



CHOIR

SEVEN

INTERVALS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ARCHITECTURE

Edited by Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Stephen Parcell

Madanipour, *Design of Urban Space: An Inquiry into a Socio-Spatial Process* (Chichester and New York: Wiley, 1996).

73 See Robert Nelson, *The Space Wasters: The Architecture of Australian Misanthropy* (Melbourne: Planning Institute of Australia, 2011).

74 This distinction is explored as alpha-architecture versus E-type or engaged architecture in "Alphatecture: Architecture against the Street," *ibid.*, 28–40.

The Laughing Girls

Marc J Neveu



Chora

THOUGH VERY LITTLE has been written about Douglas Darden, he is well known for his exquisite pencil drawings, displayed in various exhibitions, and for his book *Condemned Building*, published in 1993.¹ *Condemned Building* describes ten acts of building. Each begins with a canonical statement and the overturning of that canon. The act of turning over is a tactic often used and represented by Darden. Two details on the left side of the frontispiece of *Condemned Building*, for example, show the turning over of a turtle to reveal its underbelly.² Turning over was considered by Darden to be an architectural trope; indeed, the word *trope* comes from the Greek *τρόπος*, “to turn.” Each of the projects in *Condemned Building* relies on this turning over to reveal what Darden referred to as the “underbelly” of architecture.³

This essay will describe and begin to unpack another project that Darden had been working on for at least five years prior to his death in 1996. It was named in various ways, but most often as *The Laughing Girls*.⁴ Much bigger in scope than the ten short stories in *Condemned Building*, a 150-page graphic novel was planned in addition to at least forty objects to be made. The first dated material is from 1990, and at that time was already described as “an architectural novel.” *The Laughing Girls* remains unfinished and has never been published.

Though similar themes and tactics are present, *The Laughing Girls* is a very different project than *Condemned Building*. First, it was always intended as a graphic novel and not as a monograph or collection of projects. Darden did not produce any large-scale pencil drawings for the project. The representations rely more heavily on collage than on architectural drawing conventions such as plan and section. While narrative was an integral component in his earlier work, the importance of storytelling in *The Laughing Girls* is much more evident. In an application for scholar-in-residence at the California College of the Arts and Crafts in 1994, Darden explained the intention of the work: “The purpose of this project is to establish a new approach toward communicating the relationship between the evolution of design and its results. This design project proposes an innovative form of communication, the architectural novel, which examines the relationships between story-telling, the process of design, and the designed environment.”⁵

Darden was critical of the marginalization of the arts (and architecture in particular) and the alienation of architecture from the public. He attributed this marginalization to the fact that designers and artists rarely share



Fig. 10.1 Frontispiece from Douglas Darden, *Condemned Building: An Architect's Pre-text* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993). The frontispiece refers to the work of Marcel Duchamp, Giambattista Piranesi, and, perhaps most directly, Jean-Jacques Lequeu. Reproduced by permission of Princeton Architectural Press and Douglas Darden Estate, courtesy of Allison Collins.

their design process with the public, or even with each other. The intention of *The Laughing Girls* was to overcome that alienation through storytelling. This project, however, was not the voice of a sole author. It was intentionally collaborative and interdisciplinary. In an undated portfolio titled “The Graphic Novel: An Investigation of the Interdisciplinary Design Process,” Darden lists the following participants: Kelton Osborn

(print making), Jeff Dawson (urban design), James Trewitt (furniture design), Virginia Grote (ceramics), Andrew Grote (cartooning and illustration), Marty Hammond (computer graphics), Mark Wilkerson (industrial design), and Douglas Darden, program director (architecture). The format of the graphic novel, according to Darden, allowed for collaboration among all of the disciplines represented on the team.

The first iteration of *The Laughing Girls* was for an architectural competition. Over the next five years, the project and story would change dramatically. By 1994 a series of short drafts had been constructed, as well as a series of artifacts that included two laughs modelled in foam, Helen's cane, a juicer, and at least two tattoos.⁶ The text in the following ten figures is from a pamphlet produced in 1994 that Darden sent to several journals.⁷

The Laughing Girls was intended to take place in parts and in at least three sites. An early proposal by the "Dardanus Design Consortium" shows a site in Troy, New York; Troy, Greece; and a future Troy.⁸ A later version situates the project temporally, spatially, and physically. Part One takes place in Troy, New York. Objects designed in this section relate to the feet and the knees, and the design strategy was to work with fragments. Parts are identified without establishing a full connection to other parts. Part Two takes place in transit. This section includes objects that relate to the upper legs and torso. The design process is iterative but does not achieve completion. Part Three takes place in Troy, Greece and is the full embodiment of laughter. Individual designs in this section exist only in relation to other parts; each affects the others at all scales. Each part would take place over the course of nine days, with a final day (the 28th) acting as a postscript that returns the novel to the beginning. Each part is nine days long; the three nines plus one give the year 1999. The twenty-eight-day calendar is based on lunar and menstrual cycles. In many ways, this project is an affirmation of life, unlike Darden's meditation on dying in the Oxygen House in *Condemned Building*.

Two stories inform *The Laughing Girls*; one is fictional, the other is not. The first is a curious case of mass hysteria reported on 30 January 1962 in Kashasha, Tanzania. An epidemic of contagious laughter broke out at a mission-run girls' school and continued for six months. Ninety-five of the 159 students were affected; however, laboratory tests found no infectious or toxic evidence. Three girls later came forward and claimed to be the instigators of the laughter. This case is the only fully

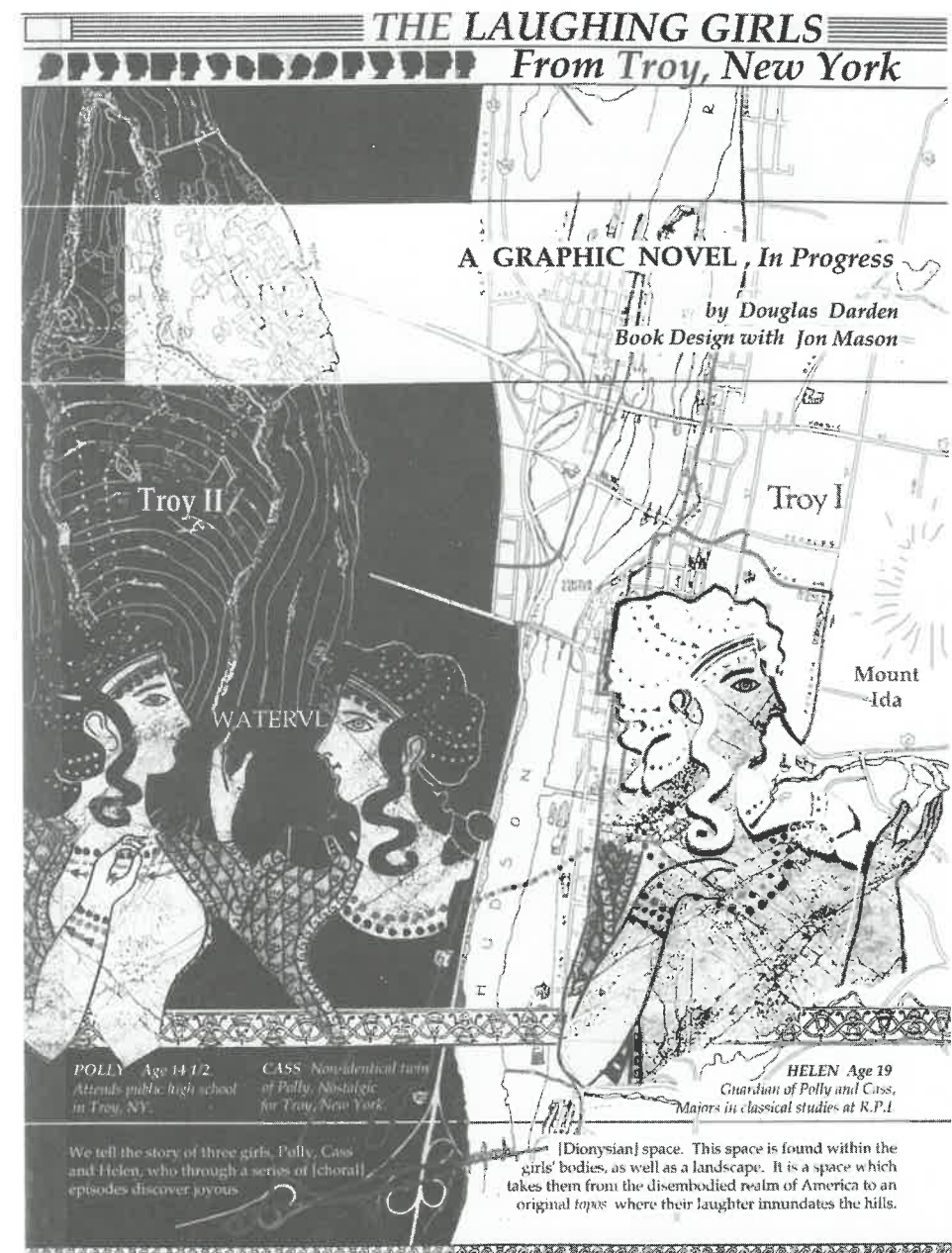


Fig. 10.2 Douglas Darden, *The Laughing Girls*, page 1. Figures 2–12, 14–20 reproduced by permission of Douglas Darden Estate, courtesy of Allison Collins.

