fairly limited and arbitrary. The result is that, for the most part, what emerges is a series of random groans, clacks and toots that sound the same no matter who is playing.

In Byrne's account, this is all about the "democratization of culture" - no one is going to sound any better or worse than anyone else. There is something a little perverse, however, about someone who gets a free hand to putter around in public because he is certified



The Great Hall during *Playing the Building*



A visitor observes one of the components of *Playing the Building*



Painting in line to play the building

rock royalty teaching us about the "democratization of culture." To the average person, getting past idol worship and the immediate fun-for-the-whole-family appeal of the experience, I'd guess it is a little disappointing that you can't really do anything too remarkable with the organ.

This is the dialectic of David Byrne: He is a natural control freak -- just ask the other one-time Talking Heads -- obsessed with letting go, and his output is defined by the admixture of and tension between the two impulses. Drawing up a balance sheet of all his impressive creative activity, from his twitchy, iconic concert performance in an oversized business suit -- one of rock's more indelible visual statements -- to his recent art movies made using Microsoft Powerpoint (shown at Pace / MacGill in 2003), what you find is that his theme is the push-pull of corporate uniformity and the longing for escape, the keen sense of individuality finding itself deformed and bursting out of the flattened mass-cultural world.

In his Talking Heads lyrics, architecture was a key symbol. "My building has every convenience / It's gonna make life easy for me," he warbles in 1977's *Don't Worry About the Government*, in the persona of someone living in the bubble of a surreally homogenous community. This concern was mirrored in his 1986 movie *True Stories*, which focuses on the fictional town of Virgil, Tex. As our anonymous narrator, Byrne tours the town's strange characters, weird fashions and cult religions, against the background of Virgil's vacuous malls and suburban developments. The film dwells on the efforts of Vericorp, a giant corporation, to sponsor a "Celebration of Specialness" for the town's anniversary. "It's cool," Byrne remarks blankly of Vericorp's headquarters at the beginning of the film, "A multipurpose shape, a box."

In time, the suburban angst of songs like *Don't Worry About the Government* evolved into the transcendent suburban freak-out of 1980's *Once in a Lifetime*. This thematic development was given musical expression in Byrne's increasing romance with African polyrhythms and funk, which clearly represented liberation in relation to his endearingly uncomfortable persona. Byrne did more than anyone to popularize the white-guy hipster affection for world music -- then turned against it when he saw "world music" become a corporate marketing category, shredding the concept in an intelligent 2003 op-ed piece in the *New York Times*.

And so the dialectic of Byrne rolls on. *Playing the Building*, something of a throwaway, can still be seen as one more move in this elliptical progression: Sonically, the installation's most striking feature is its clunky, analogue physicality -- no amplification, no synthesizers, no samples, just sounds registering the actual, singular presence of the building. It is, in its way, an attempt to claim a category of sound that escapes neat appropriation (in an interview, he tells Anne Pasternak that part of his motivation is rebellion against the way recorded music is used as background filler in bars and coffee shops).

As I said, however, the piece is not *really* a musical experience. It is mainly a visual and intellectual experience. Just as fluttery African guitars came to stand for Byrne as antidote to soulless '80s pop, so the old-fashioned, slightly run-down and picturesque architecture here serves as counterpoint to the inscrutable buildings that he has fixated on elsewhere. What Byrne's organ in *Playing the Building* produces is not music, but really something like a battery of haunted house effects, letting visitors animate the Maritime Building's Great Hall.

The pleasure of the piece is wandering about this space as your fellow visitors take turns making it come alive. The hall is painted ghost white to midway up each wall. One inspects the features of the



The organ



Detail of the Great Hall



Detail of the Great Hall



Detail of the Great Hall

Beaux Art structure, with its ornate cast-iron columns and flaking plaster details. A chink in the wall offers a glimpse of a row of the building's lead-patterned glass windows in another part of the structure. Through another side door, there's a walled-off corridor, which upon investigation appears to be a brick barrier topped with barbed wire coils. Light slants through the massive skylight. The sense of a boarded-up past in suspended animation is palpable.

The project is a reincarnation of a concept that Byrne created three years ago for the Färgfabriken in Stockholm, another old-industrial-space-turned-art-space. This tells us two things: First, that the experience of this kind of historic architecture is important to the piece. But second, that the actual history of the specific structure doesn't matter too very much.

It does have a history: Built in 1909, the Battery Maritime Building was once home of the Brooklyn Ferry, when there was one. The Great Hall was "one of New York's distinguished public spaces," according to Creative Time's brochure. It was designated a landmark in 1946, but the New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC) has now struck a deal to turn it over to the Dermot Company, famous for converting the Williamsburg Savings Bank into condominiums (as well as its aggressive moves to buy up rent-controlled properties in Brooklyn). *Playing the Building*, in other words, is NYCEDC and Dermot's very own version of Vericorp's "Celebration of Specialness." The final plan for the building is still controversial, though ideas floated to date have including putting a 140-room boutique hotel on top of it, and turning the hall into a private luxury event space.

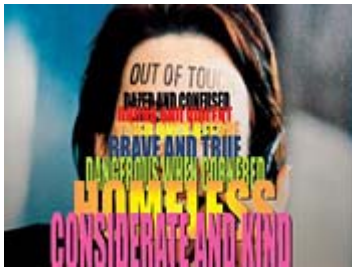
This use of public art as window dressing for high-end development is more than a little irritating by now, though typical. Byrne doesn't seem to have a take on this, though I don't think he is totally unaware of it either. True to the logic of his universe, where creativity is a kind of efflorescence bursting forth from corporate sameness and then recombining with it, *Playing the Building* both highlights the historical gravity of its locale and participates in the forgetting of this gravity, transforming the Great Hall into a bit of low-key spectacle. This background lends the whole experience an undertone of late-career resignation -- though this is admittedly difficult to appreciate with all the crowds.

At any rate, the music that was left in my head as I left Byrne's installation was not the building's ambient muttering, but *City of Dreams*, the end-title theme to *True Stories*, an anthem about history buried over and excavated. "Should we awake, and find it gone," Byrne sings, "remember this, our favorite town."

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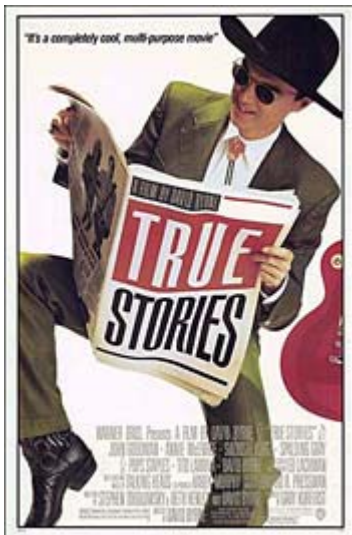
The Great Hall



Still from David Byrne's Powerpoint movie *The End of Reason* (2003)



Cover of *More Songs about Buildings and Food* (1978)



Poster for *True Stories* (1986)