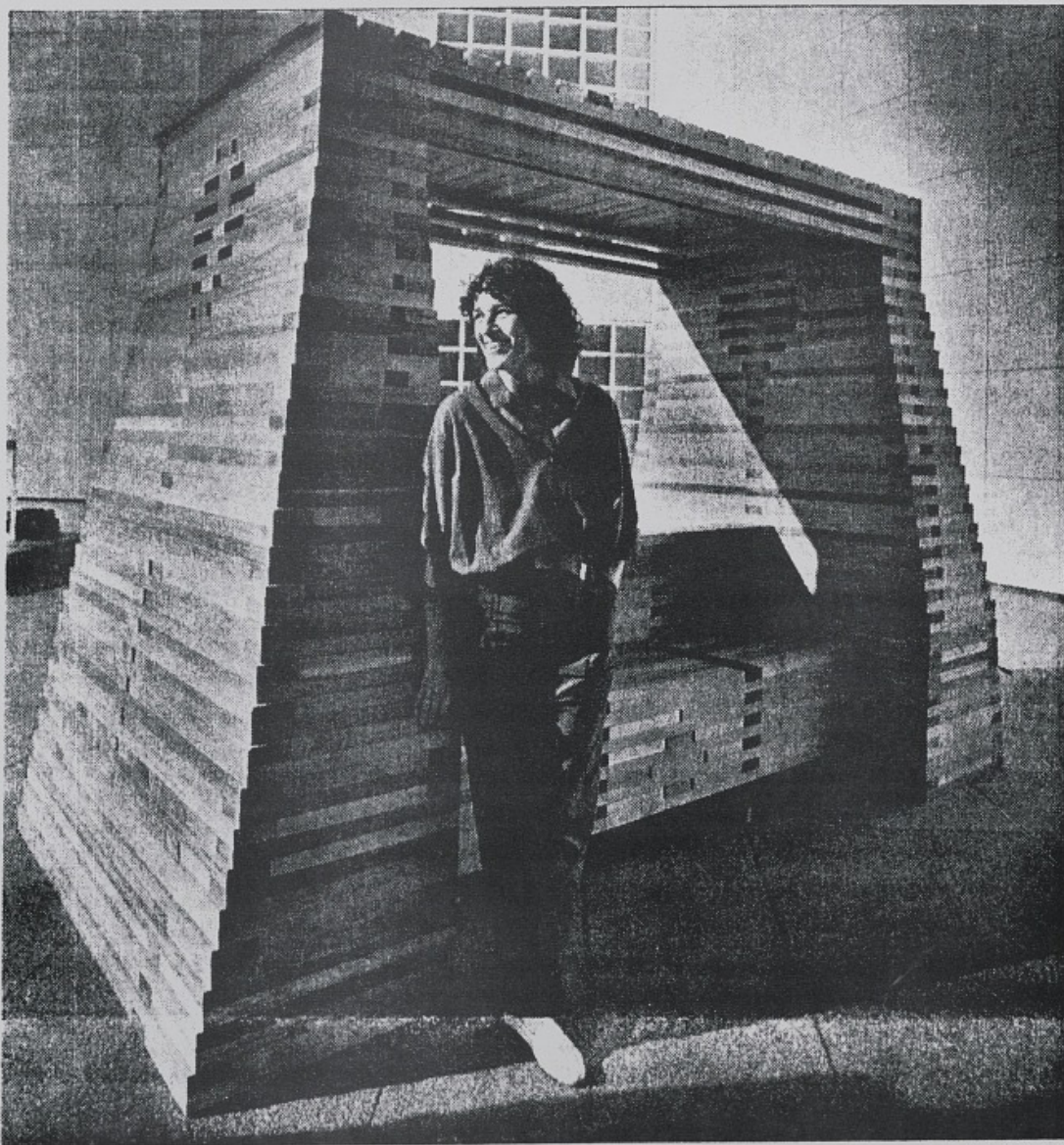


Lifestyle

The Atlanta Journal

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 1986

A marriage of art and industry



JOEY IVANSCO/Staff

Precision of both produces 'Bench House'

By Catherine Fox
Staff Writer

It was an unlikely love affair — nationally known sculptor Jackie Ferrara and a dozen employees of Cardinal Industries, a modular housing manufacturer — but that's what she called it. And it produced "Bench House," the 11-foot-long cedar sculpture now ensconced on the plaza beside the High Museum of Art.

Designed by Ms. Ferrara, built by the factory workers and donated to the museum by Cardinal Industries, "Bench House" will provide foot-weary visitors with a place to sit. It has already become an object of pride and a symbol of personal accomplishment for all involved.

"It's hard to articulate how I feel about it," Mark Dameron told the crowd gathered at Thursday's dedication ceremony. "It's like being the father of the son who hit the winning home run at the World Series."

Like many on the team, Dameron had volunteered to work on the project because he thought it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "We're making something we can take our children and grandchildren to and say, 'I did this.' Everybody wants to put their mark on the work in some way. This is one way."

They worked hard for that opportunity. The construction, which took place at Cardinal's College Park factory, got off to a late start Monday when Ms. Ferrara arrived and discovered that the pieces of wood that make up the sculpture had been cut incorrectly. Remilling the wood set the team back a whole day and required 15-hour shifts in order to complete it in time for the dedication.

BENCH HOUSE': Artist Jackie Ferrara and Cardinal Industries worked together to build the cedar structure.

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And then there was the matter of Ms. Ferrara's standards. Steve Cochran, who works as a quality assurance alternate at Cardinal, said, "I didn't think art was so precise. There was very little tolerance. Everything was figured to one-sixteenth of an inch. There is precision in building modular units, but we have a little more leeway."