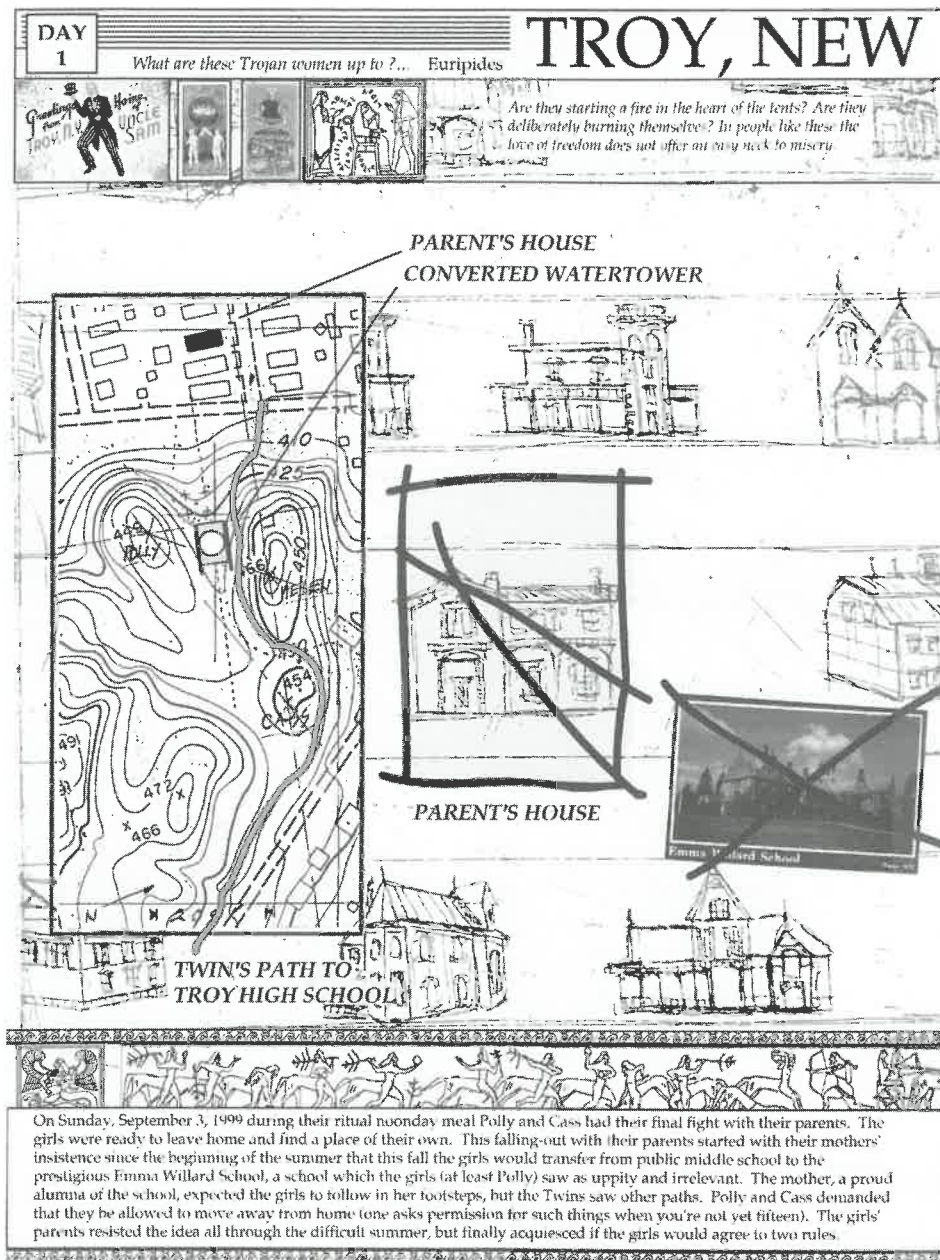


Fig. 10.3 The Laughing Girls, page 2.

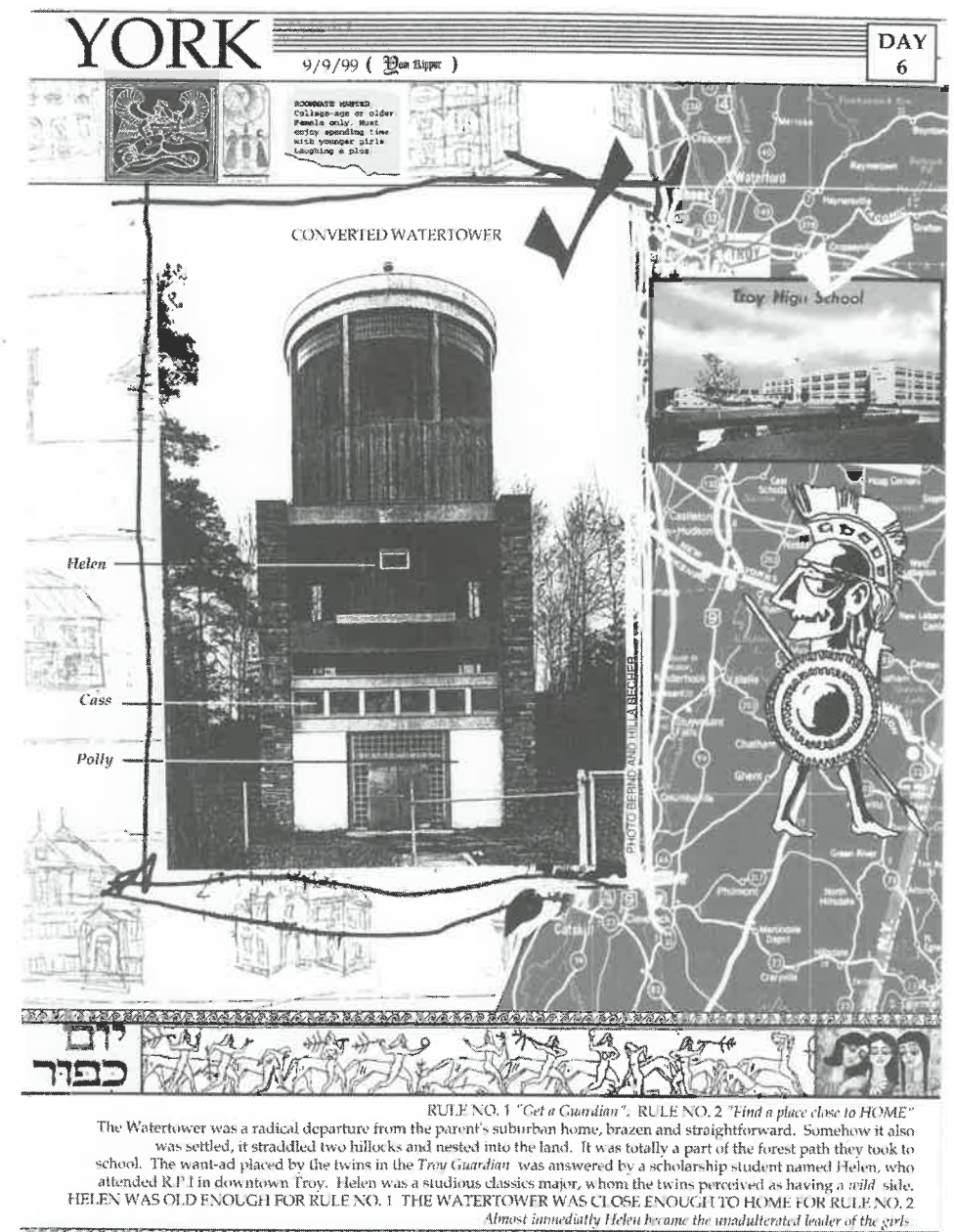


Fig. 10.4 The Laughing Girls, page 3.

