

Places

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A Quarterly Journal
of Environmental Design

Around Buildings

Guest Editor:
Marc Treib

A Nomad Among Builders
Michael Auping

**The Presence of Absence:
Places by Extraction**
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Thomas Jefferson's Body
David Bell

The Popular Yard
J. B. Jackson

**Mappus Mundi: The Portuguese
Immigrant Garden in California**
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Urban Park as Building**
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Reconsidered**
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Why start with buildings and work outward? For one, buildings are difficult to avoid these days. Even in the wilderness, just when we think we have completely escaped the presence of human intervention, frequently some structure appears on the scene. That isn't necessarily bad, however, but the ubiquity of building suggests that we do look not only at structures in isolation. Being a child of the city, buildings were a natural starting point for my formulating this issue of *Places*: starting from the constructed zone and moving outward.

It would seem that a matrix of the possible relations between buildings and nature or buildings and buildings would provide an appropriate structure for looking at designed places. I should note at the outset that several authors did not produce their contributions, in spite of countless promises. As a result, we are short of a seamless gradation from the natural to the completely built environment, but sufficient pieces are in place to create a superstructure.

As words in isolation express only semantic potential, the single structure understood alone offers only a fragment of its potential significance. Power and meaning both derive from context and in certain configurations both can be effectively neutralized, diminished or enhanced. Context, a term of literary origin, suggests that meaning, and we might add experiential effect, are as much the product of situation as intention. We have all had experiences where

the sum total was far greater than the banality of the constituent architectural fragments. Other structures, however brilliant in themselves, are pulled down by new structures around them or diminished by a poor understanding of architectural or social setting. But one need not labor the point as it is well understood and acknowledged, if frequently disregarded. In this issue, then, we will focus on that notion of context and configuration seeing buildings in settings rather than as distinct structures.

In the opening essay Michael Auping discusses the work of Hamish Fulton and explains why this artist walks *from* buildings and includes no structures in the photographs he uses to document his walks. My own essay concerns the first level of site disturbance, in this case by means of subtraction. Two essays, by John Brinckerhoff Jackson and Frances Butler, investigate the front yard generically and specifically. Following these are the topics more specifically architectural: David Bell examines Thomas Jefferson's works at the University of Virginia; Errol Barron analyzes the Louisiana plantation Oak Alley; Lars Lerup guides us up the Bishop's stairs in Gerona; while Betsy Cann and Catherine Howett question the relationship between the built and the "natural" in the city. Life on the bus that moves through rows of buildings appears in the sketches of Anthony Dubovsky. And as an epilogue, Michael Dundas and Sarah Bodine trade recollections of growing up

on the urban street or the rural towpath.

What these essays offer us collectively are commentaries on the structure, structures, and the life in the zone between aspects of the built world and those of the natural.

Since the time for assembling this issue was severely limited, I suggested to the authors that they send me the *precis* of the article they would write if they had had more time. Condense the idea and don't worry about a full explication, was the request. On the other hand, I requested a "moral" to the story. The gentle reader should thus approach these articles as if they were a cross between the article that would have been and an environmental *Aesop's Fable*. Hopefully, the stories these essays tell us apply far beyond the particular example discussed, and have a resonance "around" many more buildings or places than those specifically cited.



Marc Treib

Bishop Miquel Pontich's Ninety Steps.

Lars Lerup

This text is about a very large stair in a small city, and if glorification occupies the center of the architectural enterprise, this stair sits squarely in this glorious center.

Public stairs are common in cities that are built along steep river banks or on mountainsides. In Gerona, which is situated on the river Onyar in the province of Catalunya north of Barcelona, there are four public stairs that are named in the official tour guide: Escales de la Pera, Escales de Sant Domenec, the Escales at the Pujada del Seminari and the Bishop's steps. The Bishop's steps are not like the other public stairs, even though they are built from the same rock, with similar balustrades and topped with identical classical spheres. In fact, the Bishop's steps are not only not like other public stairs in Gerona, but in the region and in Barcelona.

Purportedly, Bishop Friar Miquel Pontich had the ninety steps built in the Placa de la Catedral between 1685 and 1699. The Catedral is itself one of those unexpected religious assemblies that the modern traveller cannot quite match with his own map of geopolitical understanding, since there is no relationship between the minor importance of the modern Gerona and the size, complexity and splendor of the Catedral. Yet this state of apparent discrepancy between architectural and

sociopolitical importance fits neatly with the Bishop's steps.

The Catedral was many centuries in its building and the ninety steps were only one of many fragments added at different times that make up the current scene of the church and two plazas: the upper Placa dels Apostols, and the lower Placa de la Catedral—the seat of the steps.

The ninety steps are divided into three sections, each consisting of thirty steps, a landing and surrounding balustrades, occasionally topped by a perfect sphere set on a pedestal. The entire stair ascends some 60 feet to the entry of the cathedral with its main door, eight niches, two balconies, and a giant rose window built in 1733 by Pere Costa. Behind this facade lies the Great Nave, which reaches 70 feet across, making it the widest nave in Europe. Yet all this splendor, size, and spatial power fades somewhat in light of the ninety steps.

We have visited Gerona twice. The first time stumbling accidentally and very briefly on the steps, we did not quite believe our eyes. Afterwards, we commented on the curious encounter and promised to return. The second time we rushed with anticipation back across the river, and through the narrow streets to confront the stairs: breaking through the perimeter of the *placa*, it was no longer

disbelief but size-shock, scale-disorientation, and bulk & magnitude-collision that stunned us. For a moment we were children in the company of a giant.

Restored to proper size we thought: the shock had to do with the juxtaposition of their **giant** size and their simple, **rational** design—thirty steps of roughly eight inches each, a landing, an additional 20 feet of steps, a landing, and the final stretch of steps. Somehow, this heterogeneous combination of unusual size and common design arrested the natural flow of the stair—it was as if getting to the Catedral was less important than the stair itself. Through this sudden change of size, the solidity and inherent predicability of the type-object with its implicit internal balance between parts and characteristics had been ruptured.

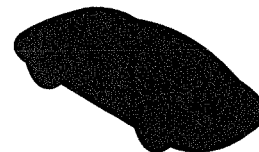
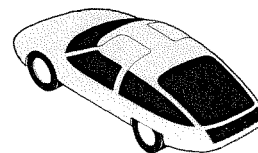
Further, the extraordinary size is apparent not only because of the level difference between the *placa* and the Catedral, but also because the stair fills the entire square, leaving space only for narrow streets and a narrow strip of its original footprint. Gargantuan, the stair has become so large that just like Yeats' dancer and his dance, the stair cannot be separated from the square. Like a new alloy, the stair-square has muscled a new place for itself in the urban taxonomy.

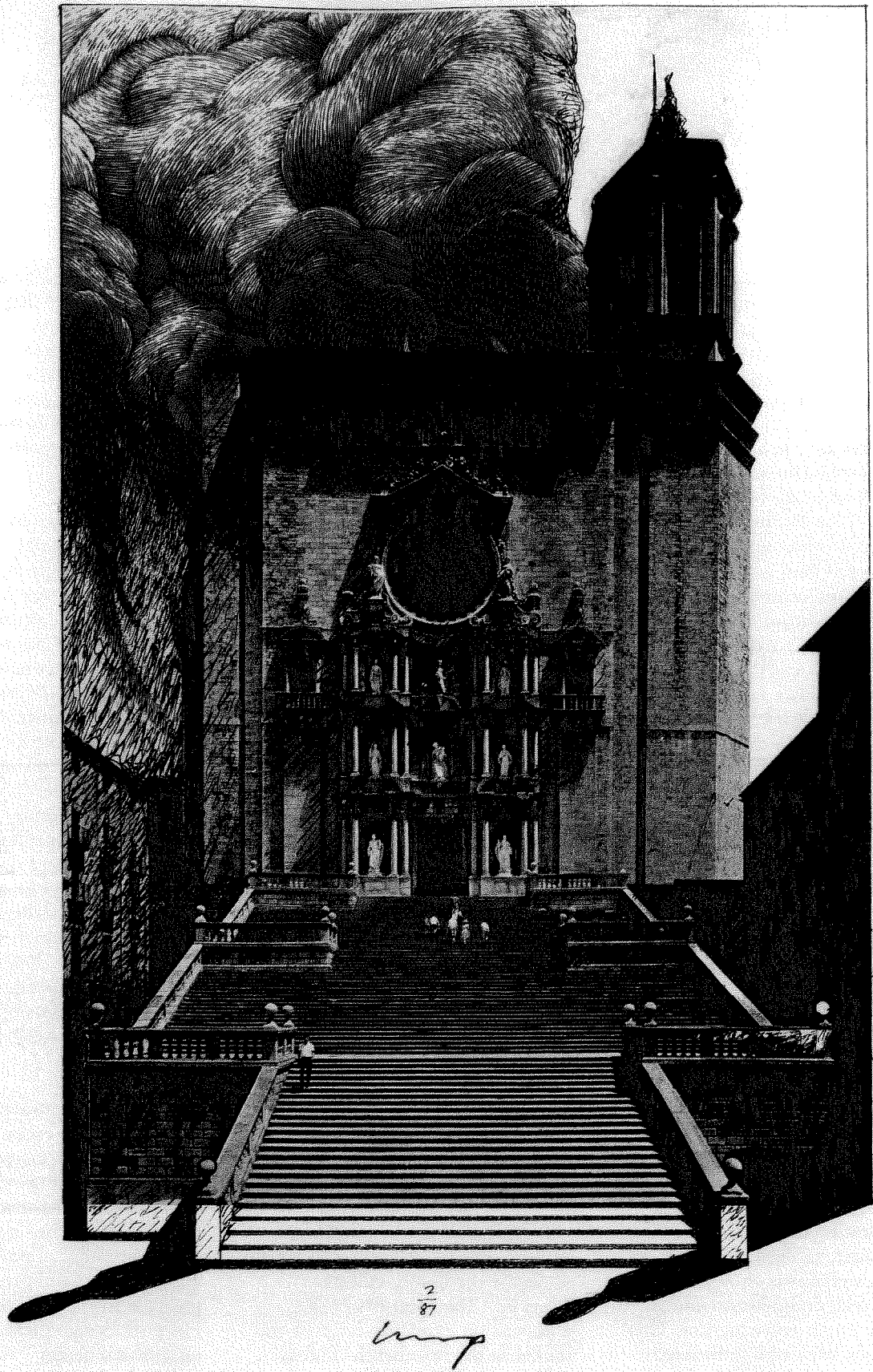
However, this new urban

presence can only incidentally be apprehended through reasoning—primarily, it is felt in the gut like the way our organs are pulled by gravity in a fast-moving elevator ascending towards the thirtieth floor of a skyscraper. No loss of symbolic importance of architecture can take this most fundamental experience of presence away from us. When the good Bishop slipped the giant stair into the Placa de la Catedral, he dropped a large rock in our experiential stomach. Not even the ear-shattering noise from a blue car struggling up the narrow street towards the Placa Apostols and the stars beyond manage to displace the weight of the steps.

There is, of course, a conspiracy against such ineffable experiences in modern culture since they fall through the Cartesian net. Curiously enough, these gastronomic forms of architectural experience are for all of us, regardless of class or creed, provided of course that we are willing to go to Gerona instead of Paris or Barcelona.

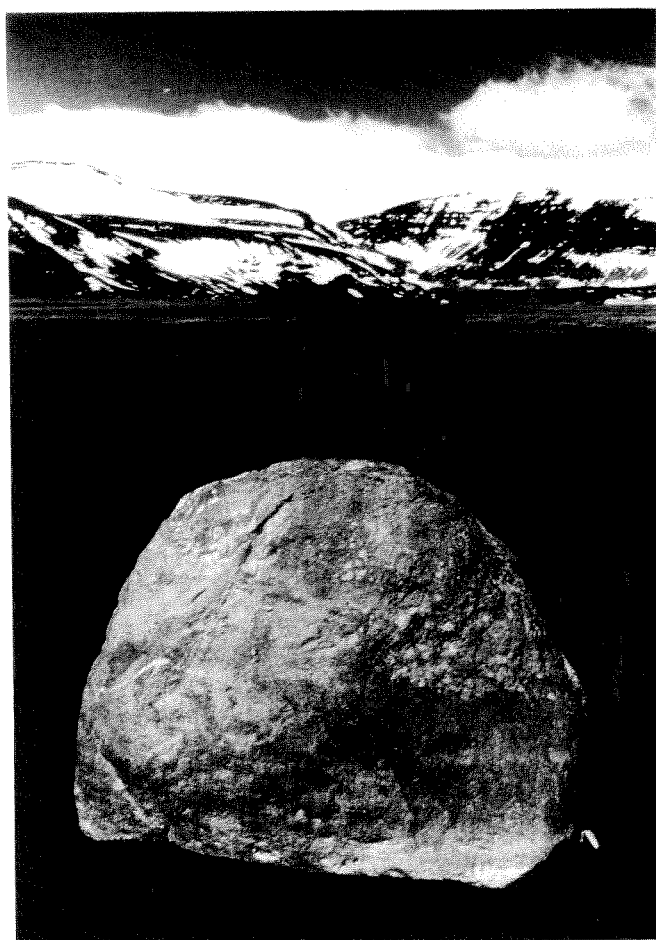
For us, the stairs show clearly that by changing only one parameter in the type-object complex, common stairs can surreptitiously, on the wings of blue cars, slip into the stratosphere of architectural glory.





A Nomad Among Builders

Michael Auping



W A T E R
S T O N E

A Walk to the Summit of Dranga Jokull At The Time of the Full Moon

Holmavik to Holmavik Northwest Iceland the First Seven Days of June 1985

I **Water Stone, 1985; A Walk
to the Summit of Dranga
Jokull at the Time of the
Full Moon**

There is something venerable about the nomad, moving across the surface of the planet with no need to take possession of it. For such peoples, architecture has a unique meaning. It is often impermanent, collapsible, and mobile, not a monument to colonization or a system of controlling a place. In this sense architecture is not a “thing” but a temporary state of being. The English artist Hamish Fulton has for almost two decades attempted to make an art that parallels this state. In working with nature as subject, Fulton’s approach is not one of displacement and construction but a nomadic odyssey that embraces a spiritual sense of place.

