




**CAC**  
Contemporary  
Arts Center

**MARK DE JONG**  
SWING HOUSE

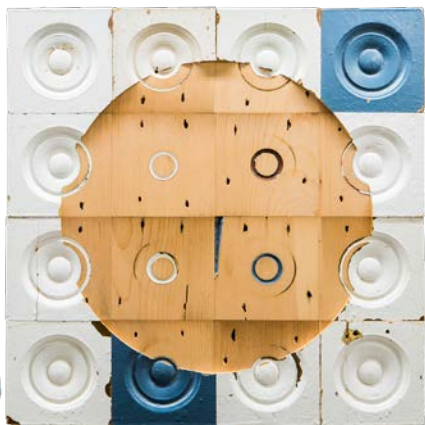


*My guess is that artist  
Mark de Jong does not want  
you to read this essay.*

He wouldn't, that is, until *after* you have physically experienced the myriad of ways that the prodigious project known as *Swing House* speaks via materials, histories, relationships, gestures and the body. It is a grand and unwieldy monument that lives in multiple places, in multiple ways, many of which exist outside the jurisdiction of academic jargon and that which curators try so ardently to do via the written word. For his part, de Jong prefers engagement rather than explanation – favoring the encounter, “the feel,” and the attendant navigation of work that is of, and beyond, architecture, and that shares our space. Employing alternate languages of materiality, geometry, ratios and urbanism to “speak” his art, de Jong believes adamantly in providing only basic descriptions of his projects via traditional museum vehicles (i.e. labels) so that interpretation and meaning can swirl without solidifying. All of the works derived from the *Swing House*, outside of the house itself, are thusly described as “ephemera” – eschewing both hierarchy and individual identification to galvanize de Jong's continuing interest in the passage of time and the fleeting moment we presently occupy. His process combines a workman's determination

in production and scheduling with an abiding faith in materials and craft to steer the course and speak their purpose, slowly, incrementally. De Jong lives and works with salvaged and refurbished objects (i.e. furniture), paying homage to their integrity as he simultaneously re-sculpts their contemporary being. Thoughts and table saws work in tandem here to renew these materials in the mind, and space. There are few restrictions on what it all means, but patterns and sequence are a habitual component of this artist's work, allowing the serial nature of repetition to both organize and bristle against the variations in/of each unit created by time, wear and inherent imperfections. Such gestures are forceful and contingent at once, asserting their presence while allowing larger archetypes to circulate without answers assigned by either artist or curator. And so it is with this disclaimer and admonition that this text tries to build a support structure with and for *Swing House* – buttressing the work's lofty ambitions and experiential earnestness with a scaffolding of references, associations and translations taken as directly as possible from conversations between myself and the artist.