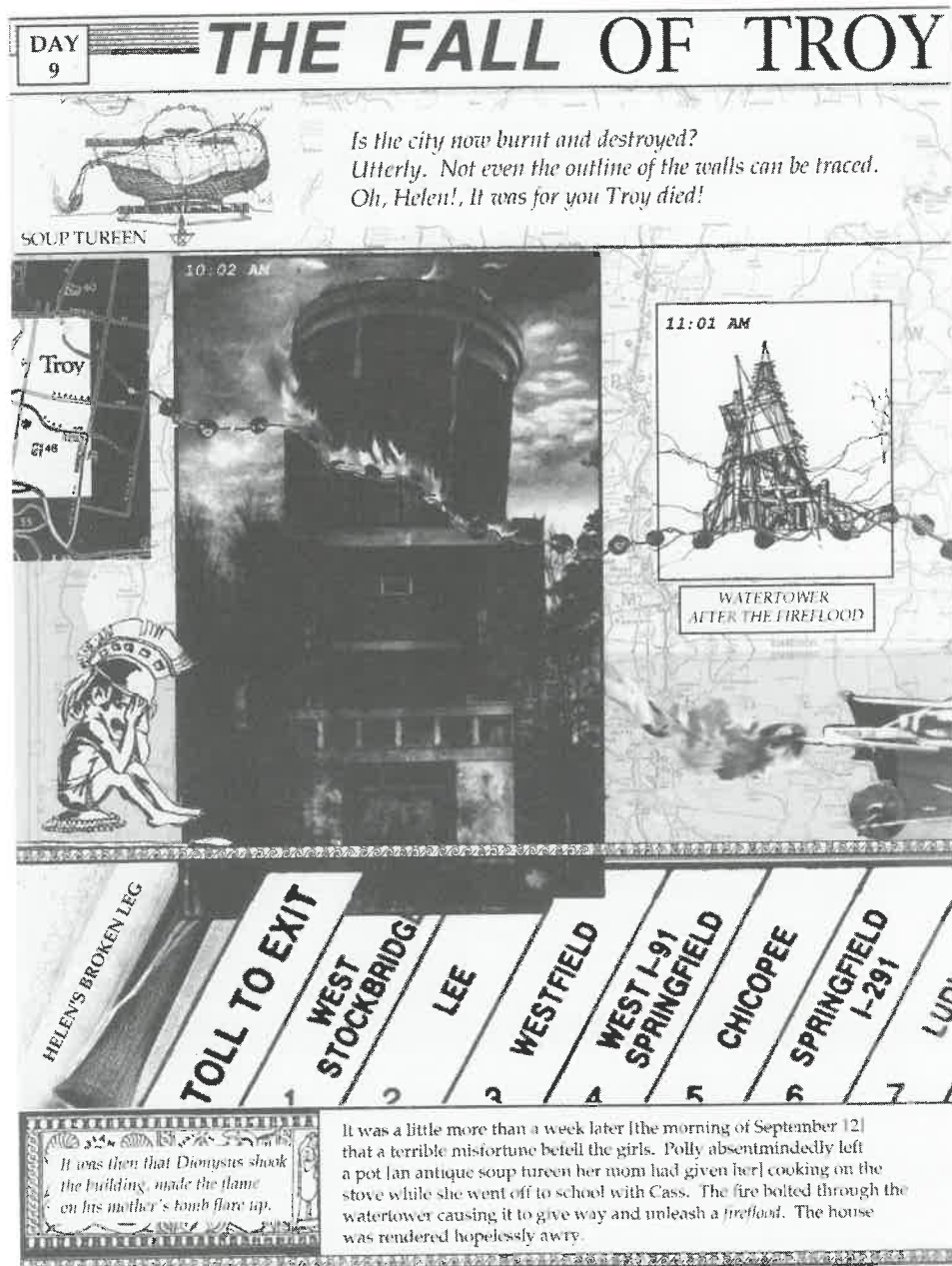


Fig. 10.5 The Laughing Girls, page 4.

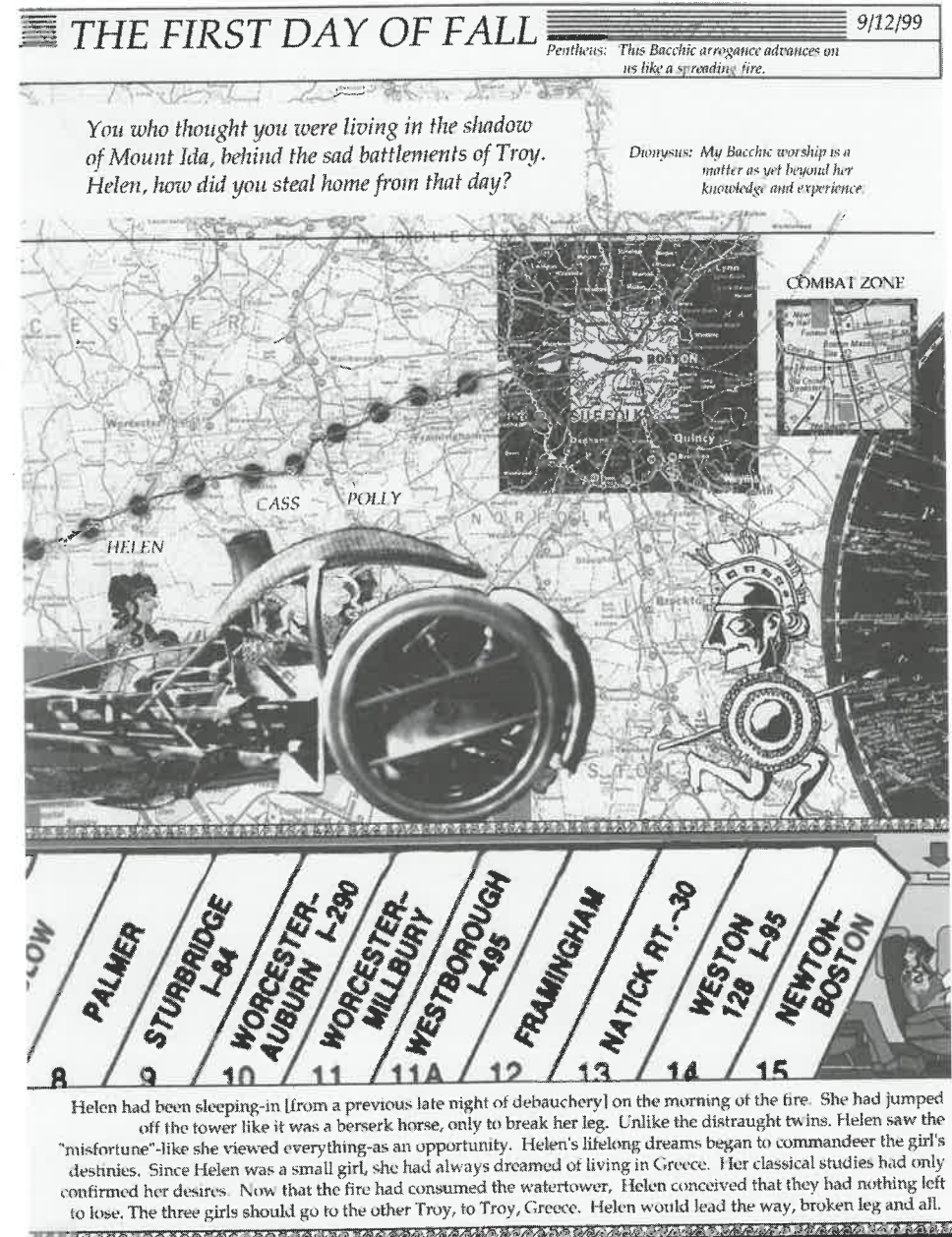


Fig. 10.6 The Laughing Girls, page 5.



Fig. 10.7 The Laughing Girls, page 6.