Since 1969 Hamish Fulton’s art has stemmed from walks he has taken in the landscape. He represents these walks through the combined mediums of words and photographs, his reaction to the character of the landscape determining the length of the walk and the number of photographs made during the journey. He tends to distill his experience of a walk into precise images, often representing a journey with a single photograph placed behind glass in a large, dark wood frame. Each of the photographs is set in a mat, upon which is printed a text giving factual information about the walk and brief details of the experience culled from an ongoing diary. These are essentially country walks, but they take place on what seems a McLuhanesque scale. Over the past decade or so, Fulton has walked literally thousands of miles in Nepal, India,

Bolivia, Canada, Peru, Iceland, England, Scotland, America, Mexico, Australia, France, and Italy.

Fulton’s art was initially inspired by his interest in the American Indian. In a recent letter, he stated specifically that it was his admiration for two books he read on the subject in 1962—*Black Elk Speaks* by J. G. Neihardt and *Wooden Leg* by T. B. Marquis—that led to a 1969 trip to the United States. Fulton’s interest in the American Indian remains a guiding force in his art, and one of his ambitions is to produce an extended series on the American Indian and “their landscape.”¹

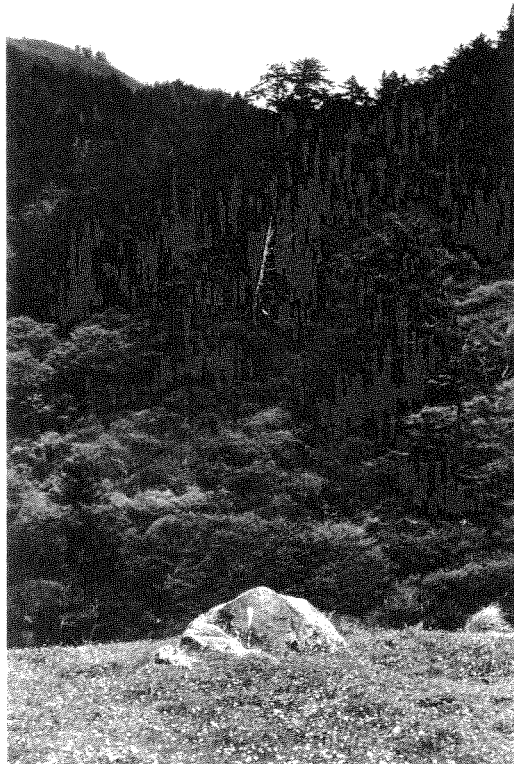
Fulton is not, however, a twentieth-century version of the Victorian voyager who transported easels and sketchbooks to the far corners of the world in search of the exotic native, unpoisoned by civilization. He is familiar with the plight of the American Indian and is clearly moved by it, although his art is certainly not—in any direct sense at least—a political comment about it. Rather, the American Indian exists as a kind of latent image in all of Fulton’s works, a metaphor for a more spiritual and symbiotic relationship with nature.

What Fulton envies in American Indian culture, or that of the Australian Aboriginal, is the lack of a monumental architecture mediating between these people and their natural environment. For such cultures, the land is not to be captured but followed judiciously if not spiritually. Fulton recently sent

me the following quotation of Narritjin Maymura, an Australian Aboriginal, in response to a question about the inspirational sources for his art:

We belong to the ground
It is our power and we must stay
Close to it or maybe
We will get lost²

For Fulton, this philosophy is expressed most poignantly in the simple act of walking. He sees walking as the central aspect of his art. “No walk, no work”³ has been one of his maxims. In Fulton’s art, walking is presented as one man’s most basic dialogues with nature, a dialogue not coincidentally central to the nomadic peoples who have helped inspire his art. Fulton does not approach nature as “landscape,” in the traditional sense of a still image, but as a physical experience. The texts that accompany his photographs relay both the time, distance, and, in a number of cases, the condition of a walk. Time is compared to distance, which is measured in relationship to terrain and weather. The interpretation of nature, the reasons he chooses to photograph particular images, is a direct result of his physical involvement with it. As he moves, each footstep is a form of measurement that mediates between his body and the landscape. When Fulton takes his photographs, he is not separated from the “scenery” as it were; he is walking through it, incorporated into it. Thus the different types of terrain become a crucial element of chance in the work, determining the



B I R D
R O C K

A VIEW EAST (ORIGINAL: 1981) ON THE MOUNT OF THE BIRD ROCK, MOUNTAIN, NEW YORK

2 Bird Rock, 1982. Photograph
courtesy of John Weber Gallery,
New York

length of the walk, the direction and the number of photographs taken. Fulton has commented, “My work is about nature and it seems proper to allow nature to determine events en route.”⁴

Neither does Fulton always present us with the grand view. His works reveal nature as an expanding process or situation that is just as faithfully represented by a modest but meaningful detail as it is in the dramatic panorama. This is to say, of course, that nature is essentially a state of mind. If many of Fulton’s photographs have an almost déjà vu quality—no matter how foreign the subject—it is perhaps because they operate on one level like mirrors. By forcing a long leap of imagination from art object to “place,” Fulton helps connect us with our past experiences of landscape and ultimately with our feelings about nature in general. The work reflects back on a very primal instinct, perhaps to what Hugh Honour has referred to as “The Morality of Landscape.”⁵ In one sense, this morality may be generated by thoughts of a pre-agricultural stage of civilization which Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed to be the “state least subject to revolutions, the best state for man.”⁶

In this nuclear era, Rousseau’s sentiments take on an even greater poignancy. In twentieth-century America, nature and Indian culture have in some respects been relegated to the status of fragile artifacts, in need of protection by (from?) the federal government. In a sense, the history of Fulton’s native



AN ELEVEN DAY ROAD WALK FROM THE NORTH COAST TO THE SOUTH COAST OF IRELAND JULY 1985

3

3 An Eleven Day Road Walk from the North Coast to the South Coast of Ireland, July 1985. Photograph courtesy of John Weber Gallery, New York

predecessors, perhaps yet to be written, is a metaphor for the collision between nature (the American Indian) and a possessive architecture of technology and politics (the United States Army, the government). In his walks, Fulton is still coping with this collision. Conspicuously (and poetically) absent from his works is reference to the colonizing realities of buildings, four-wheel drive trucks, snowmobiles, or aircraft.

The United States today represents one of the most dynamic clashes between nature and culture (Yosemite National Park vs. New York City, the John Muir Trail vs. the Los Angeles freeway system, and so on). The ecological movement notwithstanding, Americans have become used to, if not comfortable with, these dynamics. They have certainly provided inspiration and challenge for the American artist, particularly those working outdoors over the last decade or so, during which time the American landscape became part of the pioneering avant garde movement known as Earth Art. Landscape ceased to be simply metaphoric images but a material to physically manipulate via pneumatic drills and bulldozers, the artist, the architect, and the industrialist working simultaneously “developing” the American landscape. Michael Heizer, who has created a number of large, outdoor works in the southwestern United States, has said, “The work I’m doing has to be done, and somebody has to do it . . . We live in an age of the 747 aircraft, the

moon rocket . . . so you must make a certain type of art.”⁷ Robert Smithson, generally considered the patriarch of the genre, also dealt with the larger concept of nature from an essentially entropic-rational-Western approach. He could see bulldozers as twentieth-century dinosaurs, small pawns in a huge, spiraling universe of disintegration and change.

Fulton’s impression of the land is, by comparison, ghostlike. While Heizer and Smithson chose to rearrange the landscape, Fulton prefers that the landscape impose itself on him. Avoiding alteration of place, the photographs document his attraction for “unspoiled” landscape and the fact that “he was there.” Fulton agrees with the idea that the only things you should take out of the landscape are photographs and the only things you should leave are footprints.

Hamish Fulton is suspect of the notion of manifest destiny and the idea of man balancing nature through his own control. In Fulton’s art, pastoral landscape appears as a microcosm in a state of grace. Be it Transcendentalist, Far Eastern, Aboriginal, or American Indian in philosophy—all of which Fulton has acknowledged as inspirational—the work projects a sense of the mystery, intimacy, and nobility of nature, elevating those feelings close to a level of spirituality. Fulton has said, “Being in nature for me is direct religion.”⁸

Notes

- 1 Undated letter to the author, received May 1984.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Conversation with the artist, October 1981.
- 4 Words by Peter Turner, “An Interview with Hamish Fulton,” *Landscape Theory* (New York: Lustrum Press, 1980), p. 81.
- 5 Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 57.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 7 John Gruen, “Michael Heizer: ‘You Might Say I’m in the Construction Business,’” *Artnews* (December 1977), p. 98.
- 8 Michael Auping, “An Interview with Hamish Fulton,” *Common Ground: Five Artists in the Florida Landscape* (Sarasota: Ringling Museum of Art, 1982), p. 86.

The Presence of Absence: Places by Extraction

Marc Treib

Every act of design is first an act of disturbance. Whether the preexisting field is natural or contrived, construction must necessarily disturb that which has been. The term *disturbance* should not be regarded negatively, however, since in this broader sense disturbance can actually improve the existing state or provide an equally appropriate alternative.

Psychology tells us that we first perceive by contrast: we read the outline of the tree before we discern the color and shape of its leaves; we note the presence of the sound before we ascertain the rise and fall of its melody. Perception is at least a twofold process: the first stage is an awareness; the second attends more directly to the particular stimulus.¹ In staking out our place in the world, we begin by reforming the prevalent order as a means of overlaying significance onto that terrain.² Disturbance, whether by adding or subtracting from the landscape, is the first realization of environmental design.

In the developed world, we tend to regard construction primarily as an act of displacement. The mass of a building occupies real space in the wilderness by replacing rocks, trees, or earth; in the city, buildings replace other buildings or open space. But there is an



1

1 Tatra Mountains, Poland, 1969

The rectangular clearing and the hard forest edge brought one's perception of the landscape into consciousness.

2 Naiku (Inner Shrine), Ise, Japan, fifth century A.D., with 1973 rebuilding

Although the wooden structures and concentric fences overlay the sanctified space, the primary act of place-making is the removal of the trees. Photograph courtesy MIT Press.

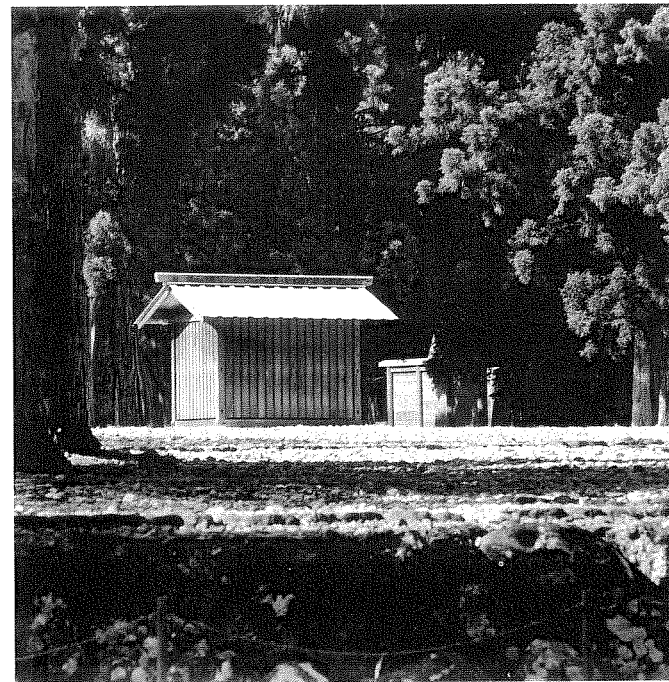
3 Geku (Outer Shrine), Ise

Alternate site. Lining the forest floor with white gravel distinguishes the rectangle of the zone from its surroundings. Note that certain trees remain within the purity of the geometric figure.

**Photographs by Marc Treib
unless noted**



2



3

alternate way of looking at architecture and place demarcation. Instead of adding more elements to the site, let us consider removing material from it and rearranging that material already present. Perhaps by looking obliquely at the more common process of addition, we can more readily accept an existing condition as worthy of continuance or build for an economically greater return.³

The power of absence does not depend on a conscious aesthetic intention. High in the Tatra mountains, on the border between Poland and Czechoslovakia, evergreen forests blanket the slopes and normally read merely as the articulated texture of the hillside. On the road toward the small lake at the mountain's summit, the tree cover remains a background presence. Rounding a critical bend, a rectangular clearing in the conifer blanket brings the terrain into the foreground of consciousness for the first time. The tandem pairing of the visually jumbled natural order with the contrived regularity of human intention is manifest in the play between the irregular spacing of the trees and the clarity of their removal. The power emanating from that rectangle is intense, informing simultaneously the unpredictable composition of the forest and the metamorphosis of the clearing from a negative to a

positive statement. Grass emerges the equal of conifers.

In the forest, the dense, inarticulate texture of the trees provides the basic ground against which design intention must be measured. In Japan, forests blanket the vast majority of the land surface, the valleys and the plains but especially the mountain slopes. During the early centuries of the Christian era, the hegemony of the Yamato clan consolidated on the land around what today is Nara and Kyoto. The gradual separation of the practice of Shinto religion from the person of the reigning chieftain—in time, the emperor—necessitated religious structures distinct from residential types. Although the high shrine style did derive from archaic storehouse forms, the disposition of the shrine precinct drew upon principles of geometric order foreign to the indigenous, topographically derived, precedents.⁴

The Shinto deities dwell in places at times announced by unusual geographic features. Shrine architecture taps upon and articulates the power of the site rather than creating an internalized sanctuary representative of Christian tradition. At the Shinto shrine all visitors pass through the sanctified precinct, but the most sacred celebrants alone are privy to

the interior of the centermost structures. To differentiate the zone of the shrine, the order of the site is consciously disturbed, a practice common to many peoples throughout the world. “When the sacred manifests itself into any hierophany,” explained Mircea Eliade, “there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world.”⁵

At the Ise shrines, since the fifth century continually reconstructed in almost the exact form every twenty years, the first act is to clear and demarcate a zone within the forest. The pure geometry of the rectangular site—divided into two sites and built on in alternating cycles—is softened by the native Japanese acceptance of natural incident. Some trees remain within the cleared field or on its perimeter. Geometry is not taken as a pure abstraction but becomes instead an abstract ordering tempered by the particularities of the site’s topography and the great cryptomeria forest. Carpeting the rectangular zone, white gravel reinforces the definition of its limits by vividly contrasting its texture and brilliance to the soft earthen and needle-covered forest floor.

