

MONDAY, JANUARY 9, 1989

THE WASHINGTON POST

Style/Arts

Arts Beat

Making a Wreck of Art

By Kara Swisher
Washington Post Staff Writer

"And now if you'll step this way, you'll see that this house has it all," said the enthusiastic guide. "Plenty of light, high ceilings, air conditioning throughout, near public transportation and dirt-cheap." The crowd guffawed at the thought, but made no offer.

Though such things make yuppies salivate, this piece of real estate at 427 Massachusetts Ave. NW was another thing altogether. The airy quality was from a gash in the roof and the entire front made by Art Attack, a group of artists who have turned the two-story antebellum house in the middle of a run-down block into a work of art.

The group, a renegade and amorphous artist collective that was founded in California and moved to Washington in 1981, hosted a reception and open (literally) house yesterday to inaugurate the sculpture. The project, which included cutting a diamond-shaped chunk out of the front and hanging it inside the abandoned house, took two months to complete.

People from the area stayed close to the sidewalk while the artists were at work. "One man came asking for smoke, because I guess he thought this was a crack house or something," said Alberto Gaitan, one of the four core members of Art Attack (the others are Lynn McCary, Evan Hughes and Jared Hendrickson). "But most people just came by and said they thought it was beautiful."

Costs for the project, dedicated to the memory of the late New York artist Gordon Matta-Clark, were low (about \$400), since the artists and volunteers used the house as material. "We needed chain saws, scaffolding and a lot of muscle," said McCary. "It is subtractive rather than additive, so it did not need a lot, except creativity."

What emerged is a curious mix of created and found art. The biggest element, the front diamond hanging through the second floor, swung gently like a strange pendulum. Nearby, an artist made tinkling glass chimes from available (and still dirty) windowpanes. Some walls and floors were torn out and some others were left intact, giving the place a skeletal feel. And the faded flowery wallpaper was left on walls, peeling and cracking in a way that movingly evokes decay.

And though Art Attack did not try to find out the history of the house while creating their work, the group inevitably came across objects that spoke of the lives that had been there before. Found in the excavations were newspapers dating back to the '30s, checks from 1954, a cat's skull and even recipes for making bootleg whiskey, with a still scrawled on a wall.

The house will be wired off to prevent the general public from going in, because of possible dangers from the condemned building. In fact, until only hours before the reception yesterday, Art Attack was unsure if it would be able to lead people through the house.

So a large crowd, eager to get a chance to see the work, gathered in front on the muddy lawn, and Art Attack led tours all afternoon. "It just changes your conception of a house," said Cathy Winter, a Montgomery County art teacher who helped with the sculpture. Though it was art, Winter got to do such seemingly uncreative endeavors as kicking out walls and sweeping up debris. "Sometime I felt just like a construction worker."

More than most art, this piece is truly ephemeral. The sculpture will be demolished when the block, which sits between the newly refurbished Union Station and the upcoming Techworld, is redeveloped. Many buildings in the area have lately fallen to the wrecker's ball.

But Gaitan is not worried. Six years ago, residents in the area were told the buildings had only six months before being destroyed. "This could be here for years," he said hopefully. "And it could go tomorrow."