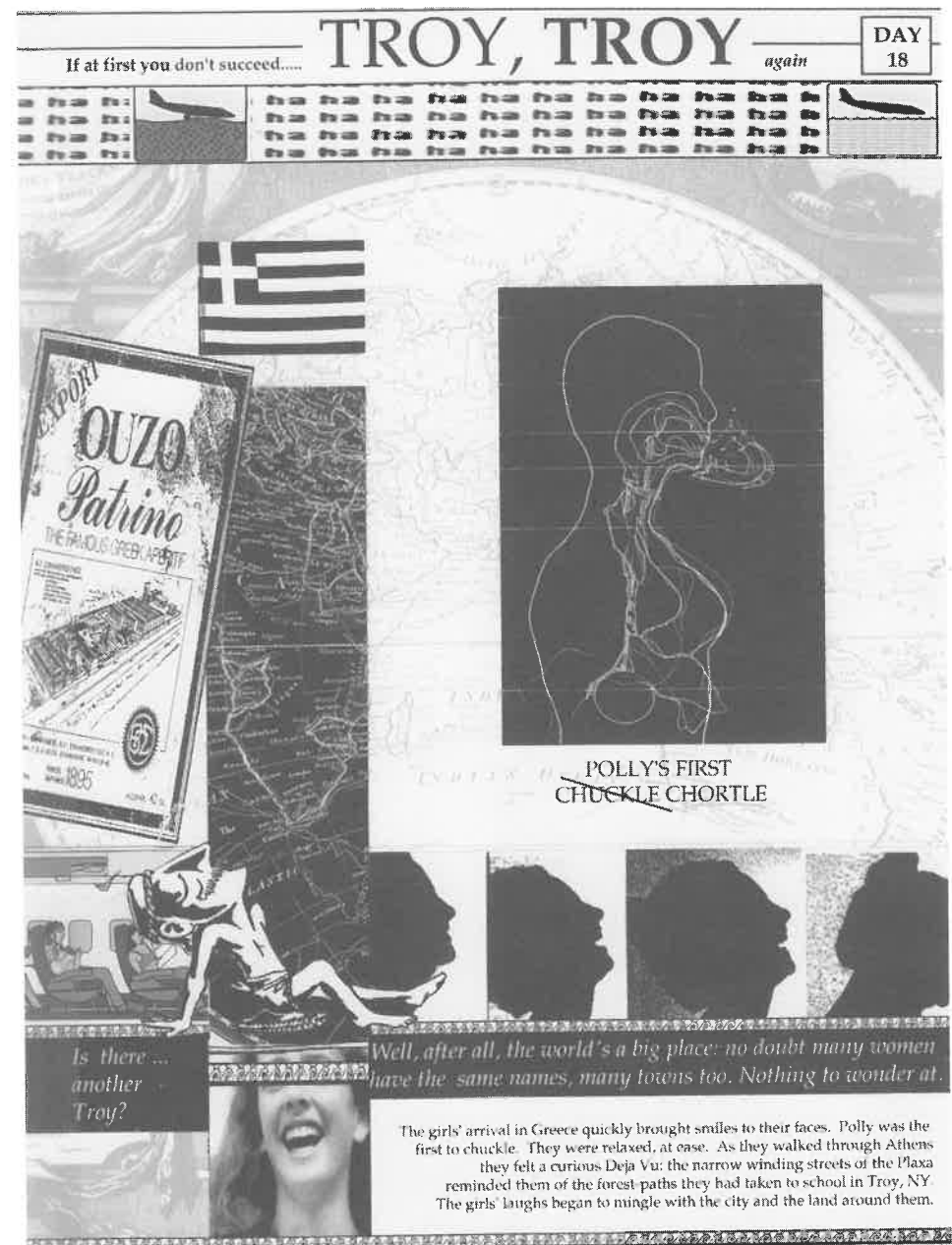


Fig. 10.8 The Laughing Girls, page 7.

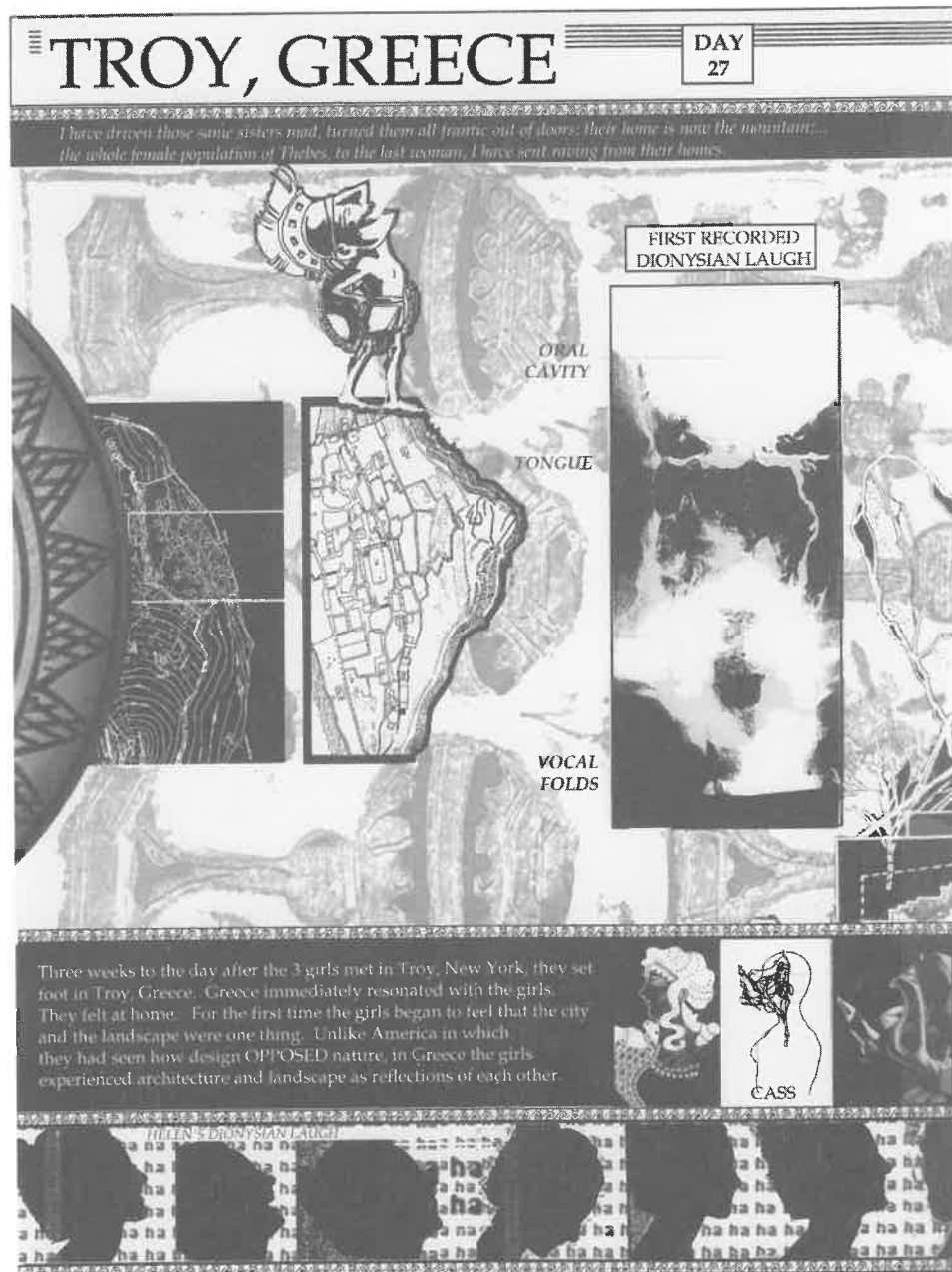


Fig. 10.9 The Laughing Girls, page 8.

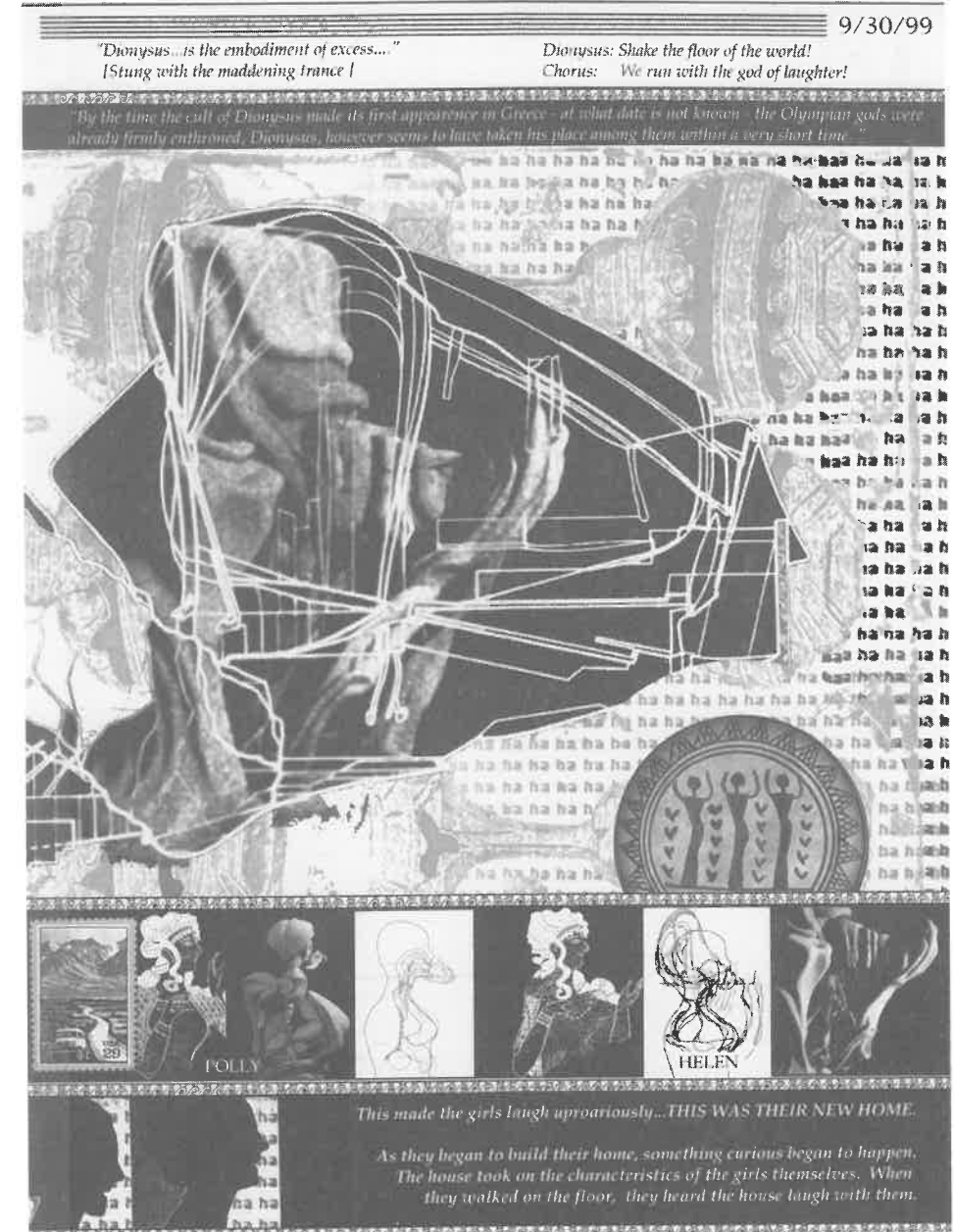
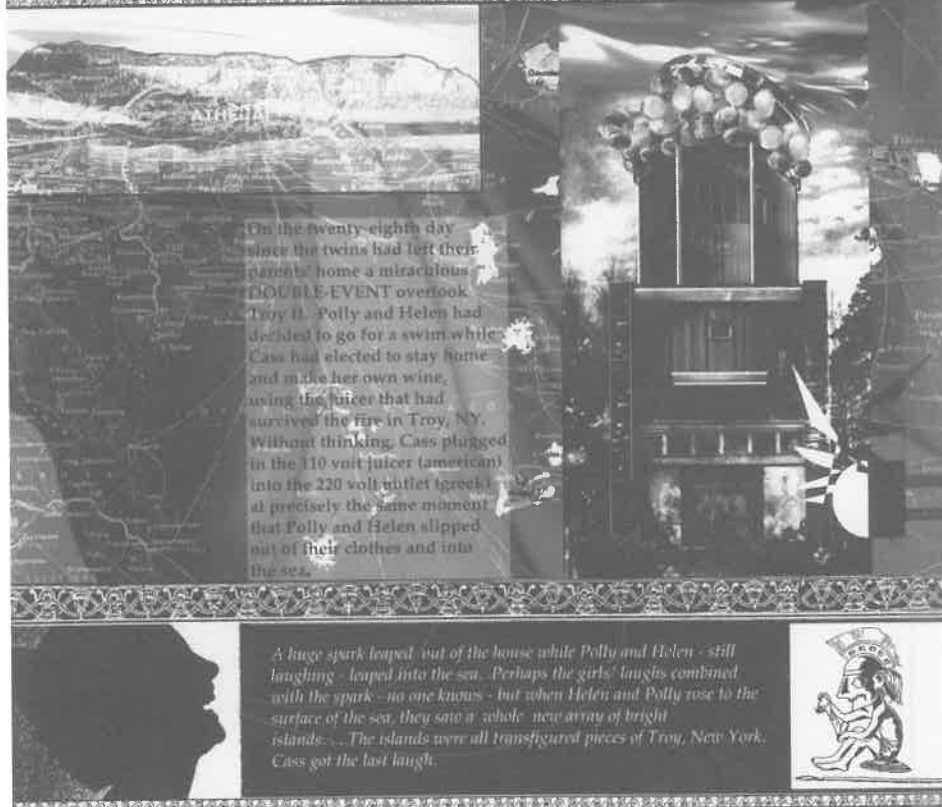