The experience has affected Cochran's attitude toward his work. "I think I can be a little more strict as far as quality goes now. It makes you think about striving for a little bit more."

"She's picky, but she has to be," Valerie Bishop explained. "It was a challenge getting everything just right. It was a lot of work, but it makes your hours worth it. I watched it leave the factory this morning. [The others] said, 'Valerie, don't cry.'"

Even David Baker, executive vice president of Cardinal, whose brainchild this project is, pitched in. He arrived from the company's Columbus, Ohio, headquarters at 4 p.m. Wednesday, "rolled up his sleeves and got right into it," Ms. Ferrara said.

At about 2 a.m., two hours before the piece was completed, Baker sensed something special happening. Having worked on two similar projects with Ms. Ferrara at Cardinal's plants in Columbus and Orlando, Fla., he knew that the "affair" was taking.

"I walked over to Eddie Jackson, a very quiet man. He told me, 'I'm just amazed at what must go on in Jackie's mind, how she visualizes it and how each piece works. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.'" He asked the artist to autograph his hard hat.

The wonder did not wear off in the light of the midday sun. As five

buses deposited most of Cardinal's employees in front of the museum so that they could attend the dedication, Jackson mused, "I never seen nothing like it before. I never had no dealings with art, but I always wanted to see what it was like."

Like many of the other team members, Jackson had never been to a museum before the team had toured it two weeks before the project. He was not alone in commenting that he planned to return, a sign that Cardinal had succeeded in one of its goals — to get its employees involved in art.

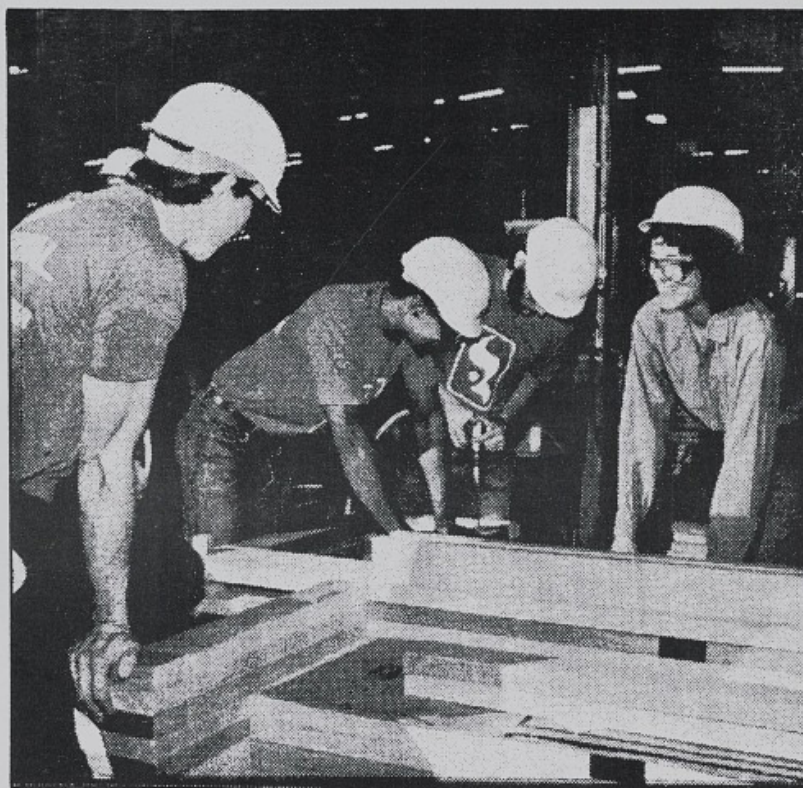
Picking Ms. Ferrara as the introducer was a stroke of genius. She is as easygoing and regular as she is demanding about her standards. Ms. Ferrara herself never had any intention of being an artist. She began her "career" as a hobbyist, taking crafts classes at settlement houses on New York's Lower East Side.

"I made purses, belts, sandals. Then I took pottery. I began making the clay into globs that obviously weren't pots. Very slowly it evolved into sculpture. I also had this predisposition for building bookcases. It was fun for me, but building was just carpentry at that point. I got a raw space in a co-op and built my own loft.

"Then I started making stairways, and that evolved into pyramids" — a form she uses frequently in her widely exhibited architectural sculptures.

Her spare, wood constructions easily fit into the Post-Minimalist aesthetic, but the sense of reduction is more intuitive than intellectual, even though she knew many of the famous Minimalist artists such as Sol Le Witt and Carl Andre socially.

"I used to play poker with Le Witt. I think it was about the time I was making sandals. When we played at his place, I remember thinking that he must be in the box-



STEVE DEAL/Staff

UNDER CONSTRUCTION: Jackie Ferrara directs workmen from Cardinal Industries on construction.

making business," she recalled.

"The architecture just happened, and I try to keep it that ignorant. I've stayed away from the pyramids. I don't go to see the ruins in South America — I'm afraid that once I saw how great they were, I couldn't make my sculpture. I enjoy the complexity of it. For me, it's all about solving puzzles.

"I want it be so that you can't exactly place the architecture. . . . I love it that 'Bench House' will eventually weather to a ghostly silver —

it will be that much harder to place."

Ms. Ferrara is aware that her participatory sculptures touch off strong feelings in viewers. "People have gotten married in them," she said. Linda Smith, one member of the Cardinal team, commented that "it has its own antique look. It's beautiful. I just let my imagination go."

Dameron compared it to Stonehenge. He added, "Maybe it'll be around as long, too."