From this point, the operations become more architectural, adding in concentric layers an arrangement of four fences of varying density and building the wooden shrine structures themselves. In many ways these buildings are secondary to the primary definition of the sites at Ise. More than any other single act, the removal of the preexisting forest—disturbance—heightens the presence of the sacred space.

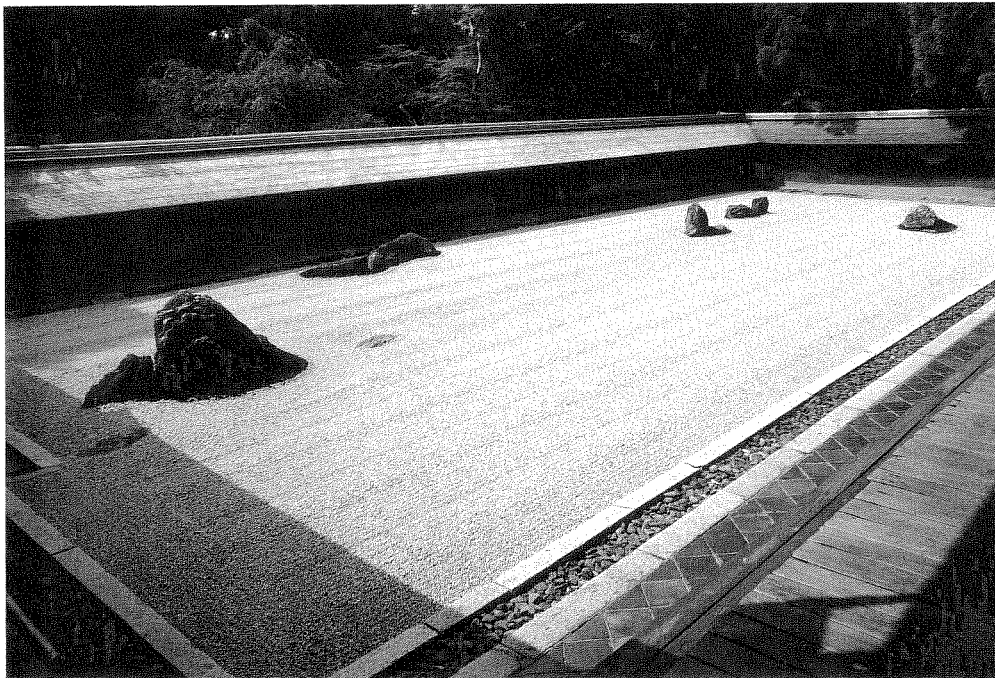
The Shinto tradition of suggestion has continued into the modern era. One can conceive of absence as omission or one can think of it as abstraction. Normally we consider dry gardens such as the famous rock garden of Ryoan-ji (ca. 1499, with later modifications) in Kyoto as absence: only gravel, moss, and fifteen monumental stones comprise the essence of this landscape. In looking at the sheet of gravel and the subjects embedded in its surface, we tend to think of it two-dimensionally, that is, as a plane. One must, however, consider the garden in context. Seen against the surrounding earthen wall, the flowering cherry trees just beyond the garden, the maples that assume brilliant colors in autumn, and most of all the adjacent hillsides, the rock garden is less a single plane and more a spatial void, as Ise is the void in the forest. In Zen, the tradition of the *yuniwa*, the

4 Ryoan-ji, Kyoto, Japan,
ca. 1499, with later
modifications

The garden clearly reads as a void against its vegetative and topographic backdrop.

5 Ryoan-ji. The fifteen rocks that comprise the subject of the garden also articulate the presence of the ground.

4
5



gravel field,⁶ thrived beyond the confines of Shinto and has become a basic element of the Japanese garden vocabulary.

The act of extraction at Ise was intended for perceptual effect. At other sites the landforms are the trace of prior use; like the forest cut in the Tatras, they are not necessarily aesthetically intentioned. The peat bog on the Shetland Islands, for example, are distributed in rectangular lots: the peat from the bogs is incised, removed, and burned in rectangular blocks. The extraction of the peat, each slab following a relatively constant dimension in thickness, depth, and width, over time creates a negative, rectilinear pit, a continually varying relief that unconsciously maps the removal of a natural resource. The grass triumphs in the summer months when the reduced need for heating fuel allows it to integrate the cuts into an abstract relief of blocky, irregularly stepped contour, both soft and hard at the same time.

Here sight parallels sound. At times it is silence rather than noise that exerts the greater presence. Indeed, the Japanese say that a whisper can be heard when a shout cannot. Composer John Cage once stated that “the music never stops, we just stop listening.” Thus, it is natural, rather than completely ironic, that the composer

entitled a book of his writings *Silence*. Cage, who has been influenced by Asian religion and aesthetics as well as Western mysticism, also created a piece entitled *4'33"*, "a silent piece in three movements."⁷ Of course, there is no true silence; Cage is telling us that we will always hear something, if nothing other than normal surroundings of our lives that ordinarily are left unheard or the pulsing of our own blood in our bodies. Absence is presence in his music: "We are in the presence not of a work of art which is a thing but of an action which is implicitly nothing," Cage wrote about the music of Morton Feldman. "Nothing has been said. Nothing is communicated. And there is no use of symbols or intellectual references. No thing in life requires a symbol since it is clearly what it is: a visible manifestation of an invisible nothing."⁸ Similarly, there are no visual silences in the environment. By simplifying, by abstracting, we may focus but we may never reach point zero.

During the 1960s a number of artists left the confines of the art gallery to create works in open space. To some of these artists, to create works that could not be purchased was a political statement against treating the art object as yet another commodity of capitalist society. But questions of scale and content also occupied



6

6 Peat Bogs, Shetland Islands, Great Britain, 1969

In time grass covers the site, transforming the excavations into a rectilinear relief, the record of human activity.

7 Isolated Mask Circumflex, Massacre Dry Lake, Nevada, 1968. Michael Heizer.

The artist terms this "drawing" in the desert's surface sculpture with the weight removed." Photograph courtesy of Xavier Fourcade, Inc.



central positions in the conception of these works. Robert Smithson directed us to re-examine the quotidian environment—often taken as ugly—to expose a reality fraught with considerable power and aesthetic possibilities.⁹ Sculptors such as Michael Heizer have depicted the order of situation through the structure of their works. Heizer's series of excavated displacements, for example, were created by removing portions of the desert floor, reforming the surface into a noticeable configuration while unveiling the geologic composition below the surface. For Heizer, "the subject matter of sculpture is the object itself, sculpture is the study of objects." But, "a statement about anything physical becomes a statement about its presence." The "drawings" (*Nine Nevada Depressions*, late 1960s) engraved in the desert floor are "sculptures with weights removed."¹⁰

Double Negative (1967–1970) is the largest of Heizer's works in the Nevada desert: two mammoth straight channels in a mesa that align across the irregular, eroded edge of a cliff. To make the cuts, bulldozers scraped two sloped ramps, each incision pushing deeper below the Earth's rocky surface, dumping the excavated material over the edge in a manner paralleling Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown*

(Rome, 1969).¹¹ The residue of Heizer's process is a broken spatial channel approached by ramps at either end. As one descends the ramp, the desert disappears and in its place, like a pair of gargantuan blinders, the sides of the cut rock rise into one's consciousness. The unreinforced sides of the channels expose the sedimentary strata and reveal the effect of time on the development of the land. In the descent, one is, in effect, traveling backward in geologic time, while one's view is focused across the opening toward the reciprocal void. In this work, the sculptor has done little more than disturb the condition of mesa edge; the straight cuts betray the human presence as the strata elucidate the geology.

Richard Serra's *Casting* (1969) was created by slinging molten lead against the intersection of a wall and floor. As the metal cooled, the sculptor pulled it from the intersection which had become its form. The piece's configuration—the straight edge and the rough edge, the irregular grain produced by the successive throws—lucidly recorded the process of its making. Serra regarded the room as the negative, using the mold for his positive casting.¹² Heizer, on the other hand, saw the desert as a positive from which he removed two linear sections to create a



8

8, 9 Double Negative, Mormon
Mesa, Nevada, 1967–1970.
Michael Heizer
The sculpture is created solely
by removal or displacement:
two aligned cuts into the mesa
edge are linked visually.
Photograph courtesy of Xavier
Fourcade, Inc.



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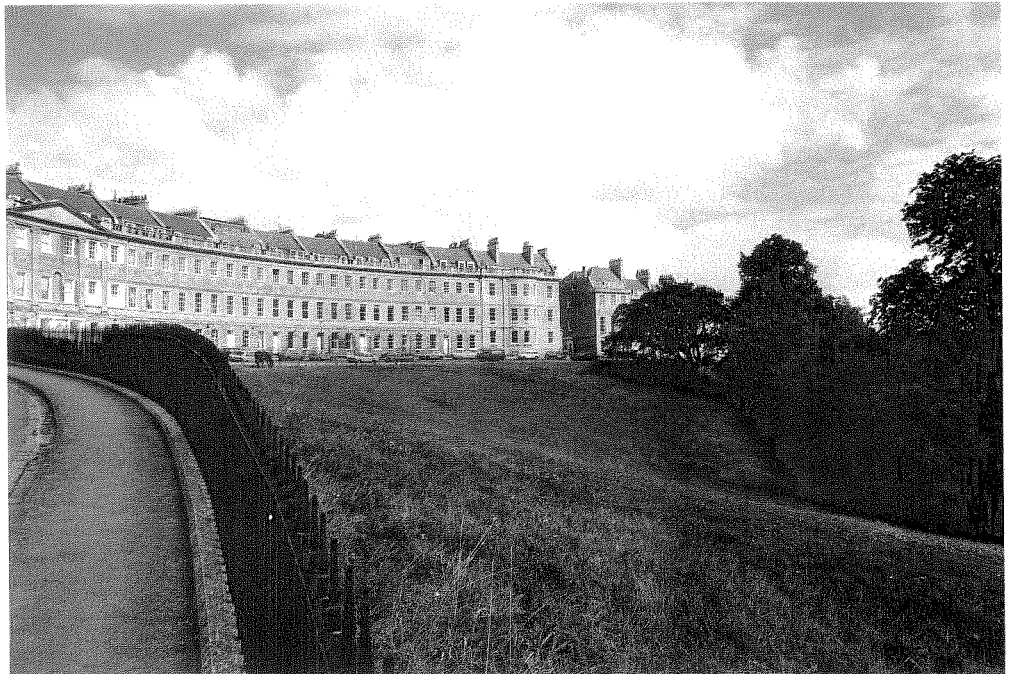
prescribed void. It is just that absence of the rock in *Double Negative* that creates its vitality.

While we read certain urban open spaces as positives, we read others as voids. John Wood the Elder's Queen's Square (1736) or John Palmer's Lansdown Crescent (1793) at Bath wrap new architecture around air to form places. Although one may feel that they are only as deep as the buildings themselves—open places girdled by buildings—the spaces and the architecture that define them may yet read as positives.

In contrast, there are urban spaces that thunder as voids: the noise of silence, the power of absence. The populace must have read the drastic cuts of Haussmann's Parisian renovations or the *sventramenti* of Mussolini's Rome in just that way: brutal incisions on the body of the city whose new order defied the existing texture like the great high-voltage easements that cut mercilessly through the forests. Mussolini, an impressive and powerful orator, also understood the manipulation of spatial context. His redevelopment projects often called for the isolation of ancient monuments in their "necessary solitude" to heighten both their presence and the role of the present in the sweep of Roman history.¹³

Of all the world's urban spaces, perhaps none reads more powerfully than the justifiably oft-mentioned "drawing room of Europe": the Piazza San Marco. Populating the Venetian lagoon was a trying task, and dwellings, churches, and other structures came to occupy every available square meter of dry land. Only the *campo* around which a neighborhood centered and narrow paths remained between the densely packed structures. While there are many *campi*, there is only one great piazza. Fronting the basilica and linked perpendicularly to its smaller piazzetta, the Piazza San Marco appears as a vacant site awaiting to be filled. One feels the tension, the long *procuratie* wings acting as retaining walls against the thrust of urban development. Like the police cordon, they hold the city at bay, allowing the crowds to gather on the piazza, to promenade, to view the church, deal, have coffee, or watch the pigeons. In a manner that recalls the extraction from the forest at Ise, the Piazza San Marco appears as a removal from its urban fabric, in feeling if not in historical fact.

The power of absence is felt in varying contexts. We notice for the first time certain structures when they have been torn down for a parking lot or when the site is vacant, awaiting construction. Like the



11

10





12

10 Lansdown Crescent, Bath,
Great Britain, 1789–1793.
John Palmer
The building wraps the air to
enclose space, but one sense
that the architectural definition
is thin.

11 Via dell'Impero, Rome,
under construction.
Demolitions at the Markets of
Trajan, ca. 1930. Photograph:
Museo di Roma, courtesy of
Spiro Kostof

12 Piazza San Marco, Venice,
Italy
One feels the tension along the
space's outer edge, which
acquires the role of retaining
wall against the pressure of
urban development just beyond
the square.

exaggerated sense of the
missing tooth, one becomes
more aware after it has been
extracted. Departure from
the normal order, whether
it be construction in the
natural setting or destruction
in the urban environment,
controls our attention. We
can focus only on the void,
at times forgetting the
subject that has been
removed.

One artist concerned with
calculated removal was
Gordon Matta-Clark
(1943–1978). Matta-Clark's
late work provided
conceptual transparency in
an opaque environment.
Using a chain saw to cut
through structures—usually
buildings marked for
demolition—Matta-Clark
simultaneously revealed the
building physiognomy while
formulating new spaces
comprised of the voids.
Perhaps his most powerful
work was *Circus* (1978),
also called *The Caribbean
Orange*, which was cut from
a structure to be renovated
adjacent to the Museum of
Contemporary Art in
Chicago. By cutting through
the floors and walls in a
series of varying shapes
based on the arc, the
composite space emerged,
distorting and billowing
as it traversed the derelict
structure's three floors.