Fig. 10.10 The Laughing Girls, page 9.

DAY
28

The Laughing Girls from Troy, New York

$$28 = 3 + 9(3 \times 3) + 1$$

9/9/9/1

Part
One
[9]

page silhouettes

transformation of scale \rightarrow space

shedding the egg (period
1 2 3 (life
smoke fire post- deny-in
fire

page

Part
Two
[9]

Part
Three
[9]

Postscript
[1]

| no. | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|-----|----------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------|---------------------|------------------------|---|---|
| | Title & girls' profiles | Troy I & original site | Converted Water tower | State SP-2 Schools | Smoke | fire to house | post- fire house | | |

page 1

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | | |

4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

re-inning the uterus (life-nurture)

| | | | | |
|----------------------------|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 Rental car, to Boston | 2 Wine bar, tatoos, leave U.S.A. | 3 Abduction by/to Paris | 4 Paris to Athens Athens | 5 Athens to Troy II |
|----------------------------|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18

Scale 1/8" = 1"

Space smaller than indicated

Prop plane

W compressor

| 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 |
|------------|---|----|-----------------|--------------------------|---|----|----------------------------------|
| Troy II | Site of house Hotel Sass nightmare | | Rock falling | Begin Const. house | Scaffolds, Helen's Fall, Laughing House | | (re) const ction o Troy II |

| | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 |
| releasing the egg | city | hills | city | city | city | city | city | city |

22
Electrical
Fire

Case
head

voice

new
up
sex

Part Three

cult.
map
P
Honor
Archi

28 memory
return to object.
underlaying of
transformation

--- (Diaphragm)
Part Two

start not at beginning.

[Helen]
Thigh

--- (Break in right thigh)

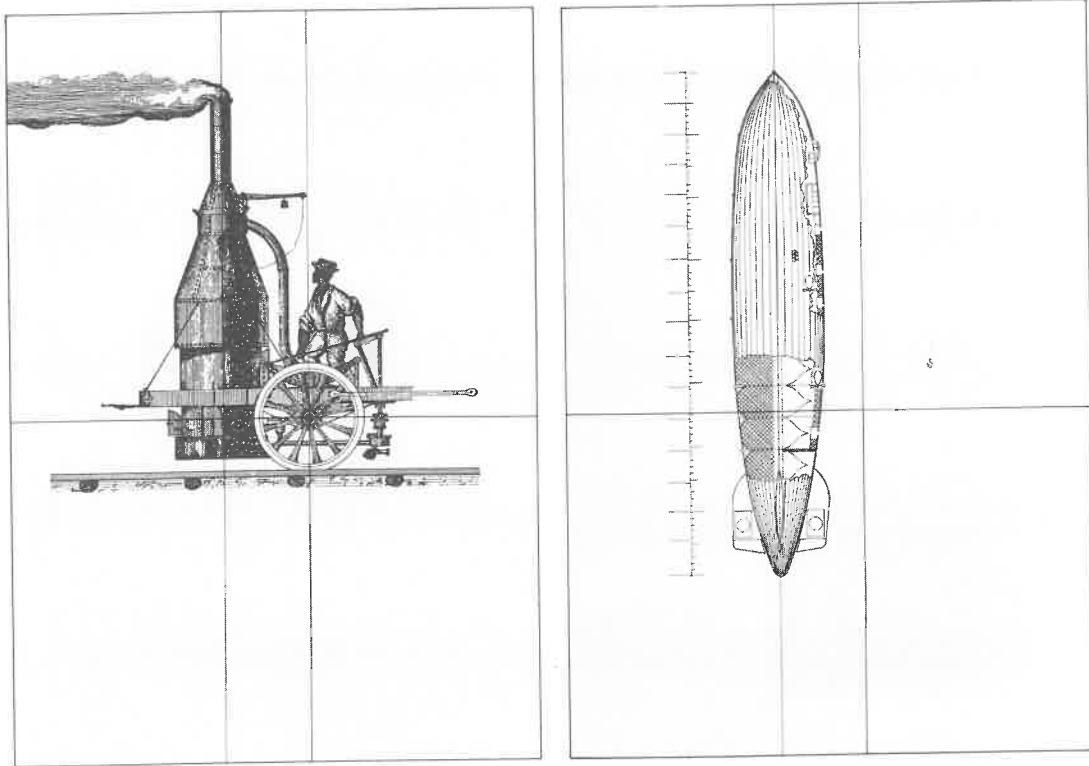
Part One

Part One

[Pollu]
Feet

_____ [EAST] →

Fig. 10.12 Storyboard from *The Laughing Girls*.



documented account of such mass hysteria in the twentieth century. The second story is Euripides's classical drama, *The Trojan Women*. Three girls – Helen, Polyxena, and Cassandra – are involved in the play. In the notes around *The Laughing Girls*, Darden makes frequent reference to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, in which Nietzsche blames Euripides's moralizing tone for the decline of Greek tragedy. Darden sees a similar decline in contemporary design thinking. *The Laughing Girls* may be interpreted as a rewriting of Euripides's *The Trojan Women* to promote the Dionysian rather than the Apollonian spirit.

