



Pedestrian Strands



Pedestrian Strands Response Number #9

By Andrew Blum

“Pedestrian Strands” was born out of multiple viewpoints. A major new public artwork installed on four overpasses above I-670 in downtown Kansas City, its creation was a collaboration between artist James Woodfill and architects el dorado inc. It wasn’t their first. Over the last decade, they have together produced more than a dozen installations and public artworks around Kansas City and beyond. In the process, they’ve developed a sort of shorthand, which helps them hone ideas without dulling them. In other words, they’ve learned how to argue, how to turn their differences of expertise and opinion into art that is particularly suited to the public realms of the city. They call this back and forth the “static.” The artworks that result demonstrate it not by being contentious or hostile, but because, having been born out of multiple viewpoints, they want to live that way too. They invite multiple ways of being seen, and of seeing the environment around them. As Woodfill likes to say, “It doesn’t just snap into place.”

This was the idea that brought me to Kansas City in June 2008. Pedestrian Strands had recently finished construction, and had begun to root itself in the psychic and physical life of the city. Having embraced the “static” in their process, Woodfill and el dorado thought to extend this spirit to its interpretation. They invited me to see Pedestrian Strands, to learn about its creation, and—with this

writing—respond to its realization. They wanted somebody to talk about it and talk back to it; to give voice to the way that the artwork itself talks about and talks to the city.

From our first conversation, and even more so as I got to know the work and how it was created, this struck me as a quintessentially urban impulse. Pedestrian Strands—installed above the highway, running alongside the streets, calling attention to itself and its surroundings in multitudinous ways—seemed to me a sign for the city: a billboard for urbanity.

City officials prefer to call it an “infrastructure enhancement project.” In the late 1950s, the interstate cleaved downtown Kansas City, wrecking the homes in its path and, thanks to speedier commutes, opening up the suburbs for development. Most every city in America shares this same history, and is now facing the same question: how do you refurbish infrastructure that has reached its life expectancy, and which has become a mild source of embarrassment? In the case of four of the highway bridges over I-670, Kansas City’s enlightened response has been to embrace the open-endedness of art, tempered by the strict requirements of highway engineering.

In March 2007, the Downtown Council of Kansas City—leading a coalition of public and non-profit organizations including the Missouri Department of Transportation, the City of Kansas City, the Crossroads Community Association, and the American Institute of Architects Kansas City—solicited proposals for artists to develop an “innovative guardrail concept” for the four overpasses. They had to weigh less than 150 pounds per linear square foot, cost less than \$828,000 (spread across the 1200



linear square feet of street edge), be welcoming to pedestrians, safe for cars, and—slipperiest of all—contain some quintessence of art: a way of seeing the world.

Woodfill’s sculptures and el dorado’s buildings often incorporate everyday objects and materials, whether 2x4s and television screens, or metal mesh and corrugated steel. In the case of Pedestrian Strands, the Downtown Council’s constraints became the “found objects to compose with”—the 2x4’s of the city. As Woodfill explains, “My attitude is to pro-actively roll all of those things into it, so nothing’s a liability or a compromise.” Yet that’s not to say those constraints were trivial. Woodfill and el dorado’s first concept imagined light beams projected from the curbs towards panels mounted on the guardrails, creating shadow puppets out of passing pedestrians. The notion was to “amplify” their presence, as if to inflate people to the scale of the highway. But the road engineers—more worried about the potential danger to passing cars than the aesthetic experience of pedestrians—rejected it. Yet rather than take it as an insult to their roles, Woodfill and el dorado recognized it as something that would hold them to the original intention of the work: to be a reflection of the city that surrounds it, in both form and process. Pedestrian Strands was freighted with the responsibilities of infrastructure, as well as the vicissitudes of culture. The engineers became part of the “static.”

So was the city itself. El dorado likes to share a diagram they made that traces the evolution of Kansas City’s street grid. It begins with the basic plan of square blocks filled with buildings, that over time has evolved into something more interesting: half-blocks cut by cross streets, super-blocks

made of new commercial complexes, and even—as in the case of the convention center—buildings that span the highway. “At the end of the day you have this much more interesting reality than the idealized grid,” notes el dorado architect David Dowell. Pedestrian Strands celebrates this idea. Rather than pass judgment on the Interstate and try to cover it up or “mitigate” its presence, like an everyday highway fence, Pedestrian Strands accentuates the potential of what is already there. It asks you to see anew—if not necessarily to admire—this slice of the city. “The highway’s such an integral part of how the city has evolved that at this point it’s a historical fact,” Dowell notes.