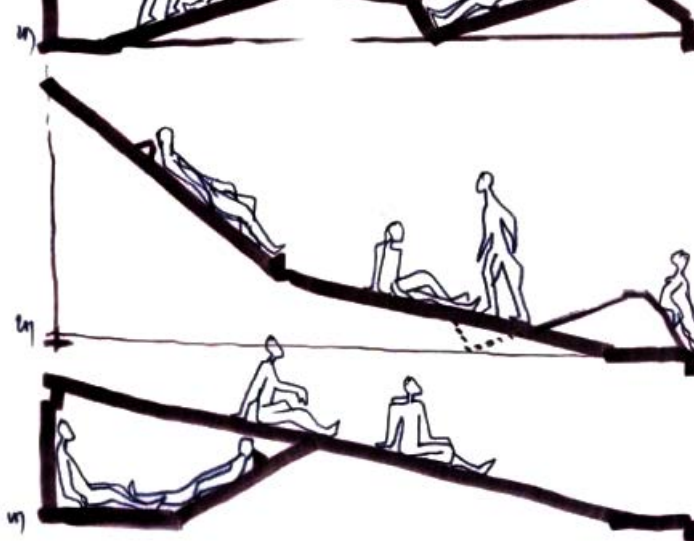




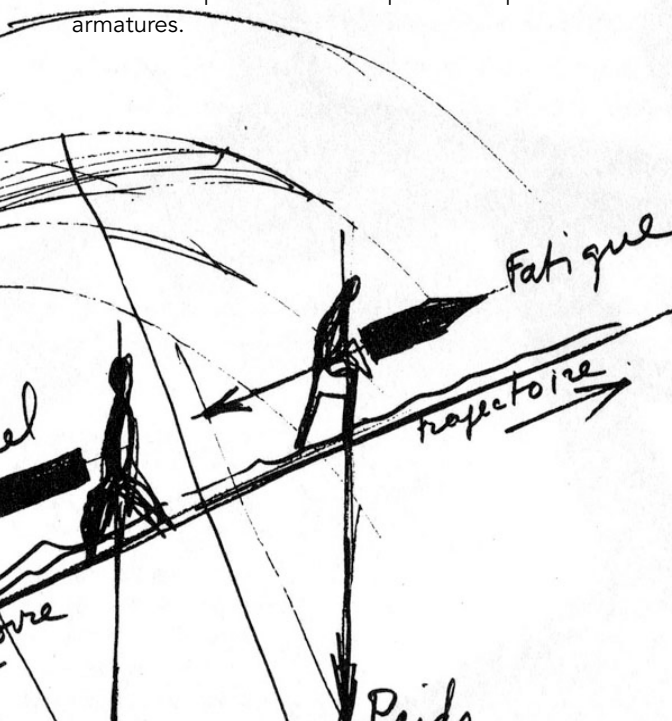
De Jong was born in the Netherlands but grew up in North Avondale, raised by parents whose respective professions as geologist/professor and ceramicist/potter would indirectly, but unmistakably, shape the maker he would become. In addition to an abiding respect for elements and place that underpins his practice, and the sensitive touch of a sculptor with which he treats salvaged materials and structures, it was his mother's purchase of a 1910 brick warehouse on Avon Place in the blue collar part of town known as Camp Washington that would pave de Jong's path. He worked as a teen restoring this three-story building that would eventually become his home decades later, but not before going to art school and then starting his own carpentry and restoration business specializing in wood finishing. This led to de Jong's purchase of a number of dilapidated shotgun-style houses on this same street (and one in Northside of similar age, but different style), and an infusion of entrepreneurial artistry into the increasingly popular business of "flipping." In the process, he turned a pair of sturdy, but neglected homes built around the turn of the 20th century into what he would call the *Square House* and *Circle House* – paying homage to their respective architectural traditions (and lived histories) through renovations that integrated art into the function and aesthetic of dwellings reborn. They continue to live as art-infused abodes and de Jong maintains a relationship with every succeeding resident; but in the greater blueprint of his escalating agenda, the ends of these houses became the beginnings of *Swing House*. Rather than architecture incorporating art and art

Robert  
Project

elements, de Jong envisioned *Swing House* as an artwork unto itself, marrying structure, space and sensory recalibration. The inspiration for its radical re-thinking of domestic space came from the time de Jong spent three decades ago on the upper floor of what is now his loft – likening the experience to floating in a boat high above an adjacent creek, but below the neighboring hillsides. The ensuing feeling was one of disorienting, yet invigorating vertigo that he wished to translate into the 3-story Italianate building that is now *Swing House*. Pursuing an immersive sense of what de Jong calls the “out-of-squareness” present in his loft, he removed the central staircase of this house, and all the floors it connected, to create a towering one-bedroom apartment with a 30-foot-long rope swing hanging from the ceiling. The surrounding armoires, kitchenette and queen bed echo and amplify the swing’s implicit suggestion of flight as their construction and positioning suggests a subtle, but collective levitation. Down a spiral staircase, alongside a tiled red bathroom whose components also float ever so gently, a diminutive basement houses a white-walled gallery. There, salvaged components of the house have been translated into sculptures that appear to hover in space with the help of inconspicuous armatures.




Taken as a whole, often at increasing speeds as one swings back and forth across the span of this anachronistic structure, we evacuate solid ground and enter a colorful, textured palimpsest. As the residue of this house’s former lives collects in the periphery of our vision, filling the corners of one’s eyes with a slurry of paint, plaster, wallpaper, partitions and a variety of architectural remnants, de Jong orchestrates an uncanny arena of physical and perceptual disorientation. In so doing – employing uncertainty to open both body and mind to alternate languages of navigation – de Jong evokes the pioneering work of French architect Claude Parent (1923-2016) who, in collaboration with acclaimed theorist Paul Virilio, developed “The Function of the Oblique” as a philosophy, practice, and manifesto. Introduced in 1966 as a campaign for “dynamic instability,” this vision of architecture and urban design championed a built form of vertigo to engender continuous movement and force the human body to adapt to – and embrace – disequilibrium. As such, a number of Parent’s buildings incorporated sloped floors based upon he and Virilio’s discovery of World War II bunkers that had slipped down sand dunes because of shifts in weather and soil consistency. De Jong has also notably sloped the floors of his own loft at a 4 degree angle (with boards salvaged from a former basketball court at the University of Cincinnati) and the ceiling at an opposing 12 degree angle, which serves as a precursor to the much more uncanny chamber that is *Swing House*.