Darden's archive is full of clippings, postcards, handwritten notes, sketches, and marked-up essays. For each of his projects, Darden collected materials in files and boxes. For each of the ten acts of condemned building, he included a discontinuous genealogy: four images collaged together to guide the form of each building. For example, the images collected for the Oxygen House – an American Civil War engraving, a caboose water cooler and basin, a Westinghouse train brake, and the Hindenburg Zeppelin – are combined to form a composite ideogram that resembles the final form of the Oxygen House, as well as a graphic disclosure of the project intentions. The collages act as a visual metaphor

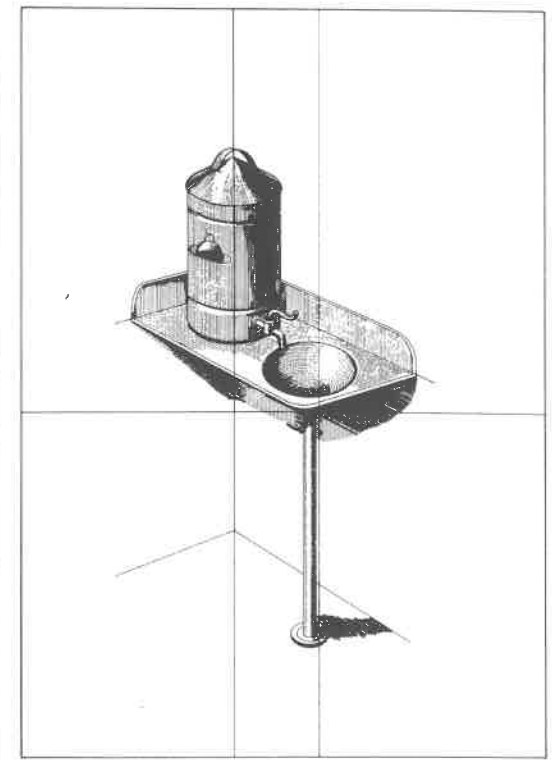
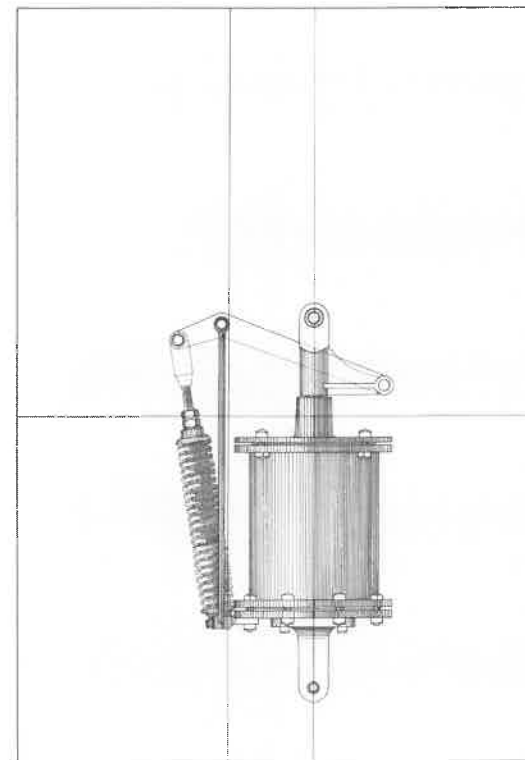
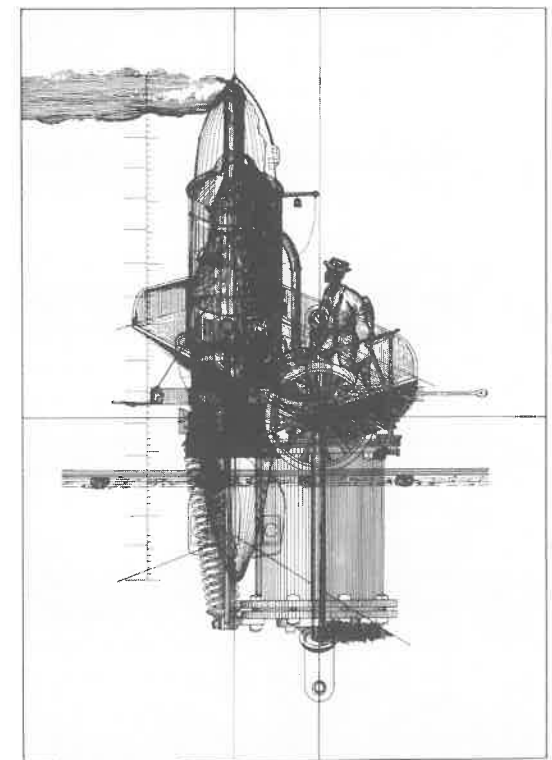


Fig. 10.13a–e Discontinuous genealogy of the Oxygen House, from *Condemned Building*. Reproduced by permission of Princeton Architectural Press and Douglas Darden Estate, courtesy of Allison Collins.



and follow Aristotle's understanding of the trope: "the right use of metaphor means an eye for resemblances."⁹ Similar to his discontinuous genealogies in *Condemned Building*, Darden plays with the latent potential of found objects in *The Laughing Girls*. Each object in a context carries a certain meaning. When the object is removed, perhaps fragmented, and then inserted into a new context, a new meaning emerges. The original meaning, however, is never wholly lost. Marcel Duchamp and Paul Ricoeur proposed that all discourse overflows with a surplus of meaning.¹⁰ Each object in *The Laughing Girls* does the same. This surplus of meaning is at the root of both metaphor and fiction.

For example, Darden sets a photograph of a water tower in Germany into the site plan of Troy, New York and manipulates it to become a house for the three girls. Maps of Troy, New York become a template for a cane. Maps of Ancient Troy give form to ankle tattoos. As noted above, the three main characters are based on three characters in Euripides's play *The Trojan Women*. Polly is the namesake of Polyxena, the most beautiful daughter of Priam, who was sacrificed on the tomb of Achilles. Cass, or Cassandra, the twin to Polyxena, could see the future, but was cursed because no one would believe her. Helen is the doppelgänger for the other Helen who may have caused the Trojan War.

The part that Darden seems to have studied most was the "found object" of laughter. In 1992 he claimed to have recorded twenty-seven young girls laughing. Three were chosen and named Polly, Cass, and Helen. I have not yet uncovered twenty-seven distinct laughs, but there is evidence of at least one girl laughing. Anna Saporito, the daughter of an architect in Denver, is referenced in Darden's notes for the project. Polaroid photographs of Anna laughing were taken and used in various collages. Other visual records include fluoroscopic images and x-rays that were produced while the subject was "chuckling" and "laughing robustly." These "laughs" were then modelled in foam. Auditory analysis of the laughing led to "temporal sections" for each of the laughs. These section cuts were translated into three-dimensional form that Darden referred to as "topographies." While there is no direct mapping of projects onto the laugh track, Darden does describe the plan of a city in terms similar to laughing. He also relates laughter to the making of a room. Beginning with the body and emanating outward, a hearty laugh fills a room. According to Darden, "Laughter starts with the space of the body, moves outward to affect

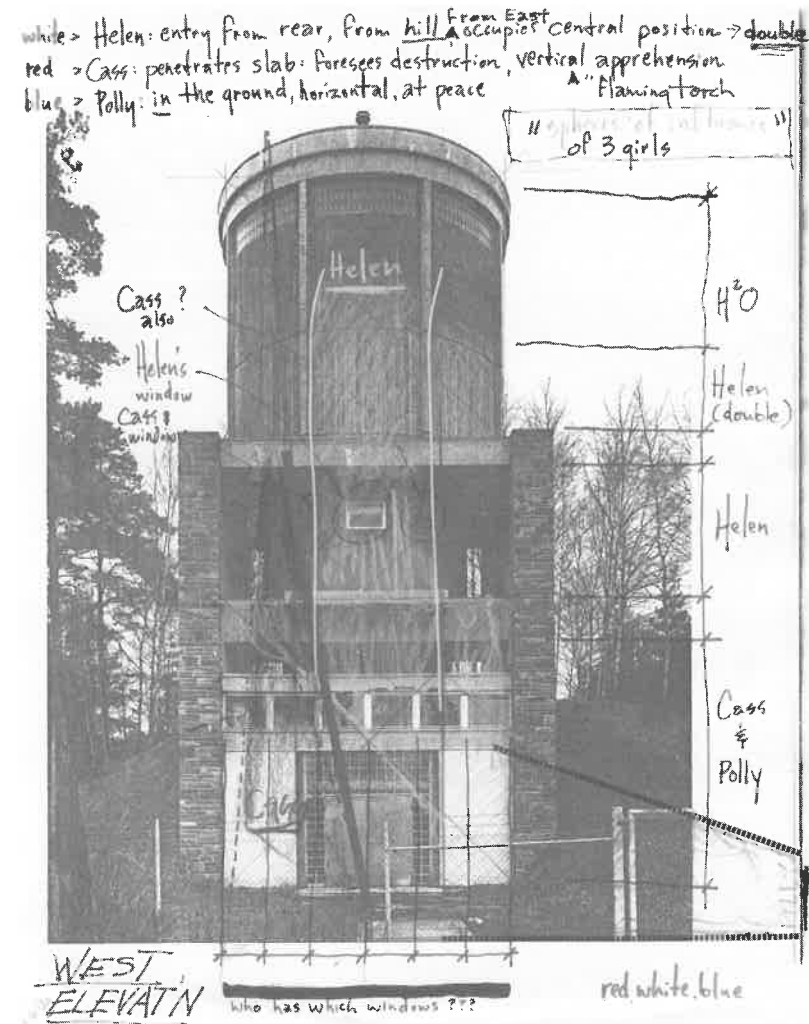
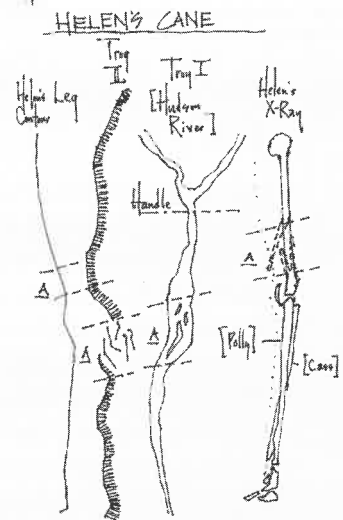


Fig. 10.14 Above Water tower from *The Laughing Girls*.