His was a conjuring trick,
making three-dimensional
spaces using two-dimensional
layers of space. Judith

Kirshner wrote the following about Matta-Clark's sculpture:

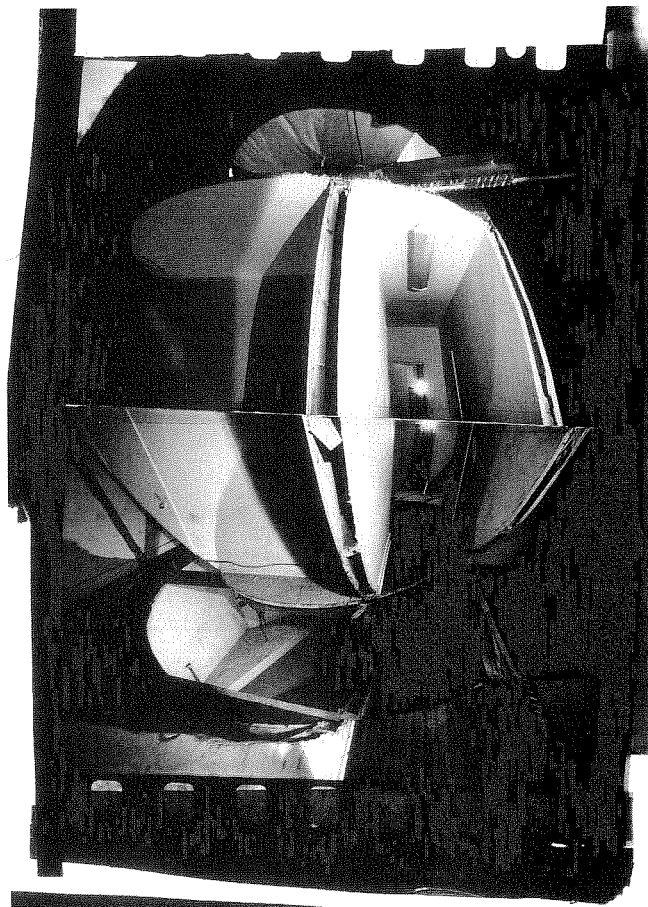
Like spiral forms, the dynamic volumes Matta-Clark carved in these last major works gave the feeling of being endless. They eluded comprehension as one passed haltingly through the spaces, climbing up and down, walking to and fro, even jumping as one looked. On the third floor of *Circus*, a truncated section of a sphere, a circle of Sheetrock with a door in the center, was dramatically suspended as if to defy gravity, architectural reason, and visual understanding. Matta-Clark often spoke of the apprehension of his multilayered works being dependent on recollection, of the impossibility of their being instantly assimilated.

This, however, was no cause for despair: "of course, it recognized that fragments can be more telling than totalities."¹⁴

We have all seen urban wall remnants upon which the records of the once-abutting spaces have been deposited on the party walls of their neighbors. The incongruence of residual ceramic tile, the curiously tinted plaster surfaces floating on brick, or the fragments of residual concrete overlay scale and history to the normally blank walls that turn away from the street. Matta-Clark's

work provides us a similar chronicle of building history, but he augments residue with a vision of the positive void that charges through floor planes, claiming space and identity. Incisions reactivate memory, proving that the power of the void can supersede architecture's repository of pragmatics.

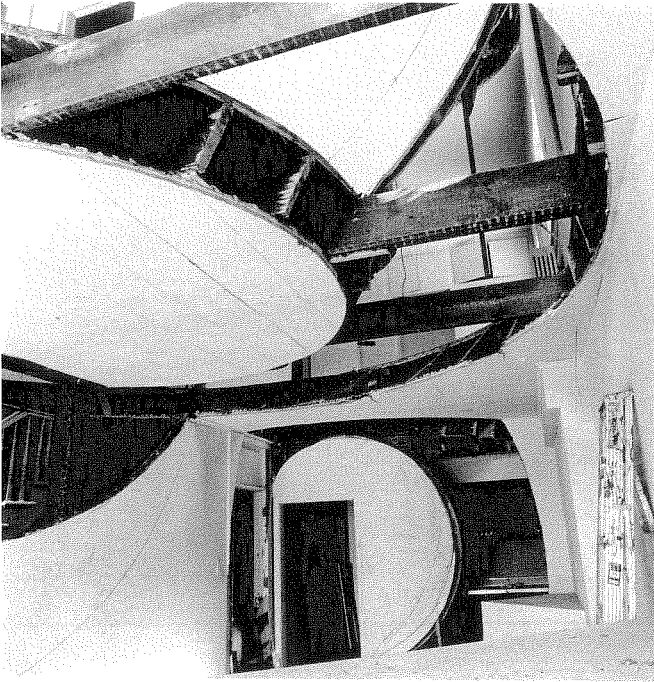
The act of construction is an act of covering, each addition overlays an existing formal condition and grants it a new configuration. Enclosure usually disguises structure, a favorite target of modernism's call for truth in building. Memory, too, plays a role in creating the presence of absence, for we must know or remember what has been before we can fully comprehend what is now. Perhaps this need for recall engages us in a more active discourse than those acts of addition normal to architectural construction. The void induces us to participate in ways that the solid cannot. Intrigued, we question just what is going on here, just what has changed, just what is different in the picture. Party walls exposed after building demolition tell us—in section—the story of the building now passed, rendered transparent for the first time since it was enclosed by the act of construction. Demolition can serve as an act of revelation. Gordon Matta-Clark and Michael Heizer, in their sculptures, clarify by



13

13, 14 *Circus* (or *The Caribbean Orange*) Chicago, 1978. Gordon Matta-Clark. The sculpture was created by selectively removing portions of a structure slated for renovation. Spatial figure and sculptural definition derive from conceptually traversing cuts into the wall and floor planes. Photograph courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

15 *Demolished building site*, Berkeley, California, 1987



14



15

“dis-discovery” and provide us with a lens with which to see, as if enlarged, the world we usually pass without notice.

Notes

- 1 See Ulrich Neisser, *Cognition and Reality: Principles and Implications of Cognitive Psychology* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976).
- 2 Marc Treib, “Traces Upon the Land: The Formalist Landscape” *Architectural Association Quarterly*, no. 4 (1979).
- 3 Economy here should be distinguished from cheap. Cheap refers to the lowest possible cost in spite of return; economy is the greatest return for the amount of resources invested.
- 4 See Günter Nitschke, “Ma: The Japanese Sense of Place” *Architectural Design* (May 1966).
- 5 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), p. 21.
- 6 See Teiji Itoh, *The Japanese Garden* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 142–147; and Marc Treib and Ron Herman, *A Guide to the Gardens of Kyoto* (Tokyo: Shufunotomo Publishing, 1980), pp. 4–6.
- 7 Anne d’Harnoncourt, *John Cage: Scores and Prints* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982). Unpaginated.
- 8 John Cage, “Lecture on Something” (1959), in *Silence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), p. 136.
- 9 Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (1967), in *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), pp. 52–57.
- 10 Michael Heizer, Interview, in Julia Brown, ed., *Michael Heizer: Sculpture in Reverse* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp. 30–31.
- 11 *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, pp. 192–193. Both works involve the residue of spillage and therefore are physically related, but more importantly, both concern the process of entropy and its effect on sculpture.
- 12 See Clara Weyergraf, *Richard Serra: Interviews, Etc., 1970–1980* (Yonkers, NY: The Hudson River Museum, 1980); and Rosalind Krauss, *Richard Serra/Sculpture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1986).
- 13 Spiro Kostof, *The Third Rome: 1870–1950: Traffic and Glory* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1973).
- 14 Judith Russi Kirshner, “Non-uments” *Artforum* (October 1985), p. 103. See also Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), especially pp. 112–130.

Thomas Jefferson's Body

David H. Bell



I View along Lawn's east portico to the break in continuity just past Pavilion VI. Photograph by Marc Treib.

Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia is cited often in architectural discussion as both a typological paragon and instantly acceptable precedent. Such normative contemporary notions of this work, as useful as they may be, ultimately indicate a rather shallow understanding of what it is. I believe Jefferson's purposes in the design and building of the University were beyond architecture as it is almost universally practiced today and hence assert his purposes in making this complex were to embody himself architecturally in the landscape he loved so dearly.¹ It would be precipitous to read this embodiment simply as an act of self-glorification by Jefferson; better to understand it as a gesture of mythic poetry. Of course, this all sounds cloyingly romantic to us cynics of the late-twentieth century. However, it is important to realize that the making of this place was the product not only of an idea that had persisted in him for almost forty years, but the culmination of his entire life, a life spent in pursuit of a rapprochement between multifaceted humanity and the natural world. His unique vision saw that the United States promised all its inhabitants the possibility of achieving the difficult but productive balance between individual desires, human institutions and the vast, raw American landscape, that is, Nature. The continuous

fulfillment of this promise, for Jefferson, could only be predicated on a citizenry that had in varying degrees a critical/practical education founded on the Enlightenment's marriage of empiricism and rationalism. His University, backed by his proposal for an extensive state education system, was the medium through which he believed all these values could be materially manifested for the country's future leaders.

In any of his enterprises Jefferson's greatest strength was his willingness or perhaps natural predisposition to accept, work with and make something out of seemingly irreconcilable situations. He believed firmly that by engaging fully and directly the mysteries and complexities of the world the individual could determine and establish his or her own place within it. Thought and action, knowledge and sensation were intimately related through the human body; these traits and beliefs underwrote his life-long desires to mediate the individual, human institutions and the natural world alluded to above. The University's buildings and grounds thus embody not only Jefferson but each of us who experiences them. Our understanding of this architectural situation comes about through our gestures, movements, senses, intellect and the tentative, diffuse connection of these through

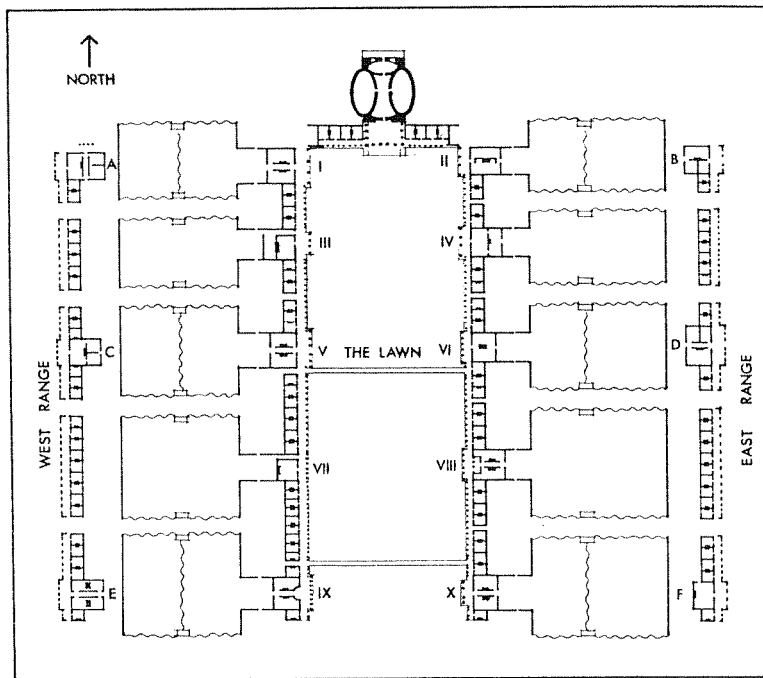
the body. It is a place resistive to a comprehensive perspectival understanding from a privileged viewpoint. It demands one's presence in it and, at the very least, one's movement through it. Such movement is both provoked and induced by the manifold lapses, breaks, inconsistencies, problematic connections, evanescent and drifting unities that pervade its architecture and might constitute Jefferson's attitude toward making architecture, which he once summarized: "It gives the greatest joy to build up and tear down."² The tentative, fluid sense suggested by this statement inhabits his University's architecture. Viewed as a geographical feature, the complex of Jefferson's University of Virginia is an assertive, extroverted and proud statement of a liberated, energetic humanity woven into the landscape as an intricate textile of spaces. This extrovertedness at the large scale is countered by innumerable, more introverted, small-scale spatial nuances. The scales constantly reciprocate with one another and the spaces themselves are expressed by the careful mediation of the individual's direct experience with both the natural and domesticated landscapes. These spaces in between along with various "unnoticed" architectural events of the University, constitute the fabric of this place as much as its architectural monuments. It

is to these former two that I wish here to direct attention.

The *individual* inhabitants of the residential quarters, which line the Lawn and the Ranges, approach the natural world directly and frontally but always through a long portico defined by a continuous screen of either columns or arches. These porticoes physically manifest the public world as variegated promenades. Their perpendicular orientation with respect to the direct connection between the individual and Nature testifies to the perpetual conflict between that individual's cultural and natural selves. The sense of this struggle throughout the entire formal/spatial order of the University—albeit an exercise in Jeffersonian optimism—is virtually unrelenting and belies one's initial impressions of the serenity of this place. Despite Jefferson's admiration for the New England village green's public significance and despite the capaciousness of the Lawn, it appears neither intended for nor does it encourage daily public congregation. This is not to say that the Lawn cannot be so used; it can and has been, but only on relatively rare occasions. The Lawn does not really merge the public world with the natural world, a merger that would comfortably mesh the social and spatial hierarchies implicit in the plan. Rather, it enforces their disjuncture.



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2 View of the Lawn from the portico on the east looking toward Pavilion VII, the first building of the University. Photograph by Marc Treib.