This is heightened by the recognition that this is an interesting moment for I-670, as the area surrounding it evolves. The opening of the Power and Light Entertainment District and Sprint Arena to the north, and the continued revitalization of the Crossroads District to the south, has increased the pedestrian traffic across the Interstate. The rebuilt bridges obviously needed guardrails to make that passage safe. The special opportunity seized by their “enhancement” has been to seek a way to make that passage a part of the life of the city, more pleasant in and of itself, while also being appreciative of its surroundings. Pedestrian Strands had to define a place while connecting two places—a characteristic of bridges the philosopher Martin Heidegger described as “double space-making.”

So given all those constraints, connections and philosophies, what is Pedestrian Strands? What does it look like, and how does it behave? It occupies two sides of four overpasses, where Grand, Walnut, Main, and Baltimore cross I-670. The safety barrier is created using a layered combination of metal



mesh and glass panels, printed with photographic patterns drawn from the surrounding area, and illuminated by LED lights embedded in the structural supports. Yet given that simplicity, there are many ways of looking at it.

One evening, just as the sky was getting dark and the lights had clicked on, I zigzagged on foot across all four of the bridges. As traffic rushed by on the highway below, their headlights and taillights bounced alternately off and through the translucent panels—themselves printed with images drawn from the surrounding city. There were the reflections and refractions of light, the imprinted photographic patterns, the transparencies created by the layers of mesh and the panels, the LEDs illuminating it all, and, ultimately, the big views—the four bridges lined up in the landscape, and the lines of the panels reaching out towards the city grid.

Yet among the many ways of looking at the work, there was no single privileged view—no single spot that was the obviously the place to stand. It struck me that while most art asks you to consider itself, Pedestrian Strands asks you to consider the city around it. Its experience is inclusive and open-ended—and therefore democratic.

Across Truman Road North from Pedestrian Strands there's a new mural, painted with iconic images of Kansas City, that I take is meant to complement the presence of Kansas City Live!, the Power and Light District's outdoor performance space. There's a giant illustration of the street signs at 18th and Vine, a jazz quartet shown in silhouette, and the Midland theater marquee. From

certain points along the bridge, you can see the mural reflected in Pedestrian Strands, its crisp graphic lines smudged by the varying patterns in the glass, or washed out by the passing headlights of a truck. Looked at head on, its meaning is straightforward, more advertisement than art. Seen through the kaleidoscope of Pedestrian Strands, that's no longer as true. The billboard becomes one among many layers of a long-standing, long-evolving, urban landscape.

This is the quiet thrill of Pedestrian Strands. It takes in its surroundings and bounces them back out, only slightly altering them in the process. It amplifies the possibility of a living city, open to interpretation and participation. Woodfill has said that it “orchestrates the dissonances,” a phrase that seems to strike at the meaning of cities. They are where people gather to exchange ideas and generate new ones, to address their different perspectives, and to come face to face with what they're not. In that sense, Pedestrian Strands is more a mirror than canvas.

It's easy to imagine a nighttime traveler driving in out of the plains, past the billboards for roadside hotels and radio stations, and cutting through downtown on I-670. On the bridges above would be what appear to be billboards. But they never resolve themselves into logos or slogans. Instead, they remain smudges of light, perplexing and profoundly engaging.

Andrew Blum writes about architecture, art and cities from Brooklyn, NY. His work can be found at www.andrewblum.net.



Design Team:

James Woodfill, Artist
el dorado inc, Architects

Supported and Funded By:

Gary Dickinson Family Foundation
Downtown Council
City of KCMO
MoDOT
AIA-KC
Crossroads Community Association

James Woodfill

As a multidisciplinary artist, James Woodfill has worked extensively in the public art realm along with privately commissioned installations in public spaces, both solo and in collaboration with el dorado inc. His public work has been widely recognized, including the Americans for the Arts/Public Art Network annual *Year in Review* in 2002 and 2003, and *Art In America - Public Art in Review* in 2003. His collaborations with el dorado have extended into education and curatorial projects, writings and numerous urban planning projects and studies.

Along with his public art practice, Woodfill has concentrated for nearly three decades on installation art, with an extensive exhibition record including numerous gallery and museum installations both nationally and internationally. Woodfill received his BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute in 1980, and has lived and worked in Kansas City, Missouri since.

For more information visit www.jameswoodfill.com.

el dorado inc

el dorado inc is intensely interested in the intersection of architecture and art. Distinct in their inclusion of fabrication as part of their architectural practice, they are uncommonly qualified to work within the public art realm. Collaboration with artists takes the form of design, detailing, execution, installation and overall quality control. Their experience as a full-service architectural practice brings an expertise in programming, project management and facilitation of community involvement.

el dorado inc was recognized as a *2008 Emerging Voice* by the Architectural League of New York.
For more information visit www.eldoradoarchitects.com.

