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Fashioned for a Week

by Andrew Formichella

Most eyes are on the glamour and the celebrities at the biannual "New York Mercedes Benz Fashion Week." Indeed, 7th on Sixth Inc., the nonprofit organization created to organize and produce these fashion shows, works hard to point the spotlights on the fashion models and designers.



Twice a year, 7th on Sixth Inc. installs "New York Mercedes Benz Fashion Week" in a temporary structure in Bryant Park, New York. Photo: United Rentals

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But in the world of architecture, engineering, and construction, 7th on Sixth offers equally interesting lessons in logistics, organization, and sheer tenacity.

Twice a year, using a variety of rented, prefabricated building components, 7th on Sixth constructs a temporary facility consisting of four theaters, a sponsor showcase lobby, and numerous ancillary support spaces.

The 65,000-square-foot (6000-square-meter) facility is constructed in twelve days within a tight urban site. During its nine days of operation, the facility produces about ten shows per day, handling approximately 20,000 people each day.

[A Form Architecture pc](#) performs architectural services for [7th on Sixth](#), a process of shifting, squeezing, and growing them into their site. Strip away the glamour, we realized, and we have an extraordinary example of a modern "temporary" architecture, which can provide insights about other potential applications and historical references.

Site design

The temporary facility is located in the 100-year-old, recently restored [Bryant Park](#), in the heart of midtown Manhattan. The location calls out for sensitivity to the existing classical stonework and architectural elements.



In the heart of midtown Manhattan, the entry to the temporary facility takes advantage of existing stairs and other park features. Photo: Andy Engler

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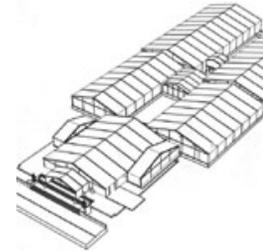
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We incorporate the Josephine Fountain as a major element in the lobby and use the existing Sixth Avenue grand stair as the main entrance to the facility. The structures are arranged to turn inward, creating pockets of egress points and mechanical equipment areas to help protect the park's existing balustrades and prize flowerbeds.



*Though short-lived, the structure is 65,000-square-feet (6000-square-meters) in size.
Image: David Burke*

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During the fashion show, the park remains open to the public; the front entry respects public access, and the facility itself only shuts down a portion of the public space.

The construction logistics on 40th Street, a busy Manhattan thoroughfare, is organized by well timed street closures coordinated with a complex trucking schedule. Street security is maintained by an organizational structure, created by 7th on Sixth, housed in an adjacent 12 by 60-foot (4 by 18-meter) trailer, called the "command center."

Round-the-Clock Construction

Command center leader, executive producer Lynn Longendyke, provides the intellect of the operation. We often compare the construction process to a military operation, but she prefers the analogy of a well choreographed ballet.

The construction schedule divides a 24-hour work day into two 12-hour shifts. Tasks are detailed to the hour and coordinated with the trucking sequence.

Multiple tractor-trailer loads of materials are required to supply the work crews at precise intervals during the day and night, to keep the crews efficient in meeting the always-impending show schedule and keeping city traffic flowing smoothly.

The command center coordinates the activities of about 40 vendors representing specific components of the "fashion village." United Rentals Special Events Division provides the primary architectural components such as the structural decking and the building enclosure, with ancillary

items such as emergency exits stairs and ramps. Aggreko Event Services provides the heating, cooling, and electrical generation.

Fascinatingly, the power-hungry facility requires Aggreko to provide enough electricity and air handling to support a 1.5-million-square-foot (140,000-square-meter) Manhattan office building.

This equipment is shipped, strategically placed, and operational in six days. Our master planning details not only the exact equipment placement but the specific wire runs and public ramp locations. It is a complex system of wiring that is largely installed in the middle of the night. Planning clarity and coordination produces the efficiency required by the command center.

United Rentals Special Events provides what early modern architects



*The structure is assembled in twelve days and functions for only nine.
Photo: Andy Engler*



*Heavy equipment used in construction is choreographed like a ballet troupe.
Photo: Andy Engler*



The building's structural frame is assembled from

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dreamed of: creating a substantial building out of preengineered, prefabricated building components.