3 Plan of the University of Virginia

4 The edge of the Lawn, the portico and the entry of Pavilion IX. Photograph by Marc Treib.

5 Pavilion IX. Photograph by David Bell.

6 Tenuous connection between Pavilion V and the portico. Photograph by David Bell.

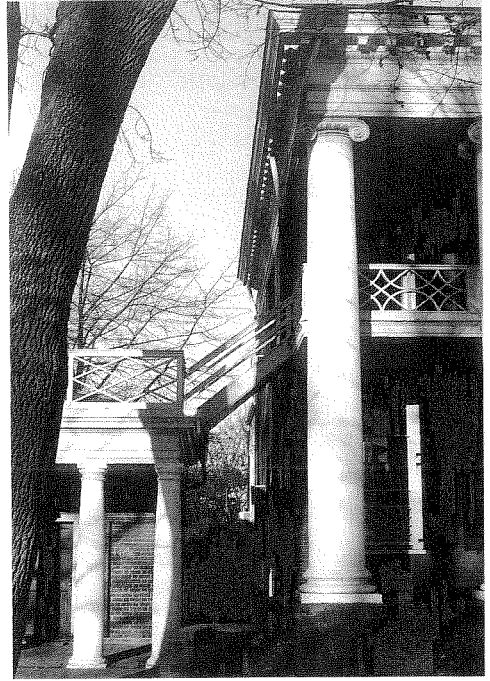
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Far from a weakness in the scheme, it is a significant constituent of its pastoral poetics, because in the recognition of this difference and the questions that arise civilization lies. (As a point of clarification, the south end of the Lawn was originally left open. The natural ha-ha of a wide ravine several hundred yards from the southernmost buildings of its perimeter physically distinguished it from the hills of the surrounding countryside. A building added to the southern edge of this plateau by Stanford White closed off this view and its potent implications.)¹

Looking more closely at the colonnaded porticoes that define the Lawn's east and west boundaries, one is struck by the refinement, or rather proliferation, of the same textile quality of spatial interlocking that structures this scheme in the landscape. Yet, numerous formal problems remain uncomfortably resolved. Although easily dismissed as the obvious mistakes of an amateur, these "flaws" demand appreciation for the qualities they possess instead of those the cognescenti wish they had.⁴ Several different kinds of spatial perceptions result, a few of which I can introduce here. First, there are spaces of multiple boundaries, that is, compounded spaces, of ambiguous, disintegrating perimeters. These spaces can only be read, understood and

appropriated in relative ways. One senses and understands one's presence in any of several spaces simultaneously, all of which differ in scale and other qualities. Consider, for example, the boundary between the portico space in front of Pavilion IX and the Lawn. Is it the colonnade itself or the apron of brick paving that extends beyond it? Each testifies to the various scales at which this building exists in the entire Lawn complex, that is, each pavilion is uniquely identified by a differentiated columnar organization, yet the simple masonry apron constantly extends beyond both the pavilions and their porticoes. This apron is an almost imperceptible but profound datum common to the whole complex. Note, however, that the datum is ultimately discontinuous given the Lawn's two terrace level changes; but it also allows one to stand outside the shelter of the Lawn buildings without standing directly on the Lawn—Nature itself, Jefferson's final datum of human existence. The portico roof of this same pavilion vertically interrupts its hemispherically domed entry alcove. At first glance this alcove space gives the appearance of extending indefinitely above the portico. Moreover, its seeming autonomy with respect to the absolute datum of this roof paradoxically draws it into the larger question of challenging that absolute.

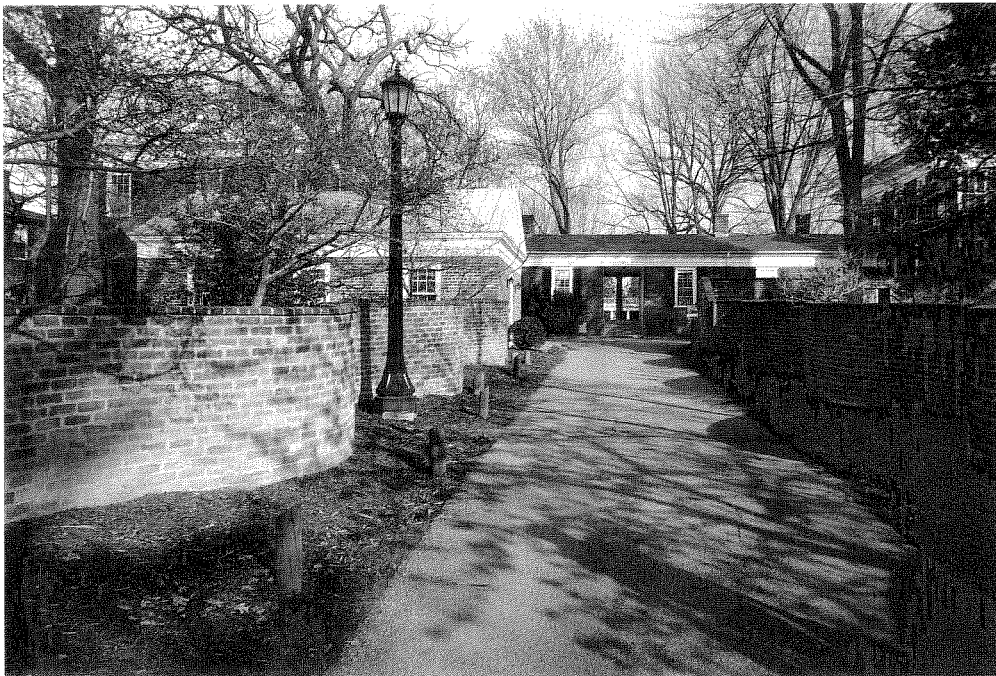
Such peculiar, some would say clumsy, boundary/juncture articulations characterize many of the portico segments between pavilions, for example, at their junctures with pavilions and where they terminate abruptly at a change in terrace level. Connections are made only by the propinquity of their respective architectures.

Further elaborations of these unsettling joints is virtually nonexistent. Consider too the entire length of both porticoes of the Lawn, which is penetrated by a total of seven passages leading from the Lawn. Five of these entail narrow vistas into the greater landscape (four from the east and one from the west, and they only occur where the land falls below the level of the Lawn). Passing any of these openings one may only be peripherally aware of them. Yet a portico column on axis with the center-line of the narrow passage closes these five passages on the Lawn side. The suggestion here of both a preferred direction and a closure, recalls the complex's entire setting and further compounds its spatial fabric.

Beyond the immediate space of the Lawn, boundary walls enclose small gardens behind each of the pavilions. These peculiar serpentine walls take their shape for practical reasons: construction stability and the protection of delicate plants. But their

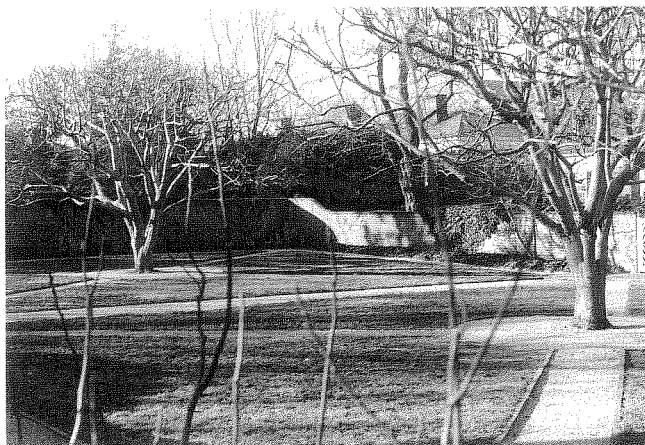
sinusoidal plan form also evokes a diffuse, dynamic, tentative boundary between the gardens. The height of these walls forecloses one's view while seated for a stronger sense of containment and inward focus. When standing up or walking, one can see into the adjacent gardens or the distant landscape, to be aware again of the larger world in which this specific smaller place exists.

Of the engaging puzzles of this place, Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia, the one that permeates its every part asks whether it constitutes a unity suggested by its plan or whether it is a willful assemblage of lyrical fragments. On this matter I defer to Maurice Blanchot, who wrote of poetry: "So the fragmentary poem is not complete, but . . . opens up a different mode of completion: that mode which comes into plan in the form of expectancy, of questioning, or of an affirmation irreducible to unity."⁵



7

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7 View toward Lawn from the east; note portico column silhouetted in the opening. Photograph by Marc Treib.

8 Garden behind one of the Pavilions of the West Lawn. Photograph by David Bell.

Notes

- 1 For a more extended discussion see Alberto Pérez-Gómez, "Architecture as Embodied Knowledge" *JAE* (Spring 1987) and David Bell, "Knowledge and the Middle Landscape: Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia" *JAE* (Winter 1983), pp. 18–26.
- 2 It is worthwhile to note that the eighteenth-century Venetian architectural theorist Carlo Lodoli assumed for himself a similar motto, "to throw down and destroy . . . to plant and to build."
- 3 The host of a recent PBS television series on architecture, when discussing the University of Virginia, stated that the space of the Lawn opened to the west to symbolize Jefferson's dream of westward expansion. This makes interesting, but incorrect speculation.
- 4 See Bell, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–23, for further discussion of these phenomena.
- 5 Blanchot, Maurice *L'Entretien infini* (Paris) 1955. I ran across this quote in Tafuri, Manfredo "Carlo Scarpa and Italian Architecture" in *Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works* Electa/Rizzoli (New York) 1985 p. 77 while I was writing this article on Jefferson. The two architects have struck me as having interesting similarities in their respective approaches to their work.

The Popular Yard

J. B. Jackson

If I were to write a history of American vernacular landscape architecture, I would mention Olmsted for one reason only: he belonged to a generation of designers who redefined the role of landscape architecture. Before their appearance, a garden or a park or even a whole estate was seen as a work of art based on well-established aesthetic principles. By the second half of the nineteenth century, landscape architecture had in part become the art of designing public parks or gardens accessible to all citizens in search of relaxation and sociability in a setting of picturesque greenery.

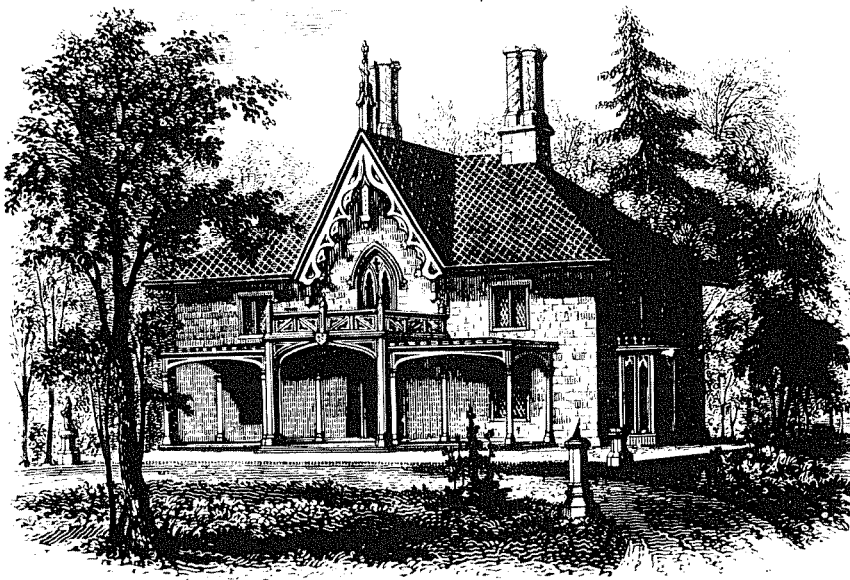
The transition, easy to understand and applaud, took time. Downing, even though he was one of the early

advocates of public parks, still thought of them in terms of art: places where the public could be educated by seeing sculpture and painting and formal garden design. The switch in the definition of the role of landscape architecture first affected the private garden, which had become an environment for informal pleasure before the public park had come into existence.

To people of every age and class, the private garden has always been something to take care of, to study, to design, and to be proud of, and its produce—fruits and flowers and vegetables and herbs—have always been important to the household. Yet I believe that before Andrew Jackson Downing became influential, most Americans took their

garden very solemnly. They saw it as a laboratory and a workshop and a chapel: a secluded place where they spent hours of concentration, labor, reflection, and reverent study. It was probably in the 1830s that Americans first began to derive a new delight from gardening and to think of the garden as an outdoor room, an extension of the house.

There was a difference in how each class reacted to the discovery of the recreational garden. As we know, Downing was fascinated by clients with money and taste. The large villas or houses and the elaborate gardens he designed were for wealthy families who did a great deal of entertaining. The rooms were for the display of handsome furniture and works of art, and the



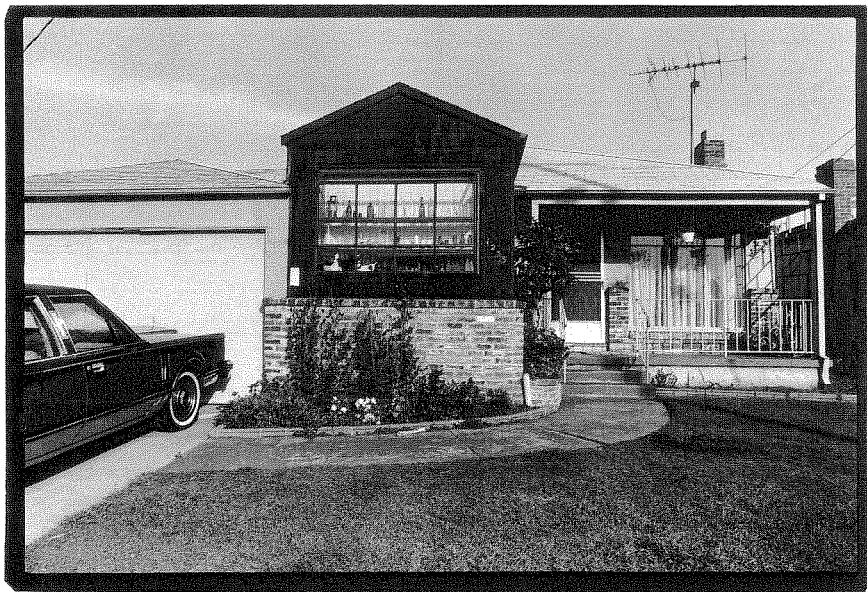
I From a Pattern Book by A. J. Downing; The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum Library: Collection of Printed Books. Courtesy of Dell Upton

romantic landscape, with its wide lawns and exotic plants, was to impress guests with the wealth and refinement of the host. The landscaped garden, for all its would-be natural appearance, was no longer a simple work of art. It had become a kind of botanical museum, a collection of curiosities and surprises that the guests discovered as they admired the view or wandered along the winding paths. Part of this new emphasis on entertainment was the introduction of the games that we still associate with the private lawn: croquet and archery and tennis and bowling and badminton. All these amateur sports appeared in the landscaped gardens of the rich long before they were allowed in public parks.

