

Atelier Bow-Wow: Small Case Study House



ATELIER BOW-WOW,
Small Case Study House (BBQ House), 2009.
Installation view at REDCAT Gallery, Los Angeles, 2009.

Most students of architecture examine the Case Study Houses, a revolutionary, low-cost housing program initiated in Southern California by *Arts & Architecture* magazine after World War II to make use of leftover war materials and employ new technologies. Yoshiharu Tsukamoto and Momoyo Kajima, partners in the Tokyo-based architecture firm Atelier Bow-Wow, came up with the idea for their first solo exhibition in the United States at the Los Angeles art center REDCAT, “Small Case Study House,” while leading research into the Case Study Houses as visiting professors at the University of California Los Angeles.

Designers of over 20 private homes in Japan, the duo are interested in the relationship between human behavior and living environments. Atelier Bow-Wow famously coined the term “pet architecture” to describe their improvised-looking structures squeezed into the awkward nooks and crannies of developed cities such as Tokyo. For example, they positioned a driving school training lot on top of a supermarket and a boutique in a narrow alleyway. Inspired and informed by the principles of the Case Study Houses—a cyclical turn of events, as many of the architects affiliated with the original program, such as Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen and Richard Neutra, found inspiration in minimalist-style Japanese architecture and living—Bow-Wow created three “Small Case Study Houses” (2009) to sum up their perceptions and provide proposals for LA living: *BBQ House*, *Hammock House* and *Sunset House*.

True to the economical, resourceful origins of the Case Study program, Bow-Wow utilized lumber from ReUse Industries—a nonprofit organization based in Albany, Ohio, specializing in the sale of reclaimed materials—for the fully functional “microstructures.” Aesthetically reminiscent of traditional Japanese saunas in their minimalism and use of untreated wood, “Small Case Study Houses” echo a Japanese tea house as each structure serves a singular, cultural function. A tribute to the American tradition of

outdoor cooking, *BBQ House* is a sturdy, open-air wood structure centered around a trio of reclaimed oil-barrel grills. According to Bow-Wow, the curvatures of *BBQ House*’s clover-like shape capture and recycle the flow of heat and energy from the grilled food as well as mingling people, who at the gallery opening were invited to socialize in the “Small Case Study Houses.” The graduated levels and tiered-seating structure of *BBQ House* allow for a stadium viewing of what Bow-Wow calls the curiously “performative aspect of BBQ” in California.

In an exaggerated adaptation to the agreeable weather and terrain of Los Angeles, *Hammock House* has neither a ceiling nor a floor. Instead, two rope hammocks hang from either end of a large, swinging wooden beam, cantilevered like a set of balancing scales. The structure requires the cooperation and communication of users of roughly the same weight to achieve equilibrium and comfort. *Sunset House* provides a dedicated environment for what Bow-Wow found to be the stereotypical Los Angeles activities of admiring the sea and watching the sun go down over the Pacific. Within a concave, upturned 30-foot dome—angled to 23.4 degrees to parallel the tilt of the earth as it orbits around the sun—inhabitants nestle in beanbag pillows. As a surrogate for an actual twilight, Bow-Wow projected footage of six sunsets filmed at various locations around the Los Angeles area onto the adjacent walls.

Thoughtful yet humorous, “Small Case Study House” is a microcosm of the laid-back lifestyle that Bow-Wow found to be archetypal of Angelenos. The compact, minimal structures reflect a Tokyo-ite’s awareness of limited space, and, as Tsukamoto and Kajima joke, the unconscious Japanese aversion to the inordinately large American homes filled with a surplus of “stuff.” In a world of excess, Bow-Wow offer an alternative to the American axiom of “bigger is better” with the antidote of “reduce, reuse, recycle” and playfully remind consumers of the luxury in simplicity. At the show’s end in March, Bow-Wow and REDCAT made plans for the pieces to be acquired by a local community group, keeping the structures in constant use and activation, as well as contemplation, by the Los Angeles public. ●

Jennifer S. Li



ATELIER BOW-WOW,
Small Case Study House (Hammock House), 2009.
Installation view at REDCAT Gallery, Los Angeles, 2009.