Building the Structure

United Rentals begins with the night shift, using powerful portable work lights. One crew covers the grass with plywood to create a consistent structural surface. Another crew starts laying a modular decking, consisting of a 4-foot (1.2-meter) square modular interlocking system leveled to a predetermined datum.

Like most of the components, the system of labor is unique. It employs a high proportion of unskilled to skilled labor, sometimes as high as 6 to 1. The laser-leveled structural platform quickly grows into a stage to support the prefabricated building.

As the decking is installed, a well choreographed forklift ballet places large concrete anchor blocks and heating, cooling, and electrical power distribution equipment into place. Their placements are carefully coordinated with the spacing required for emergency egress and building anchorage points.

The building system is a Losberger, Maxi-Flex 82-foot (25-meter) wide clear-span structure, wrongfully termed a "tent." The frame consists of aluminum base plates, columns, and beams, clad with a vinyl-coated polyester fabric attached like boat sails.

On the decking, the columns are attached to base plates, and two beams form a rafter that is joined to the columns. A strategically located crane lifts the frame sections into place. It takes about ten hours to erect 39 frames with a crew of seven skilled and six unskilled workers.

As the skeletal system is being completed, a separate crew begins installing the vinyl cladding. It takes only a few hours to apply the skin to the structures and to close the village off from the elements. Then the fine tuning of the components takes place, such as guttering for rain and snow protection. The egress patterns are coordinated and established.

Tent Transforms to Theater

At this point in the installation, the construction process becomes more of a theatrical production. It's fascinating to witness the transformation as the process shifts to the internal components.

The command center skillfully integrates these many components — the connecting stairs, seating risers, runways, platforms, prosceniums, technical support areas, storage, lighting, and sound systems — into a coherent, efficient building package.

Modern architecture arrived as a result of an industrialization of production. Those new methods directly influenced the development of building materials and their assembly into a new aesthetic faithful to pragmatic and economic concerns, thus giving a clear expression of the building components.

Tents have been expressing their construction for thousands of years, protecting and adapting to their nomadic inhabitants with a lightweight, transportable support system. When the tent typology merges with modern architecture's techniques, the result is quite extraordinary.

When complete, the fashion village assumes its purpose exhibiting the latest in fashion and fabrics. Yet fabrics are also on display in the modular systems of the temporary architecture. The building's assembly performance is nearly as spectacular as the fashion shows inside.

Beyond this glamorous application, we can also speculate where else this technology might be applied. For disaster relief efforts? Or in refugee

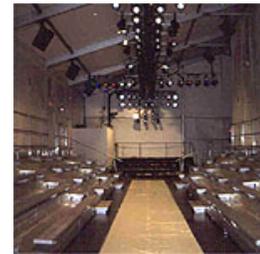
frame is assembled from preengineered, prefabricated components.

Photo: Andy Engler



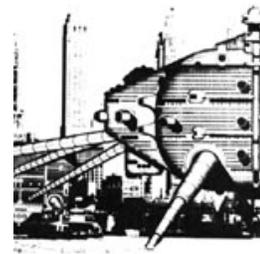
Cranes lift the components into place, operating on a 24-hour schedule.

Photo: Andy Engler



Sophisticated lighting systems transform a temporary facility into a theatrical setting.

Photo: Andy Engler



Forty years ago, Archigram anticipated the day of moving, plug-in cities.

Image: Ron Herron

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technology might be applied for disaster relief efforts, or in refugee camps?

The philosophy of the early 1960 Archigram movement comes to mind — with moving cities and plug-in architecture — because we now have the equipment and skills to realize their ideals. 7th on Sixth is a fine example of this direction and potential.

[Andrew Formichella](#), is principal of A.Form Architecture pc in New York.

Project Credits

Client: 7th on Sixth Inc.

Architect: A.Form Architecture pc

Primary Vendors: United Rental Special Events and Aggreko Event Services



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