This ongoing adjustment to circumstances is to be seen in the evolution, over the last hundred years, of the blue-collar home environment. It has been buffeted and transformed not only by changes in taste but by economic and technological factors over which few of us have any control. Let me remind you of what has happened to that very utilitarian, unsightly back yard. The horse has gone, the cow has gone, the chickens have gone thanks to the advent of the automobile, the advent of the supermarket, thanks also to zoning ordinances. The laundromat did away with the clothesline, and the accumulation of trash and garbage has been replaced by the neat black plastic bag deposited at the curb. As a

result of these and other developments, the American back yard for a period of a decade or two ceased to have a definite role: it lingered as an empty, neglected space where the abandoned automobile was stored and the dog was allowed to run.

The front yard also underwent radical change. Street life, once so entertaining and neighborly, lost its charm: too much traffic, too much noise, too many strangers, street lights too bright and harsh, all combined to drive the family out of its garden, off the porch, and into the air-conditioned house. Then the newer houses built since World War II had two-car garages and concrete driveways that took over half of the front yard. The gas company ripped up what was left of



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Photographs by Miwon Kwon

2 San Leandro, California

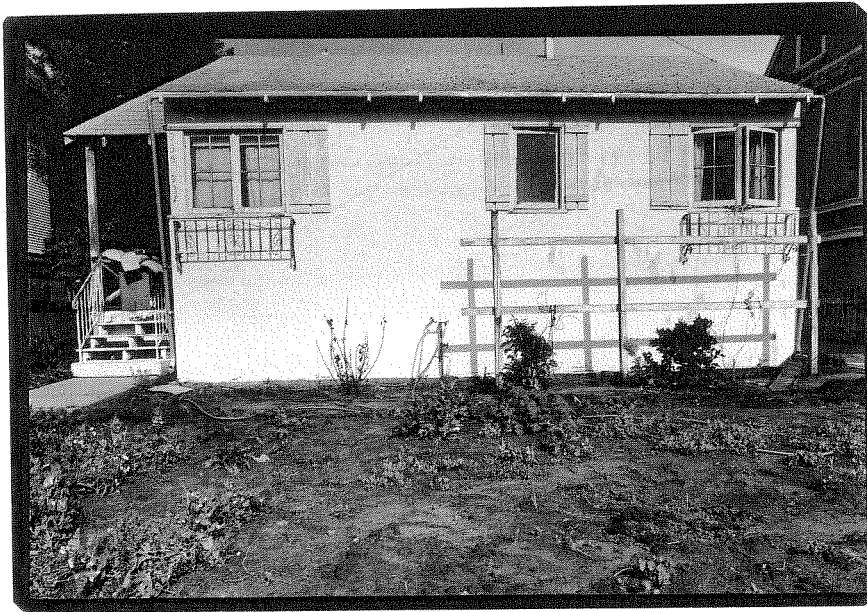
the lawn, and stray newspapers and wrappers and Kleenex littered the flower beds.

The family eventually responded to these changes by turning its back on the street and devising a new kind of space for relaxation in the back yard. A seven-foot fence or wall was built in back of the kitchen. There was a deck and an arbor and a constantly changing composition of bricks and railroad ties and outdoor grills and masses of flowers bought at a low price from the nearby supermarket. Plants dangled overhead, and there was a profusion of shade and color and greenery. And only rarely was there a stretch of lawn, brought in the form of rolls of turf and installed in the course of an after-

noon. Someday we will chronicle this miraculous transformation: a thoroughly vernacular event inspired by nursery advertising, by the influence of immigrants from other parts of the world, and by a new concept of outdoor leisure. I am not sure that the landscape professions are even yet aware of the extent of this revolution and of how imaginative many of these low-income back yards have become.

What happened to that remnant of the front yard is even more dramatic. Over the last two generations we have seen houses on a residential street or in a subdivision come closer together, and as they approach the street and each other, they seem to enclose the street and give it an architectural quality, even

though it is often planted with rows of trees. All that is left of the traditional front yard is a small plot of ground between the house and the sidewalk either covered with sod or a layer of heavy gravel. Where I live many families plant a typical local shrub or tree—a juniper or a chamisa or a Russian olive; sometimes they place large volcanic rocks in the midst of the gravel or a sensational specimen of dead wood retrieved from the mountains or the desert. The effect is often attractive: a view down a curving street of new houses with these unobtrusive plantings has variety and neatness, no weeds are allowed to grow, and only rarely is a car parked on this patch of land. By comparison with the old front yard, however, these new spaces are totally impersonal.



3

3 San Leandro, California

No one sits there, no personal objects are left lying around, and beds of flowers are few.

How to explain these discreet ornamental displays in front of every self-respecting house in the American subdivision? My belief is that the front yard has now become a space dedicated to showing that we are good citizens, responsible members of the community. What goes on in the back yard is strictly private, and the palisade around it protects the family from inquisitive eyes. But the space in front is the image we present to the neighbors and to the public at large. It is once again a form of communication.

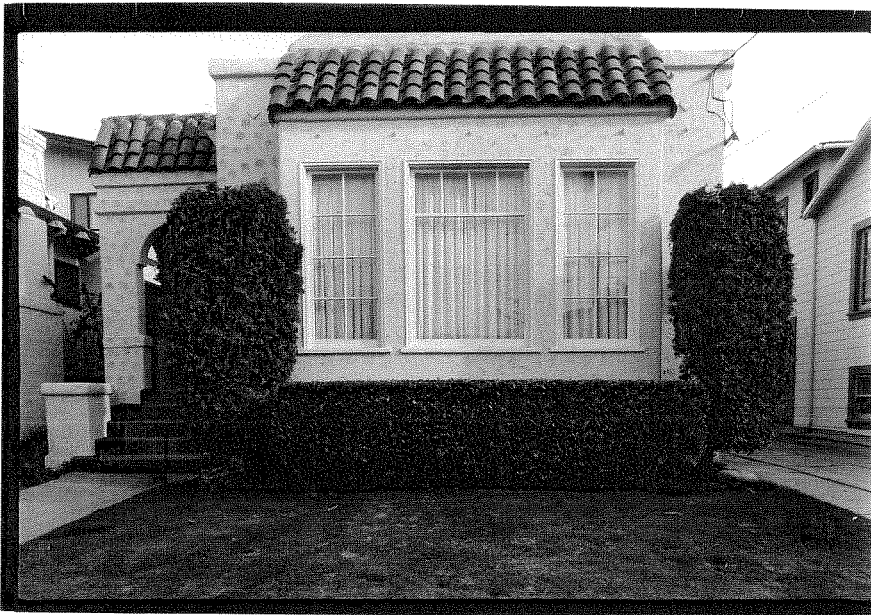
As I have suggested, the vernacular dwelling always has a close

relationship with the street and its activities. The larger houses of the well-to-do seek to detach themselves from the street and often surround themselves with walls or a barrier of vegetation. But the wage earner's dwelling depends on the street in many ways. Its broad concrete driveway, its garage, and its conspicuous house number make it clear that it considers the street a public space, and so its small vestigial front yard is now no longer used for domestic purposes but for identifying with the neighborhood. This is where a family's name sign is placed or election placards are staked. This is where owners show their loyalty to the local environment by reproducing a small-scale desert or a growth of indigenous vegetation. In some

neighborhoods there are religious statues. The symbols vary according to the region and its history: ox yokes, wagon wheels, out-of-date plows suggesting the pioneer background of the community. New England has its own front yard symbols, so has the South.

Much of this contemporary front yard landscaping is the work of builders and developers in collaboration with wholesale nurserymen and represents an attempt to give the new development an orderly and lived-in character to attract buyers. Nevertheless, it is widely imitated by individual home owners, for the style reflects the taste of many Americans. All of us have heard the denunciations of middle- and working-class residential

4



4 Berkeley, California

districts, their monotony and sterility and lack of any colorful street life. I myself see nothing objectionable in the quiet and peaceful tone of the average residential street during the hours of work and school, and many critics ignore the existence of the back yard as a place for recreation and sociability. We are all aware of how the automobile has altered every aspect of our environment, from the location of the place of work to the design of the dwelling. What we sometimes fail to recognize is how successfully we have often responded to those changes. I mentioned that the generation of Olmsted taught us how the park and garden could be redesigned for public accessibility and participation. Our own

generation has tackled another problem: how greenery, sometimes on the most modest scale, can restore a human quality to the increasingly artificial urban environment of work and living. A strip of lawn, a row of flowering fruit trees, a bed of flowers, these are small elements in the overall city landscape, not to be compared in beauty and importance with the parks and playgrounds and recreation areas that landscape architects are creating. Yet such green accents are becoming more and more common. We see them in parking lots and drive-ins, we see them in office buildings and outside of factories and stores, and their cumulative effect is impressive. To me they produce a new and welcome symbolism in our cities:

greenery as a way of communicating with others, which tells the public that we are thinking of them, thinking of the community and its appearance, and asking for goodwill and approval. That is why I like these vernacular touches of nature, small and temporary though many of them may be. Those miniature, somewhat standardized front yards are valuable: they allow the home owner to pay his or her respects to public opinion, just as they allow the commercial or industrial establishment, the shopping center, the condominium to contribute to our visual pleasure. As landscape architecture in America continues to expand and to take on the design of larger and more imposing projects throughout our environment,



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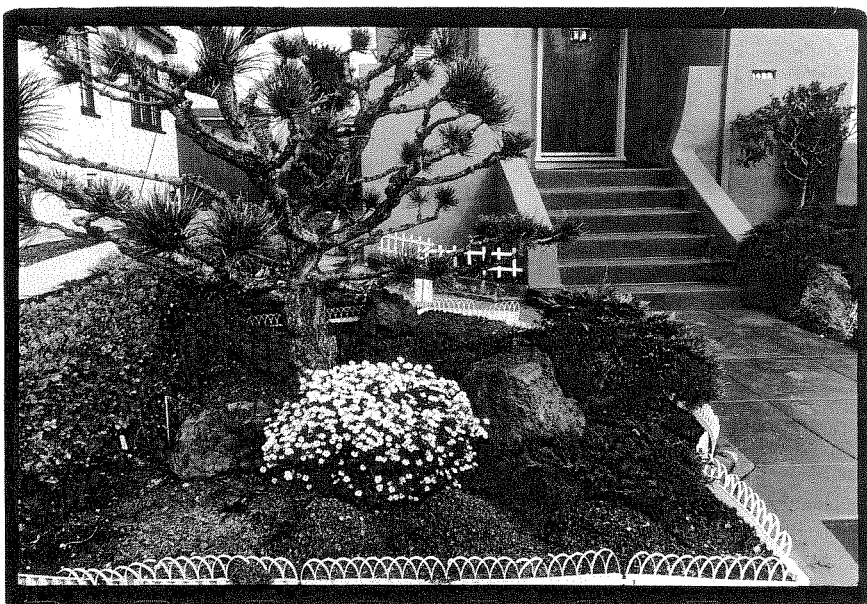
5 Berkeley, California

I hope it will protect and foster the smallest and most intimate places for greenery: the individual dwelling. Mass-produced architecture has eliminated all individually designed communication. Landscape architecture, of a very new and informal kind, can restore it. It can give our houses and streets and cities a humanity they badly need.

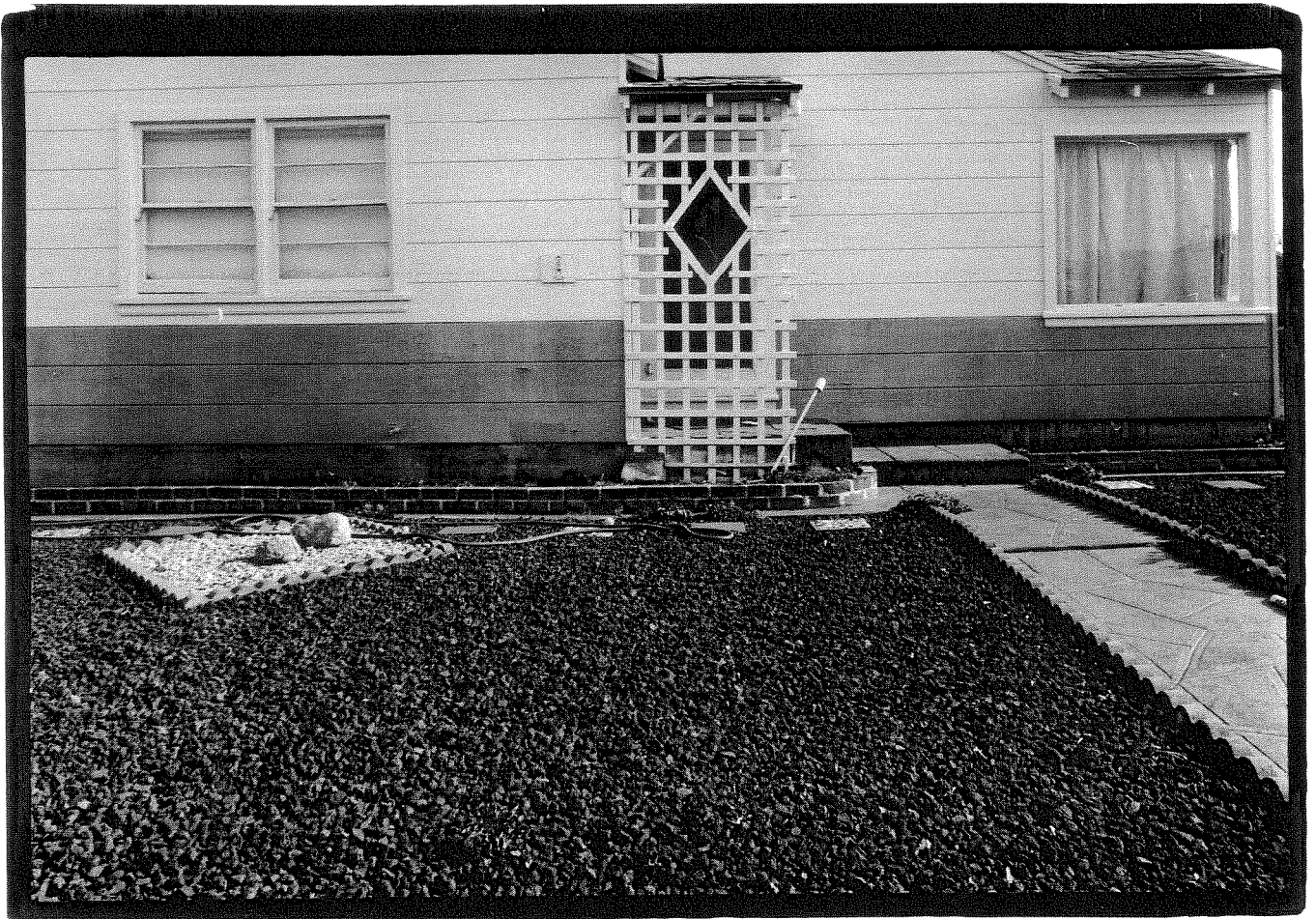
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6 San Leandro, California
7 Berkeley, California



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8 San Leandro, California

Mappus Mundi:
The Portuguese
Immigrant Garden
in California
Frances Butler

Photographs by Travis Amos

I



I **Topiary arch** suggesting a grotto on Pacific Street, San Leandro.