Top & Left: “The Function of Oblique” Sketches by Claude Parent

A 1960s era church Parent built in Nevers, France was a hexagonal concrete structure that the architect split in half and added sloped floors so the congregants "would immediately feel the gentle push and pull of gravity." De Jong can't make quite the same intervention at the CAC, but he is careful to establish motion as a guiding principle of this exhibition by way of an arrow that gathers in size and complexity as it curls around the CAC's 4th floor. Like a school of fish in swelling agency, de Jong orchestrates this directional imperative by way of bits and pieces of wood salvaged from the renovation. His other muse – time – is also incorporated into this arrow, whose multitude of parts collectively suggest a kinetic display of clock hands turning, dominos toppling, and a body in transit. The body is further embedded into the constitution of this atomized arrow as the distribution of units in a 1:3:4 pattern mirrors that of de Jong's head/torso/legs – reflecting the person in the place and the place in the person. In concert with the serendipity that the 7:2 footprint of the house echoes that of de Jong's body (7 units high x 2 units wide), *Swing House* is an increasingly holistic self-portrait of the artist. A neighboring work manifests this arrangement in more cartographic terms, sanding down a portion of the CAC wall to marry the shape of a human eye – peering into the layered histories of past exhibitions – with the stretched contours of a large-scale painting of a surveyor's elliptical viewfinder. The mutual mapping of body and building returns to a more physical, material and cumulative place in an adjacent work which appears to be a large woven orb upon first approach. Upon closer inspection, the sphere's strands are revealed to be skins of the wood studs that once made up the interior walls of the *Swing House* – now woven into a continuous 750 foot long ribbon whose bulbous diameter is hung at the height of the artist's belly button. The orb's umbilical tether to the CAC's wall also brings the surrounding space into this architectural symbiosis, amplifying Parent's belief that in a position of incline, the wall exceeds its supposed neutrality and "becomes experienceable."