Fig. 10.15 Right Helen's cane.



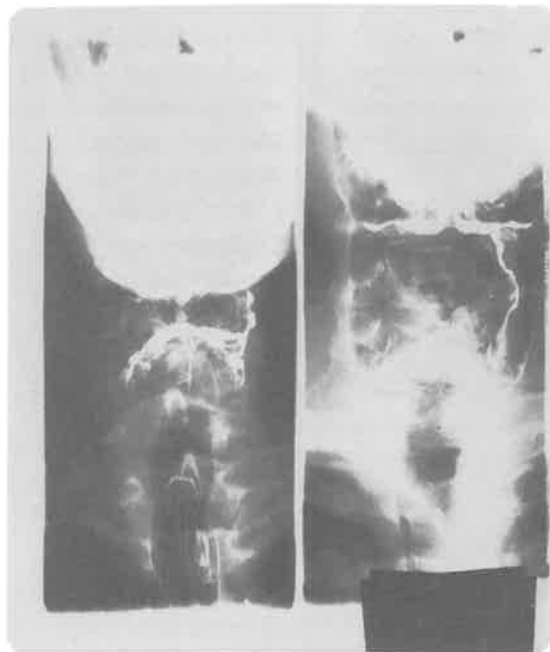


Fig. 10.16 X-ray taken while chuckling (left) and laughing robustly (right).

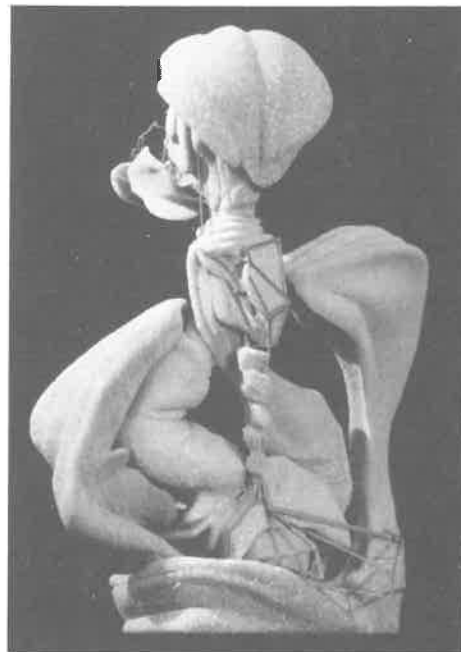


Fig. 10.17 Foam model of laughter.

a structure, and creates a site for an event.” Indeed, the space of laughter informs the section of the girls’ house in Troy.

Many, if not all, of the projects in *Condemned Building* are autobiographical. In many ways, *The Laughing Girls* may be the most autobiographical. Darden spent the 1988–89 academic year at the American Academy in Rome. While there, he experienced bouts of exhaustion. Returning to Denver after his fellowship, he was diagnosed with leukemia. A friend, Norman Cousins, recommended a book on curing cancer through laughter. Although Darden relied on medical treatment, this book was influential. Darden claimed that “the theme of the girl’s laughter was chosen

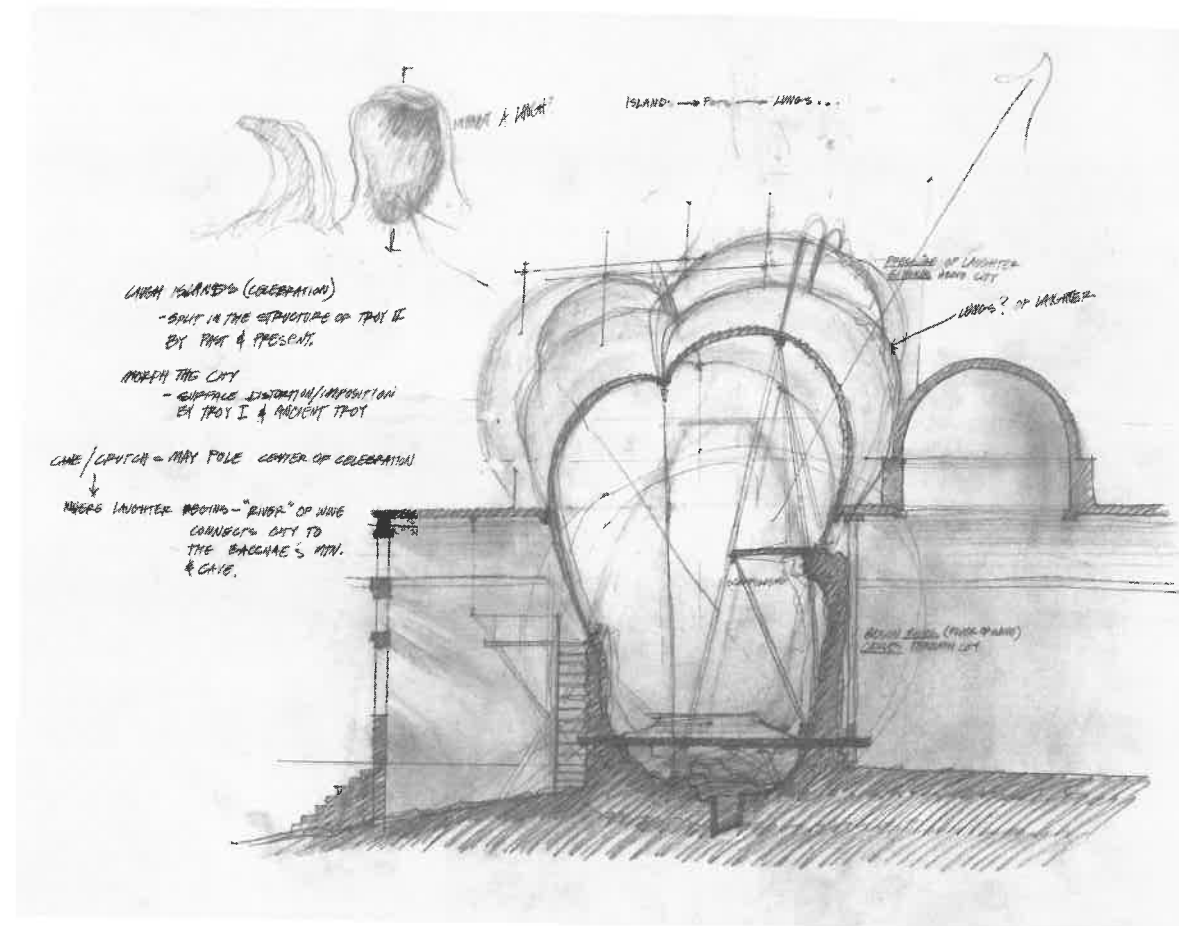


Fig. 10.18 Section of the laughing girls’ house in Troy II. In the drawing Darden asks if it possible to “inhabit a laugh.”

because nothing else makes me proceed in this world with a greater sense of hopeful lightness.” Unbearably light, given the context.

Darden’s heritage was Greek. He travelled to Greece in 1982, and *The Laughing Girls* project took him there again in 1992. On his first trip to Greece, he travelled to Monemvasia, where he met two women: Christiane Gollek, who had renamed herself Sophia on her first trip from Germany to Greece, and another woman named Janice, who referred to herself as the Greek Janus. These two women were quite close and even thought they might be twins. According to Sophia, “It was as if we were each other’s shadows – not in a bad way, but positive,

THE TROJAN ROYAL FAMILY

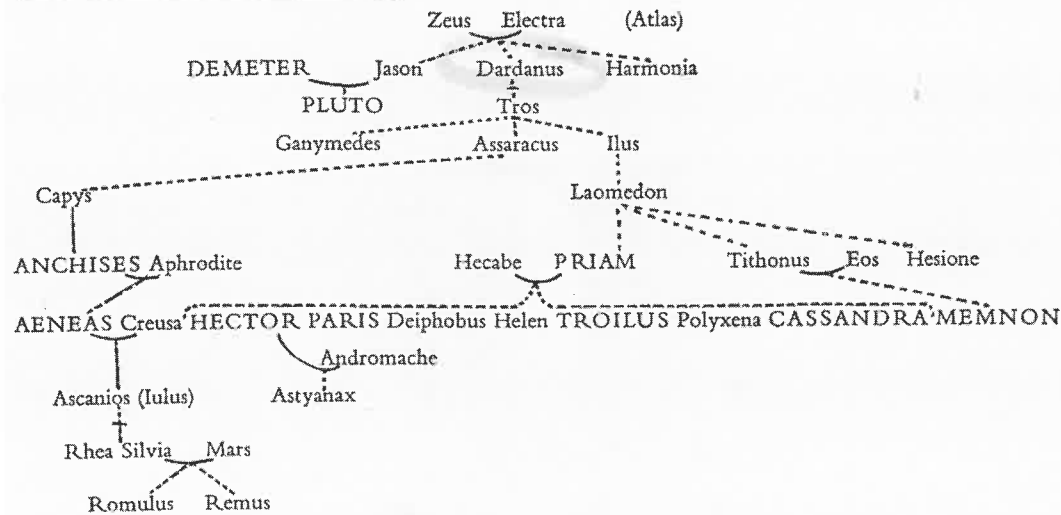


Fig. 10.19 The Trojan family tree.

like in a dream ... we were sharing each other's dreams."¹¹ Darden remained in touch with both women and visited Monemvasia again a decade later, this time with James Trevitt, a colleague who was working with him on *The Laughing Girls*.

