to the contrary
in spite of all evidence
happy ending to everything,

The normality of the
Why would I want that to be a Jewish space, or a Catholic space, or a Muslim space?
Sukkah

Subway

Of the Sacred

Austin+Mergold

Austin+Mergold

Believing man of his own is only act of prohibition. See will tend to universal jurisdiction.
Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between church and State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

—Thomas Jefferson, 1802

In 2010, author Joshua Foer hosted an architectural design-build competition “Sukkah City: New York City.” Austin+Mergold (A+M) was invited by Foer to enter the competition that called for twelve “radically temporary, experimental pavilions.”\(^2\) Their entry, Subway Sukkah, was noted by Natalie Jeremijenko in the New York Times as provoking a discussion “about whether or not you could turn a public space into a religious one.”\(^3\)

The competition required rediscovering the ancient Jewish practice of constructing a liminal realm between enclosure and nature for the festival of Sukkot. The Union Square competition site provoked A+M to consider the overlap between New York City zoning codes and sukkah design prescriptions outlined in the Talmud.

According to Jewish tradition, the sukkah is a structure meant to acknowledge power of the Higher Authority and to commemorate a nomadic past through abstinence from various comforts. It is also an acknowledgment of the connection and interface between the mundane and the divine. The architecture of a sukkah is described in sacred Hebrew texts in ways that are not dissimilar to how New York City Zoning and Building Codes regulate construction. Zoning informs one where to build and building codes regulate materials, structure and methods of assembly. Everything else (in sukkah or NYC construction) is open to interpretation, as long as the design remains “as of right.”

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\(^2\) In an e-mail to A+M on Wednesday, June 09, 2010 at 12:32 PM
Joshua Foer wrote: “Dear Austin+Mergold, As an admirer of your work, it is my pleasure to invite you to enter ‘Sukkah City: New York City,’ an international design competition that will result in 12 radically temporary, experimental pavilions being constructed in Union Square Park, NYC this fall. The sukkah, as you may know, is an ancient, ephemeral archetypally erected for one week each fall by Jews to celebrate the autumn harvest. Our competition aims to re-imagine and reinvent the structure within its traditional design constraints. Jurors include Ron Arad, Michael Arad, Adam Yarinsky, Thom Mayne, Ada Tallia, Natalie Jeremijenko, Rick Bell, and Paul Goldberger. This is a design/build competition. All 12 winning structures will be fully funded by a financial award. The registration deadline is July 1, and entry deadline is August 1. I hope you’ll consider entering the competition: www.sukkahcity.com.”

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New York City Subway entrances are ideal pre-made sukkah spaces, convertible with minimal effort. The 2008 NYC Building Code further stipulates in Section BC 1014 that “two exits or exit access doorways from any space shall be provided […]”\(^4\)

Considering that there are at least two ways out of each subway station, the “wall of separation” can still be maintained providing a discerning citizen a choice of a “secular” or “religious” exit.

In 2013, filmmaker Joshua Hutt released the film SUKKAH CITY which included documentation of the jury deliberations between Michael Arad, Ron Arad, Rick Bell, Paul Goldberger, Natalie Jeremijenko, Thom Mayne, Ada Tolla, and Adam Yarinsky, among others.

The Sukkah City design-build competition received approximately 600 entries. A twelve-person jury was tasked with selecting twelve winners that would be built and exhibited, meeting on Sunday August 8, 2010 at the Center for Architecture in Manhattan. After eleven finalists had been selected the jury needed to choose a final entry, focusing on the A+M proposal Subway Sukkah.

The following transcript is an excerpt from the documentary film SUKKAH CITY, directed by Jason Hutt, and appears courtesy of Oxbow Lake Films.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) Sukkah City, Dir. Jason Hutt, Oxbow Lake Films, 2013, Film. For more information about SUKKAH CITY, or to inquire about booking or acquiring the film, visit www.oxbowlakofilms.com.
Beginning at 17:01:

**Offscreen voice**  One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... nine, ten, eleven...

**Ada Tolla**  So who would vote for the subway? Come on. Let's do a show of hands.

**Thomas de Monchaux**  Can I just speak to the subway? Why I find it troubling is: you don't have a choice as to whether to be in it or not. If you want to get out of the subway in Union Square, which is a very...

**Paul Goldberger**  There are a dozen different ways out of the Union Square station.

**Ada Tolla**  There could be something interesting in linking this off-site moment to the rest of the site which is far down south. So I do think that there is something to this entry.

**Maira Kalman**  But how are you reconciling the religion part of it? Which is the most...

**Ada Tolla**  I can't reconcile that.

**Maira Kalman**  Which is the biggest part of it.

**Ada Tolla**  I can't reconcile that.
Maira Kalman  Using the structure in the city, which is clever and wonderful, and all of those things. But ultimately, what are you saying? The question becomes: is taking it into the religious aspect something that takes away from the...

Michael Arad  Public realm.

Ada Tolla  I cannot reconcile that.

Maira Kalman  And that, that to me is a problem.

Ron Arad  I can. I can. It’s no different than any of the other structures that you’re going to impose on Union Square.

Maira Kalman  That’s not true. [With the other structures,] you’re not taking a public space and saying, “This is now a Jewish space.”

Ron Arad  But it’s not. First of all, it’s not built forever, and it’s just...

Maira Kalman  So what?

Ron Arad  It’s just like, Christmas decoration.
Thom Mayne  For me, it does not have any transformative power, to move from a contingent infrastructural space to one of ritual.

Ada Tolla  I think it has the potential to be so surprising to go into this space.

Multiple voices  [Inaudible / talking over each other]

Adam Yarinsky  But the fact that it causes this argument, I think makes it interesting to put there. Because there will be people who say, “This doesn’t do enough.” And that’s a very legitimate criticism, and others who...

Multiple voices  [Inaudible / talking at the same time]

Maira Kalman  To create a controversy about something that ultimately [is] more of an offense in a way than an interesting conversation. Because how many public spaces would you want to be transformed into anybody’s religion for any amount of time? And that goes back to the question for me. Why would I want that to be a Jewish space, or a Catholic space, or a Muslim space?

Ada Tolla  This is this today, and it will be something else tomorrow. The idea that the spaces that we have around change, and have the flexibility to absorb that.
Michael Arad  To speak on your side for a moment here, I think if something is offensive as it is to you, then, you know, the willful majority should not be imposed on [and] overrule a minority voice in this case, I think.

Paul Goldberger  There is something extraordinary about the way in which this most ordinary of public spaces, of public circulation spaces, has such a strange resemblance to a space of ritual. And to point out that odd intersection is itself I think important. And worthy. But if it can’t carry itself far enough to be a true space with meaning, is the question. I don’t know.

Thomas de Monchaux  I don’t think there’s any evidence that it does.

Rick Bell  Since they are not sure that the subway is going to be permissible with the MTA, let’s put it among the alternates. If we then have twelve, and one of them doesn’t work, these people can’t do it, the people who want to do the Wachsmann knots can’t tie them, then we start to look at the alternatives. But we have twelve, plus eight runners up, and we’re done.6

6 Ultimately, eleven out of twelve sukkahs were built on Union Square in September of 2010. Entrance to all pavilions was prohibited. After two days, they were removed.
Family style.
NYC style.

Austin+Mergold
Above ground.
Below ground.
We can be killjoys

But art can.

Edited by Nathan Friedman and Ann Lui