

# OBSERVED

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PROJECT  
Icebergs NYC  
www.woodsbagot.com

New York City

*"We have to find ways to do something other than blue boards and parking lots."*

## Urban Outfitters

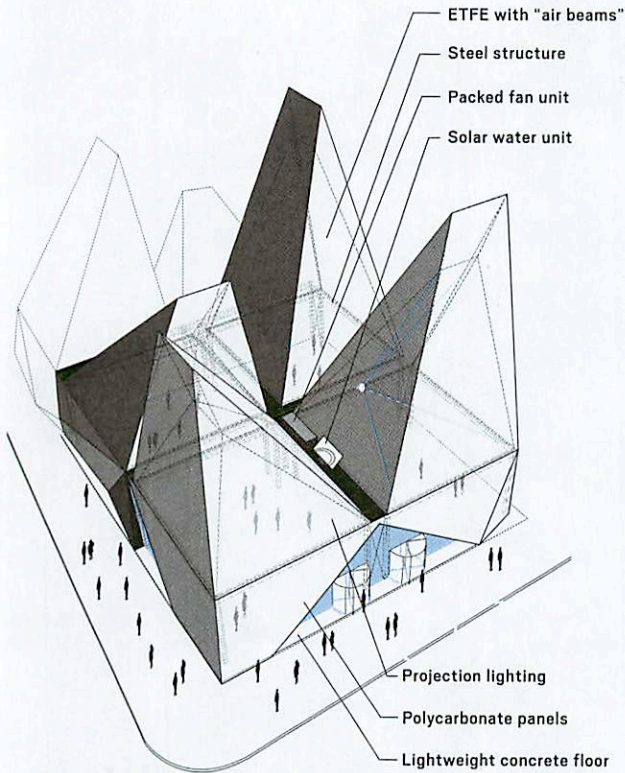
**A new initiative proposes enlivening the depressing sight of stalled construction sites.**

One of the architectural casualties of a recession—besides the layoffs and canceled projects—is the city itself. When real estate development falters, construction work vanishes. The cranes and trucks and trailers disappear. Once bustling sites often become empty lots, and the blue boards inevitably appear, creating large lifeless gaps in the streetscape. "They're urban-life killers," the architect Jeffrey Holmes says of the stalled sites.

Last year, as the recession deepened and development lurched to a halt, Holmes, a principal at Woods Bagot, in New York, began thinking about what owners could do with those dead spots. In previous downturns, the options were either abandoned, boarded-up lots or ugly "taxpayer buildings," temporary structures that were rented out to cover the taxes on the site but that sometimes stayed around for years.

Holmes and his team—working with Arup, ERA (a real estate consultancy), Design on Earth (a retailing expert), and Pentagram—set out to create a solution for the roughly 100 stalled construction sites in Manhattan. (Holmes estimates that there are 300–400 similar sites in the metropolitan area, adding, "This is in fact an international phenomenon.") His concept, Icebergs NYC, envisions dramatic, short-term structures made of lightweight, recycled materials. "By doing something light, not only do they have a small environmental footprint, but it allows them to be erected **continued on page 38**

**Woods Bagot is proposing lightweight temporary structures, called Icebergs, for the many inactive construction sites in New York. The structure (left) consists of a modular steel frame wrapped with a polycarbonate base, and inflated volumes of ETFE.**



Courtesy Woods Bagot

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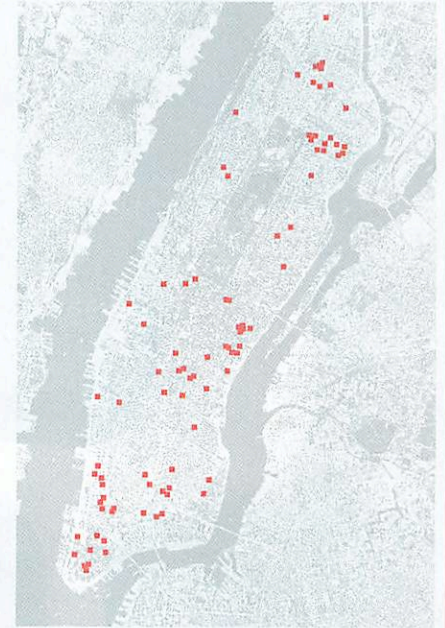
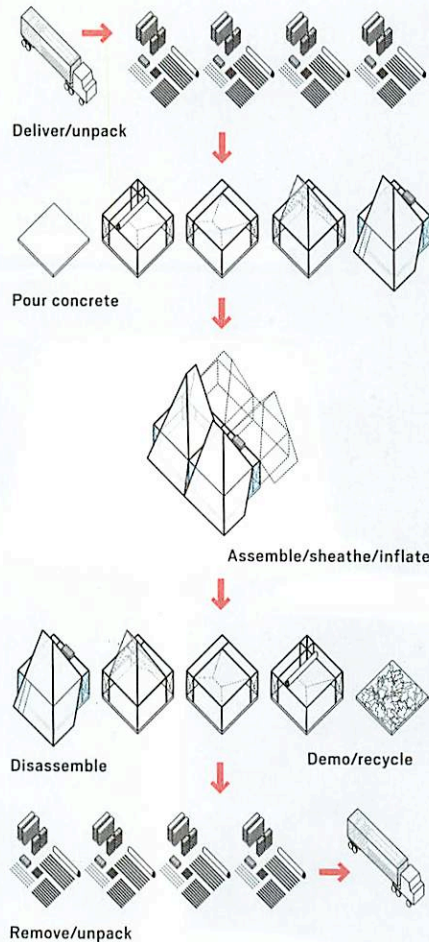
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and dismantled very quickly,” Holmes says, estimating that the Icebergs would weigh about one-tenth as much as a traditional taxpayer building. “We’re trying to take into account the real issues surrounding these sites. No one wants them to be tied up for long periods.”

The design behind Icebergs NYC (so named, according to Holmes, because, like icebergs, they “create maximum impact with minimal means”) is deliberately simple. The architects wrap a modular steel frame in translucent polycarbonate panels at street level, and then top the structure with inflated “pillows” of ultralight ETFE (ethylene tetrafluoroethylene, which was used at the Water Cube, in Beijing, and at Herzog & de Meuron’s Alliance Stadium, in Germany). “The pillows gain their stability by being inflated by a low-pressure fan,” Holmes explains. The structural support for the pillows is provided by “air beams,” a rigid material used for airplane emergency slides.

Because the condition of each site is different, Holmes believes the program for Icebergs should be as flexible as their physical form. He sees a number of possible uses—pop-up store, branding experiment, exhibition space—although they don’t necessarily have to be buildings either. “Just illuminating the surface and doing some tasteful signage in the right places could be everything,” he says. “Maybe that’s what it is—an active facade that enlivens the streetscape for some period.” In the meantime, he has started meeting with owners and developers, laying out his extensive research in hopes of convincing them of the concept. “These big holes in our urban fabric are unacceptable,” he says. “We have to find ways to do something other than blue boards and parking lots.” ■ / \*



A map details the roughly 100 stalled construction sites in Manhattan. Designed for easy assembly and rapid disassembly, Icebergs could serve a variety of social and cultural functions.