Darden's family name is derived from Dardanus, who was the son of Zeus and Electra. His grandson, Tros, gave his name to the city and land over which he ruled. Dardania thus became Troy. The strait just north of Troy is known as the Dardanelles, a name Darden had fun with in postcards to himself. Priam, the great-grandson of Tros, was the last king of Troy. Among his many children were, of course, Helen, Cassandra, and Polyxena, the namesakes of Darden's three laughing girls. In an interesting twist, Robert Graves relates the Greek δάρδανος (Varvanos) "burned up" (from the verb δαρδάνω, *dardapto*, "to wear, to slay, to burn up") to the name Dardanus.¹² Fire is, of course, a key element in the story of *The Laughing Girls*.

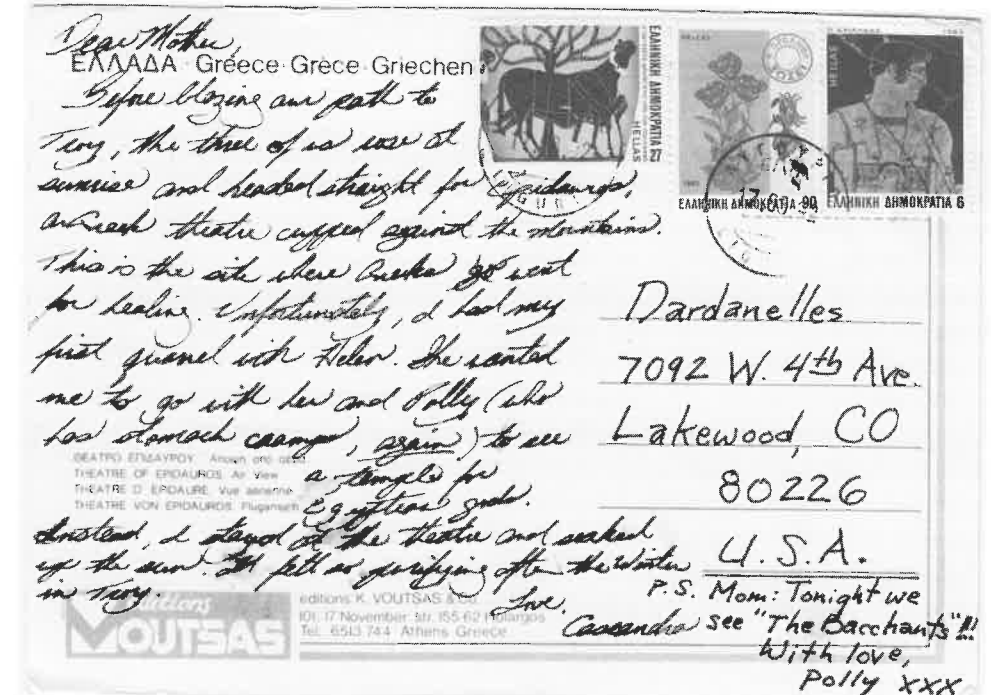


Fig. 10.20 A postcard of the Theatre of Epidaurus from "Cassandra" to the "Dardanelles." The postcard, addressed to "Mother," explains that this site is where "Greeks go to be healed." The address was Darden's house in Denver.

In his proposal for scholar-in-residence at the California College of the Arts and Crafts in 1994, Darden makes a specific connection between narrative and identity:

The new work on the architectural novel is based on my belief in the necessity of making architecture by folding other disciplines into its inquiry. Through this seemingly circumspect approach the architect can more cogently seek a recommencement with origins. It is through a recommencement with origins that architecture establishes resonant cultural identities. A key component of this recommencement is acknowledging that each of us has a life story, an inner narrative that we construct and which is our identity; that is, the narrative constructs us. To assert the human subject at the center of architectural practice, it is crucial to deepen the correspondence between personal, cultural, and architectural narratives. The study of myths and stories as part of the act of designing is necessary for the mooring of architecture to our culture. This

mooring is further realized by envisaging buildings and designed objects as having the capacity to tell stories about the inhabitants and the places where they reside.¹³

Richard Kearney reminds us that “every act of storytelling involves someone (a teller) telling something (a story) to someone (a listener) about something (a real or imaginary world).”¹⁴ This interplay of agencies not only affords a potentially rich and grounded reading of work, it also provides a particular experience of selfhood and, by extension, identity. When one makes architecture, it is always for another. It is an eminently social act, just like storytelling. This recognition of “the other” is also inherently ethical, leading to a sense of identity and selfhood that is essential to any sense of responsibility. It is clear that Darden understood this to be not only the potential but also the obligation of building. Although Darden is no longer with us, the story continues ...

NOTES

1 After graduating magna cum laude with degrees in English and psychology from the University of Denver in 1974, Darden spent two years at Parsons in New York, then from 1979 to 1983 at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) in Cambridge. Although he graduated from the GSD with distinction, his time there was not particularly rewarding, except for a studio with Stanley Tigerman in his final year. Darden was inspired by Tigerman’s witty critique of architectural agency, evident in Tigerman’s *Versus: An American Architect’s Alternatives* (1982), written while Darden was Tigerman’s student. Darden dedicated *Condemned Building* to his parents and Tigerman. After graduation, he taught at several universities and spent time in Rome as a fellow at the American Academy. He returned to the United States in 1989 and began work at the University of Colorado at Denver, where he taught until his untimely death in 1996.

2 The act of turning over the turtle refers to the film *Blade Runner*. In an early scene, Holden is interrogating Leon to determine if he is a “replicant” and therefore not human. Holden proposes a hypothetical situation in which a turtle has been overturned and is lying on its back, basking in the sun, then asks Leon why he does not help the turtle by turning it over. Visibly shaken, Leon then shoots Holden and escapes.

3 “Underbelly” is a word that Darden often used to refer to his architecture. It is discussed at length in *Looking after the Underbelly*, a film made by architect and professor Rob Miller in 1992. In the introduction to *Condemned Building*, a certain Dweller by the Dark Stream claimed, “I am inclined while watching the turtle to turn it over and study its underbelly. From this unnatural position I see how this platonically solid creature makes its way through the world.”

4 All of the sources for this essay are from a private archive of Darden’s work that is currently held by Ben Ledbetter, a close friend and fellow member of the self-titled “unholy triumvirate” that somehow made it through the GSD in the early 1980s. Ledbetter graciously allowed me and a group of students from the Wentworth Institute of Technology to study the materials in the archive.

5 Unpublished application for scholar-in-residence at the California College of the Arts and Crafts, 1994.

6 Drawings of the cane and the tattoos are in the archive. The locations of the juicer and the modelled laughs are not known at this time.

7 In almost all of his grant applications, Darden states that *The Laughing Girls* was intended to be published in a forthcoming volume of *Chora*; however, it remained unfinished and was never published. With the publication of this essay, Darden may get the last laugh.

8 In other iterations of the project, the three sections are named variously as “passage one,” “passage two,” “passage three”; and “Troy, NY,” “Troy, Greece,” and “future Troy.”

9 Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe, in *Aristotle: The Poetics; Longinus: On the Sublime; and Demetrius: On Style* (London: William Heinemann, 1932), 22.9. The translator further explains that the use of metaphor implies “the power of detecting ‘identity in difference.’” This last phrase is often translated as the “similarities of dissimilars.”

10 Paul Ricoeur describes surplus of meaning as the residue of literal interpretation. He discusses this idea, as well as the issue of metaphor and symbol, in *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976). The rationale for, and defense of, Duchamp’s most famous readymade, *Fountain*, was presented in the second volume of the surrealist journal *The Blind Man* (May 1917). In an article entitled “The Richard Mutt Case,” the anonymous author explains, “Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not

has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under a new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.” Most scholars agree that Duchamp was indeed the author. Both Ricoeur and Duchamp are referenced by Darden.

11 From an unpublished letter.

12 Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 1:89n2.

13 Unpublished application for scholar-in-residence at the California College of the Arts and Crafts, 1994.

14 Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), 150.

Filarete's Sforzinda: The Ideal City as a Poetic and Rhetorical Construction

Alberto Pérez-Gómez



Chora