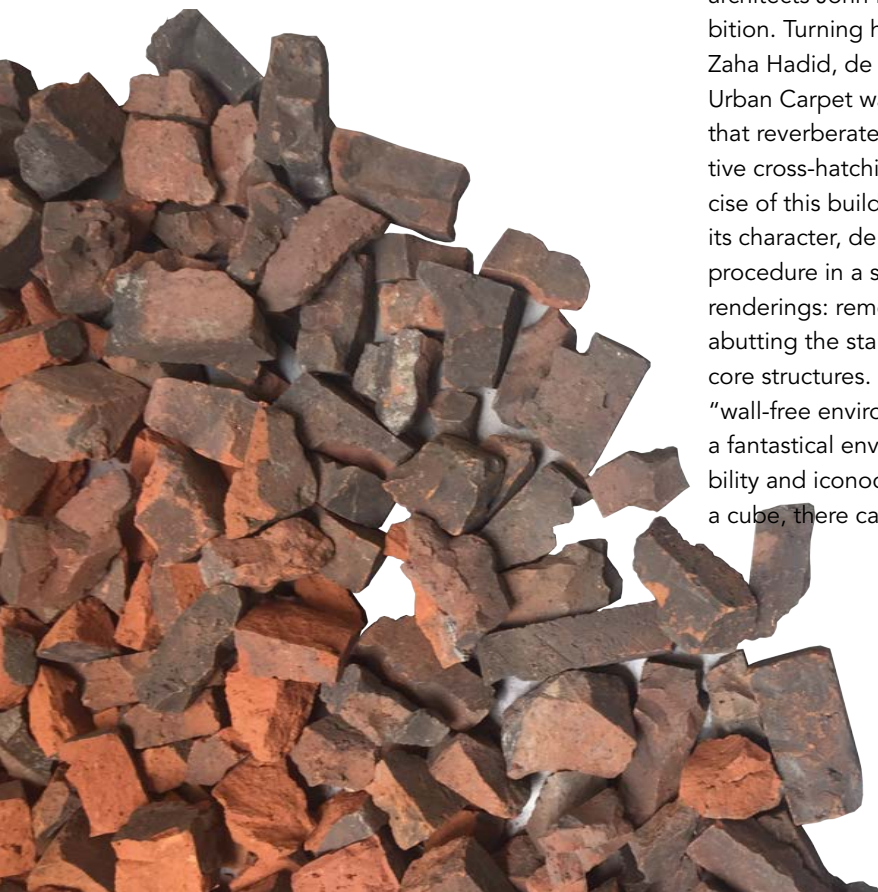


In this way *Swing House* swells beyond the solipsism of an exclusively autobiographical vessel, expanding into a platform for de Jong to amplify the life of the house in this reciprocal endeavor. Referring to the textures, bones and histories of his architectural subjects as “found work,” de Jong labors to reveal what paint and plaster so habitually obscure. As a prime example, he presents 338 circular “core samples” extracted from his newest project, *Stair House*, in the CAC’s gallery atrium. Arranged in an equidistant grid, this dot matrix beckons the audience to view it from the side, askew, to apprehend the revealed layers of wallpaper, paint, plaster and lath that de Jong likens to stained glass. Facing this work is a pair of cobbled, but stately columns built from clay gutters that originally ran horizontally along the length of the *Swing House*, directing water away from the structure. In the CAC, they take on a more figurative assignment, standing vertically and taking on respective heights of 14 and 16 feet so that their crowns can only be viewed from above. The pair is connected by circular orbits of brick shards (collected from the *Swing House* patio) that conjoin in a barbell-like shape, speaking to the foundational role of relationships in this work and the many collaborations that underpin the nexus that *Swing House* has become. In the process of renovating the original structure, de Jong discovered a number of children’s drawings, toys, and reels of Super 8 film that belonged to the former residents of the home. Through a serendipitous turn of events he was able to connect with a member of that family and gain permission to display these artifacts as components of *Swing House* ephemera – thereby propelling documents of domestic life into the far more equivocal terrain of fine art. We cannot know the original stories they told, but as these pieces float off the walls and hover in their frames, de Jong embraces their inherited dichotomy in this larger enterprise – functioning as both barricades and peepholes into the archival life of *Swing House*.



Upon entering the shotgun house in its former incarnation as a family dwelling, one was immediately met by the staircase and its central, organizing role within the home. As de Jong subsequently transformed this structure into the *Swing House* he was careful to preserve the stairs in the otherwise clean sweep – laying the excised unit on its side, like a slumbering leviathan, before its eventual export. In its display at the CAC, de Jong aims to recapture some of the staircase’s original function and character while also expressing its present role as an anonymous archive of time, place and passage. As such, he places the fallen staircase at the head of the stairs leading into the CAC gallery space, and positions it in front of the main elevator in a manner that simultaneously blocks and re-directs entering visitors. It is a structure that thereby continues to assert itself, and an entity that must be addressed and performed by the public. This includes the artist, who is featured in a nearby array of video pieces (directed and produced by C. Jacqueline Wood) which present glimpses of de Jong traveling up, down and around the architectural vertebrae.

In the process, in the many steps that de Jong takes in the remaking of this house into a hybrid work of installation art, the stairs quietly, but crucially, transition from pragmatic device into performative object. Stripped of function and ostensible purpose, the stairs-made-artifact enter a more uncertain life as the vehicle of contemplation. A parallel transformation is posed to the CAC building in a newly commissioned work that de Jong has developed in partnership with architects John Isch and Renee Martin for this exhibition. Turning his attention to the iconic design of Zaha Hadid, de Jong pays particular attention to the Urban Carpet wall and the monumental staircases that reverberate here like a cavalcade of demonstrative cross-hatching. To propose an alternative exercise of this building while retaining core elements of its character, de Jong et al reverse the *Swing House* procedure in a series of hypothetical architectural renderings: removing the exterior walls and floors abutting the stairs to elevate the prominence of the core structures. Evoking Parent’s dream of building “wall-free environments of moving air,” he imagines a fantastical environment that slides between possibility and iconoclastic fancy. Without containment or a cube, there can only be movement.







This is a proposal that pushes believability to the farthest brink, but de Jong is nevertheless careful to ground his re-imagining of the CAC in working designs, cost projections and code compliance. His inclusion of pitched floors in this design, and an infrastructure that continuously activates both subject and space extends the spirit of *Swing House*, as well as a 21st century vision of Parent's "Function of the Oblique." In this context – in this heightened assault upon stasis, solidity and the absolute – priority is given to sensorial experience, movement, and a sentient body that, in Parent's words, "cannot abstract itself from the space." Thoughts and words accrue in this arena, but they are preceded by a physical navigation of materials, structures and space that expand our typical tools of understanding. *Swing House* was born of architecture, but its affect permeates a much wider social, cultural and spatial arena where stasis is no longer an option. The success of this essay in supporting one's experience of de Jong's project thereby yields, humbly and respectfully, to that which only can be felt and known when one's feet leave the floor.