The Portuguese immigrant has one of the most distinctive gardening traditions in California, and conversations with Portuguese gardeners reveal that their gardens represent different expectations than those assumed by the design profession. The gardens published in the professional press such as *Ortho* books, or *House and Garden* or *Sunset* magazines, present the front garden as an empty theater, a border framing the house as parsley frames meat on a platter. The compositional arrangements used are still those of late modernism, that is, Mondrian's variable grid. The planting is usually a glaze of "native" grey-greenery, punctuated by an occasional reverent pause for a Japanese-style garden device. The Post-Modern, or down-scaled Baroque garden, which recalls that other relic of early Reagan-Era posturing, the down-scaled Cadillac, is not yet much seen. The professional back yard is defined and made significant by its provision for well-established middle-class social scenarios: outdoor cooking and eating, swimming and sun-bathing, playing games with the children.

The Portuguese are not part of this same web of social behavior, and their gardens symbolize their differing values through tactics that are a mixture of traditional Portuguese spatial preferences and experimentation with the new materials

and unfamiliar gardening traditions now available to them.

Their communities are dispersed throughout the state, but they are small, self-contained, and sufficiently well-established for their members to own businesses that can employ new immigrants, many of whom do not even need to learn to speak English. While they are not isolated from the dominant culture, their gardens serve not so much to emphasize well-established social values but as organizational tools to help in evaluation of the old, and assimilation of the new cultures that form the immigrant's world, on the way to a new working synthesis.

In this process immigrant gardeners update historic tactics. They often incorporate versions of the ancient memory theater to stabilize reminders of both past and present in a spatial continuum. They use the cabinet of wonders, a form of artifact organization popular from the sixteenth century onward, to direct the speculation of its maker towards the unknown instead of the known. Most often they operate from an understanding of the nature of work and of time-use based on intensity and perseverance that is still a vital part of their culture.

Most of these gardens serve as a form of learning for the

individual. The few private immigrant gardens that serve as lessons for the community are usually based on traditional religious memorials: Madonnas in grottos made from up-ended bathtubs or miniature chapels copying those from the homeland. (One such garden in San Leandro has two small chapels in a "sunken garden" to provide a resting place in an annual religious procession). Some religious artifacts are permanent: grottos or topiary arches with statues of the Virgin Mary. More often they are temporary displays, like the Portuguese-style creche incorporating many parts of the nativity story which a few families build in their front yards at Christmas.

But the immigrant garden is primarily a space in which to try out a range of tactics for personal spatial and cultural orientation. These include traditional labor practices, unification of ideas through collecting and cataloging material objects; defamiliarization and the encouragement of wonder achieved by tricks with scale and juxtaposition; spatial stability achieved through symmetry and ornament; and a sense of connection with past time by using souvenirs.

The garden is a place to work. The Portuguese in California are primarily blue-collar workers, and productive manual labor was

and still is central to their economy. Some became agricultural workers; many now own farms in the Sacramento valley. Those who now live in the cities often have elaborate vegetable gardens: fava beans on trellises are a sure sign of the Portuguese immigrant, as are taro plants in the front yard. Many came as sailors, and either settled in Northern Coastal lumber towns that relied on the sea for shipping, or as fishermen, stopping in Hawaii before coming to the Bay Area, where many now work and live in San Leandro, where their gardens contain many references to the sea.

Portuguese gardeners, both male and female, work the land themselves, and their garden designs develop gradually through the cumulative effects of a random sequence of small decisions made during the course of the work, such as pruning, cultivating, or weeding. The unprogrammed labor of handling materials, not preconceived plans, generate layout and form. The importance of labor is further reflected in the density, intricacy, and high maintenance of the special effects and scenarios built into the garden.

Work and Reverie

Garden labor consists of an ongoing series of small decisions directed toward an imagined but an undesigned goal. Work of this kind is not boring, for each action still shapes form, but as plants do grow back, the threat of irrevocable mistakes that underlies other kinds of work without templates (the workmanship of risk) is not present. Without the overriding fear of going astray, and with the gardener's knowledge that nature does not allow total human control anyway, the mind can lapse into reverie, a state of attentive dreaming that is the matrix of creativity. Reverie is a working dream in which both the idea and the skills and techniques used for achieving it are considered at the same time, making it a critical support for a life based on productive labor.

The Portuguese garden is both the place for, and the manifestation of, the process of reverie. The gardeners provide themselves with the opportunity for reverie by creating a continual outlay of small labors in their gardens, especially topiary work, patterning the ground with various nonorganic materials, and painting. These tactics control natural and nonorganic materials by making dissimilar surfaces into similar ones, substituting like texture or color for variation, but most importantly, such tactics require time, and many small decisions, encouraging reverie.

Topiary

The varieties of topiary in San Leandro range from narrative (a topiary dragon on Sibyl Street) and religious memorials (an arch and cross on Kelly Street) to more formal abstractions. Typically topiary emphasizes the borders of the house, the pathways or the lots by repeating those borders. If the hat-shaped topiary shaped by Mr. Silver in San Leandro is not typical, the layout of the topiary in the garden is: bushes trimmed into hundreds of brimmed hats follow the front path, border the house, and creep around the perimeter.

Repetition has been reduced to its most abstract in another front garden, by laying a continual grid of trimmed junipers over the entire area like a piece of polka-dot cloth. There are a few other gardens laid out on the continuous grid, but this is a new organizational strategy in San Leandro. The bilaterally symmetrical garden, with identical beds on either side of a central path, is much more common. Perhaps the sources for this garden are European, although even those Portuguese born in the United States could have seen this typical Baroque garden composition in large public gardens and, within the lifetime of the more elderly, at the world's fairs held at Chicago, New York, or San Francisco in the first half of the century.



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2 A new garden planting pattern in San Leandro, the infinite grid, marked with topiary evergreens.



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3 Mrs. Costelli's cabinet of curiosities combining natural wonders and man-made artifacts.

Painting

Painting does not need the same frequency of maintenance as topiary, but it allows the gardener to control the color of nonorganic surfaces. Many San Leandro gardeners have unified natural and man-made materials through the common application of paint. This transformation employs the reasoning used in older forms of cognition like fairy tales, or magic. Magic is the acceptance of a proposal, either mental or physical, that transforms the unlike into the like. Applied magic, or fairy tales, is a mode of instruction in which effort and success are joined around some wondrous talisman. The garden offers a good opportunity to display this symmetrical order. Its talismata, of unlike material transformed into symmetrical order, or of spiritual power symbolized by the Virgin Mary in a grotto, offer the hope of knowing how to succeed against all odds, which is an important part of the risky life of the immigrant.

The Cabinet of Curiosities: Accumulation Becomes Order

The Portuguese garden is often structured as a “wonder cabinet,” another historical tradition that is based on transformation by magic, or what Geoffrey Hartman calls “pseudo-causality,” of the incomprehensible into the understood. The wonder cabinet, developed by Renaissance princes and prelates, was the place in that their accumulated wonders, natural and man-made, were arranged in a spatial order that might suggest similarities and analogies useful for further speculation.

The process of generating or grasping meaning through wonder marked the beginning of the institutionalized organization of knowledge now called the Renaissance. Although by the first decade of the seventeenth century Galileo was already deriding the wonder cabinet as an inadequate tool for thought precisely because it incorporated everything, especially that which was then considered marginal or weird, the tradition did in some cases lead from curiosity to the development of the new mode of reasoning called the scientific revolution between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Most of these wonder cabinets have subsequently been separated into art and science collections or dispersed. The collection of the architect John Soane is one of the few to survive as more than a printed catalogue. But the

principle underlying the wonder cabinet as a mode of learning, random juxtaposition of physical categories connected by formal similitude, still survives in the works of both the intellectually sophisticated and the naive. The visionary city planner Patrick Geddes was still proposing a wonder cabinet, which he called the Outlook Tower and Index Museum, for various world's fairs at the end of the nineteenth century. The dada artist Marcel Duchamp, the proto-surrealist Giorgio De Chirico, and the surrealists themselves all continued the juxtaposition of unlike categories as a tactic for new, or newly named, understanding. They merely switched the provenance of the wonders from nature and the products of skilled artisanry to the production lines of the industrial revolution, and the name of the understanding to be gained from cosmology to psychology.

Portuguese gardeners today still assemble natural wonders and commercial products into private collections, organizing them into personal dictionaries of meaning. Their collections are held in shape by geometric patterns and structures that assume the potential for organization to produce meaning. The Portuguese are not the only gardeners who shape their gardens into a sequence of rooms without walls, the practice seems to be

common in all the vernacular gardening in the Mediterranean tradition in California, and Italian, Spanish, and Mexican immigrants also create gardens that are architecturally divided into stages or passages between the inside and the outside world. But the popular image of the garden in the United States is still based on the traditional English garden, that is, on an image of the untrammelled out-of-doors; or on its Japanese cousin that also emphasizes spaces rather than the walls around or the objects within the garden. The vernacular Mediterranean garden tradition may stem from the fact that from the time of the Romans to the present day the domestic garden was frequently inside in an atrium or courtyard and more easily conceived of in architectural terms.

In a back garden in San Leandro, Mrs. Costelli has constructed her own wonder cabinet, moving from the collection of curiosities to the telling of stories. She divided the garden into ever smaller stages with different gravels, pavers, and edging materials. In each she arranged real and artificial rocks, shells, plants, large and small figurines, miniature Japanese bridges, and many different kinds of mirror, to make up tiny scenes of animals and people gathered around watering holes.

Now animals or humans drinking or bathing in water

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- 4 Horseshoes and farm implements from the Rubello family farm, combined into hand-made memorials. The name plate over the porch says that Mr. Rubello is the last surviving son.
- 5 The island of Pico set into a concrete sea with bas-relief whales.

at the spring of life is an element of many European fairy tales of birth, death, and regeneration, and spiritual transformation, like baptism, is also accompanied by water. The tradition of the seafaring Portuguese explorers is also recalled by images water. The quality of continual change in the life of the Portuguese seafarer is nicely suggested by one of the more startling miniature scenes in Mrs. Costelli's garden: trumpeting elephants charging over a red Japanese bridge. The symbolic image of the water-hole may be part of Mrs. Costelli's own understanding of an old mythic tradition, or it may be her recreation of scenes from the Walt Disney versions of fairy stories. But Mrs. Costelli made the garden to delight and refresh herself and to open a window onto curiosity and change for all.

Souvenirs

Mrs. Costelli's garden is filled with purchased souvenirs of the inexpensive type usually bought by children who have no memories of their own. Adults, on the other hand, can usually make their own souvenirs from the artifacts of their past. The garden of the Rubello family in San Leandro is a good example. The gate, fences, and ornamental frame around the miniature windmill were made by Mr. Rubello from welded horseshoes saved from the family farm. The other agricultural artifacts—plows, pumps, wagon wheels—are also remnants of the valued family past. This past, and the style of labor on which it was based, has become more precious as the style of labor has changed and as the family has died away.

Males are more likely to have souvenirs of their own property than are females. According to a United Nations report of 1980, females, who do more than 60 percent of the world's total work, own less than 1 percent of the world's goods. Mrs. Costelli's options were typically less tied to family possessions, and, using new and second-hand souvenirs she explored more abstract ideas, like defamiliarization through radical changes in scale.

Miniaturization

There is nothing miniature in nature; scale requires human beings for its definition. Our present response to the miniature is based on its past history; miniatures were once the precious province of the wealthy, who commissioned miniature models of their possessions. Now, despite the possibility for anyone to explore the cognitive exoticism of the miniature, climbing to the top of a skyscraper or making a miniature railroad, an aura of privilege still clings to reduced scale.

The scale of a garden is determined by many factors: the size of the house and its lot, the kinds of plants available, and the neighboring preferences in planting patterns. Most Portuguese immigrant houses and lots are comparatively small, and very few gardeners have chosen to grow large or bushy plants. Instead they prefer a horizontal garden, perhaps reflecting low or absent planting in Portugal, and make their patterns with gravel, very small plants, and figurines designed for interior tables and shelves, that become miniatures when used outdoors. Mrs. Costelli's placement of these miniature interior figurines on the ground rather than on a mantelpiece transforms the visitor into a giant who is too big to move among them and is forced to view them from far away.

Today miniaturization is a critical part of the com-

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6 Sunnyside Street garden using available red and white stones from California, hammered into sand, and set with mortar, in the traditional Portuguese manner.

7 Detail, showing the surface achieved by this paving technique.



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8 Gravel garden with Japanese-style corner.

puterization of memory and the production and use of maps. Whereas there is much of the miniature that is simply too small to see with the naked eye, one of the principal points of its use is that its outside edge is completely visible and therefore assumed to be controllable. That which is too big to be seen all at one time is miniaturized into visibility, and map readers then project themselves first figuratively and then literally back into real space by imagining and then walking or driving through it. Miniature souvenirs and maps offer control of things or concepts too big or too ambiguous to buy, like Niagara Falls or a watering hole.

For the Portuguese gardener, miniaturization also offers a map of the past and a direct way to unite past and present geography. The memory of their homeland still occupies an important position in the San Leandro community, and many local families return frequently to Portugal, especially to the Azores. While memory of other cultural traditions is kept alive by institutions such as the Catholic church or the Portuguese clubs, memory of the shape of the land is generally kept by individuals in the shape of their private gardens. On Frederick Street in San Leandro, a man who was a deep-sea fisherman from the Azores made a central fountain in his rose garden in the shape of his

former quarry, the terrapin. His next-door neighbor, from Pico, built a miniature of his native island, outlined with up-ended sections of pine trunks in a Japanese style, surrounded by a concrete aggregate ocean in which swim two bas-relief whales with inlaid teeth of white rock.