- Steven Matijcio, 2018

*"We cannot know the original stories [these pieces] told, but... de Jong embraces their inherited dichotomy... as both barricades and peepholes"*





**MARK DE JONG**  
**SWING HOUSE**

April 20 through September 2, 2018

Curated by Steven Matijcio

**Generously supported by**

Stewart Turnbull and Artswave Corporate Sponsor:  
Macy's

**Mark De Jong** was born in 1966 in Utrecht in The Netherlands, and immigrated to the United States at the age of four. He was raised in North Avondale, Cincinnati and currently lives in Camp Washington. De Jong's father was a geologist and professor at the University of Cincinnati, and his mother was a ceramicist and potter, who purchased a former warehouse in Camp Washington for her studio in the early 90s. This building ultimately became de Jong's loft, as well as catalyst for his purchase of a number of other houses on Avon Place. Prior to the *Swing House*, de Jong restored distressed properties in a way that honors their history and infuses them with artistic elements. In 2012 he transformed a dilapidated house in Camp Washington into the *Circle House*, and in 2014 he turned an early 20th century American Foursquare structure into the *Square House*. De Jong completed a BFA between the University of Cincinnati (1985-1987) and Alfred University (1990-1993), and has presented his work in a number of exhibitions including Semantics Gallery, Cincinnati (1993), Bay 34, Portland (1995) and Zephyr Gallery, Louisville (2016). In 1995 he was an Artist-in-Residence at the Edward F. Albee Foundation in New York. From 1995-2012 de Jong was active in residential construction, working as a contract carpenter and eventually operating his own high end interior refinishing business from 2001-2012. He launched the *Swing House* to public viewing in 2017, and is currently working on a new project in the neighboring house, titled *Stair House*.

*All works by Mark De Jong unless otherwise noted*

Images Courtesy of Hailey Bollinger

Cover Photo by Hailey Bollinger

**contemporaryartscenter.org**

## Exhibition Checklist

- **Swing House Ephemera (Stairs);** 2014 – 2018; Wood Staircase and steel
- **Swing House Ephemera (Childhood Drawings);** 2014 – 2018; Found Children's' Drawings
- **Swing House Ephemera (Kermit);** 2014 – 2018; Stuffed Animal and Steel
- **Swing House Ephemera (1-3-4 Series);** 2014 – 2018; Interior Wood Trim
- **Swing House Ephemera (Bench);** 2014 – 2018; Wooden Floor Joists
- **Swing House Ephemera (Victorian Corner Protector);** 2014 – 2018; Wood
- **You and I;** 2018; Sanded Paint
- **Swing House Now;** 2018; Speaker Parts and Cords
- **Swing House Ephemera (Gutter Towers);** 2014 – 2018; Ceramic Landscape Gutter, Patio Brick and Steel
- **Swing House Ephemera (Scream);** 2014 – 2018; Stuffed Animal and Steel
- **Stair House Ephemera (Circle Grid);** 2018; Paint, Wallpaper, Plaster, Lath and Steel
- **Stair House Ephemera (Ball);** 2014 – 2018; Wood and Steel
- **Swing House Ephemera (69);** 2014 – 2018; Cast iron, steel
- **Swing House Ephemera (Hand Box Series: #65 – #128);** 2014 – 2018; Lath and steel
- **Swing House Ephemera (Knelt);** 2014 – 2018; Wood shoe molding, steel
- **Swing House: Panoramic;** 2018; Photo; Image by Hailey Bollinger
- **Swing House: Photo Collage;** 2018; Photo; Photo Collage; Images by Mark de Jong
- **Swing House Ephemera (Video);** 2014 – 2018; Video & Found Home Movies; Recorded and produced by C. Jacqueline Wood; Special Support by Haile Foundation and Wave Pool Gallery
- **Swing House Brochure;** 2018; Produced by Comey & Shepherd Realtors; Text by Scott Schmitz; Design by Courtney Bruse
- **CAC Revised;** 2018; Blue Prints and Sketches; Drafting Table, Letters from Contractors; Produced in collaboration with John Isch, Renee Martin and Billy Bohl