The scale is inconsistent, the whales are bigger than the island, but the miniature can reconnect the viewer to real spatial scale as surely as can a road map. In fact, many of the motifs used in Portuguese gravel gardens recall the decorative borders and motifs used around maps that are so much a part of their seafaring past. The four-part star, possibly left over from the Etruscan and Roman city-founding device of the crossed *cardo* and *decumanus*, and used on maps to indicate the cardinal directions, is the single most common motif in Portuguese gravel gardens.

Patterned Ground

Despite the frequent use of miniaturization and other mapping conventions that encourage a sense of intellectual connection to the Portuguese homeland, many Portuguese gardeners simply reproduce what they can of their past as close to its real size as possible. Many Portuguese streets, plazas, and private courtyards are paved in mosaic patterns made of squares of grey and white lava. A small-scale version of this patterned plaza with a central fountain is a favorite garden subject for the immigrant gardener in California. One gardener on Sunnyside Street in San Leandro even made a patterned mosaic ground in the Azorean tradition, substituting local California materials for the lava blocks used in Portugal. The pattern composed of a six-pointed star and straight and undulating bands was made by pounding red and white stones into a sandy bed with a four-foot vertical mallet. When the stones were even, mortar was brushed into the cracks and water was sprinkled over everything to form a firm cement. The lava blocks used in Portugal are about 2.5 inches to a side and fit more regularly together than do the small, irregular rocks available in California, but even this Sunnyside Street version of the traditional plaza is much more precise than the more common gardens using loose gravel to reproduce the undulating white and black lines of homeland paving.

Conclusion

This garden also includes an element from the Japanese garden, the border of up-ended pine logs. Many Japanese families live in San Leandro, and their gardens have influenced an increasing number of Portuguese to combine geographical references to both Portugal and Japan. It may be that the immigrant gardener, who once operated within the traditional pattern of cultural diffusion, that is to say, only copied ideas that could be personally seen, which encouraged formal similarity within a small geographic area for a long time, is now considering the diffusion practices of popular culture, the widespread geographical diffusion of ideas by mass-media, with an attendant short life span. Of course, in San Leandro the example of the Japanese garden is right next door, but a shift from making a garden that reconnected one to the homeland half-way around the world to a garden that introduces one to an unknown land that is still, despite propaganda for the concept of the Pacific Rim, considered to be all the way around the world, indicates a major realignment of the cultural and cognitive values of the Portuguese gardener in California.

Oak Alley

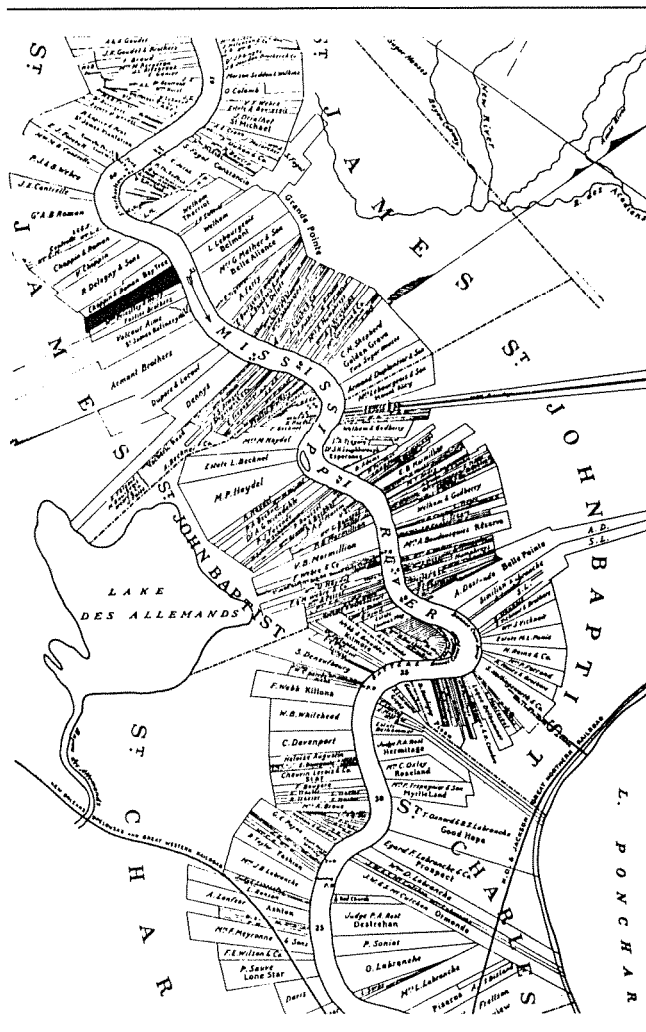
Errol Barron

Of the plantations that line the lower Mississippi near New Orleans, none has as much architectural power or hold over the popular imagination as Oak Alley. Built in 1836 for a family of planters and politicians, the house was sited at the end of a century-old allée of live oaks. As a colonial representation of Greek revival architecture, it has twenty-eight columns, corresponding to the twenty-eight oak trees, a perfectly square plan, and four carefully matched elevations based on the square.

The composition of the house and grounds is aligned with the river, upon which its connection with New Orleans and the world beyond depend. Through its extreme if diagrammatic axiality, the formality of the siting reflects the love of order and power of the French Creole family who built Oak Alley (or Bon Sejour, as it was originally called). They conceived the house in the tradition of great European houses. Thus the appeal of Oak Alley rests not just with the obvious theme of luxurious nineteenth-century living that visitors associate with the Old South but with the power of both an architectural and social order, the ability of a family to mark the landscape in some memorable way.

Axiality marks this plantation and inextricably

links it to its European counterparts, whose very essence, like Oak Alley's, is in and on the "line." The Villa Lante or Vaux-le-Vicomte, for instance, use axiality to organize a network of major and minor events within an overall composition. At the Villa Lante the axis directs a series of allegorical episodes so powerfully that the villa's two casinos take their places on either side of the line. In this Louisiana example, the house marks a radius point for a curve in the Mississippi River, which makes a gentle arc around the front of the property. From the center of this curve, the line, or principal axis, runs 5,280 meters to a nearly impenetrable swamp nearly 11 feet below the level of the river. Starting here and walking back the three miles toward the river, one finds the axis is bounded on each side by geometric rows of cane and cotton (once indigo and corn), which form a giant parterre of useful crops. Past modern rails, past canals and between rows of cottages left from other days, past a second, more relaxed alley of trees at the rear of the house, the line continues directly to the door and sweeps through the center hall of the house. The vortex of trunks and limbs of the allée, like rifling in a gun barrel, holds and shapes the axis as it finally surges to the levee and river beyond.



I Map of Plantations circa 1850's (Oak Alley in black).
Courtesy The Historic New Orleans Collection, Museum-Research Center



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2 Block Plan of New Orleans.
Vieux Carre' in black.

While the plantation is known for its house and oak trees, it comprises much more. The house and trees only intensify the organizational preoccupations that are the essence of the plantation itself. Rectangular fields are aligned neatly along the unadjusted axis, which serves simultaneously as a centerline and farm road.

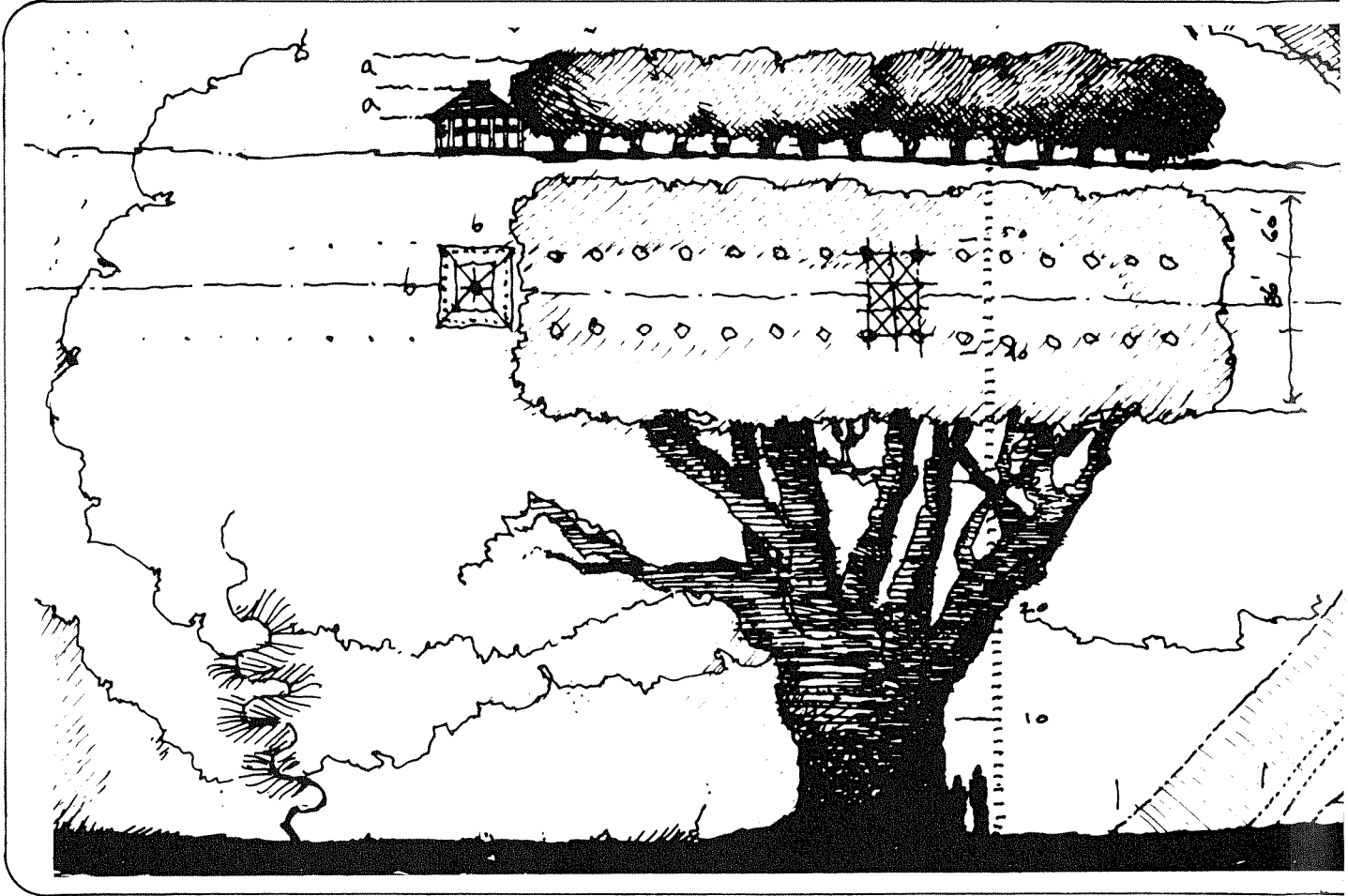
The parallel rows of the fields drain into cross canals that carry rainwater into Lake des Allemandes several miles away. This landscape is without wall and contour and was not cleared over time or nestled into an existing topography but was conceived and executed on a clean flat slate like a diagram on paper. It is an abstract grid of ideal plots for the production of crops, the agricultural equivalent of New Orleans's Vieux Carre itself. The individual plantation grid and the collection of plantations make a compelling image. The river grinds toward the gulf; the plantations flank it like iron filings clinging to a magnetic current creating a vast network of farm sites at the end of the nation's principal drainage system.

The pattern of Oak Alley is New World classicism, a classicism of power and rationality rather than historical quotation. Despite the picturesque Greek revival forms and the elegant diagram of the house, the

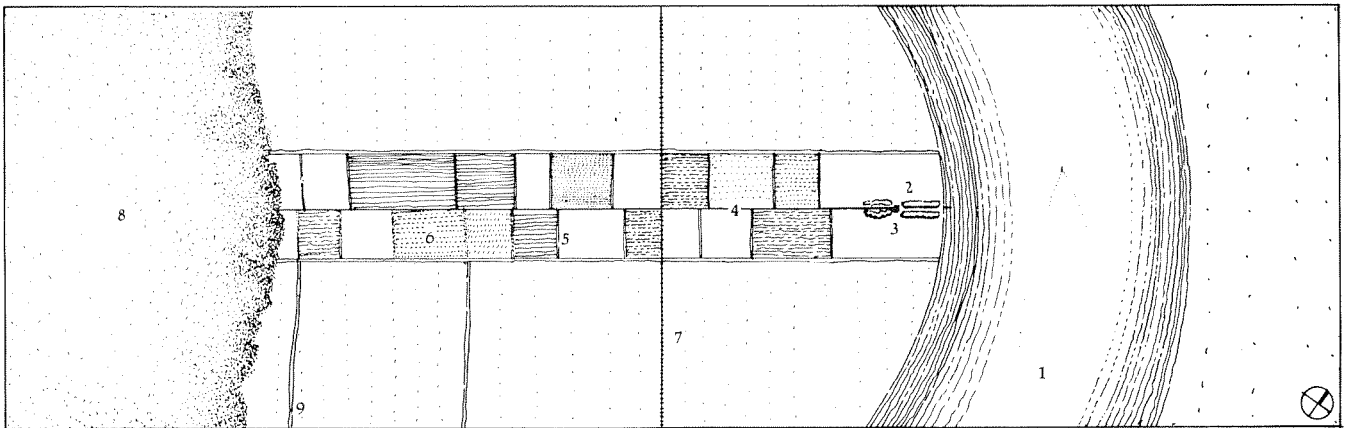
plantation as a whole conveys an idea of agricultural, even industrial, might. The uncompromising organization also recalls other classical settings where axiality and control work toward the classical goal of a place without contradiction and compromise. At Oak Alley the inherently tragic nature of this ideal is dramatized by the grotesque branches of the trees and by the bizarre and shadowy light. There is a sinister quality to the order of the perfectly square house with its twenty-eight columns and abundance of squares and golden sections, which glosses over a harsher reality of human abuses and a foreshadowing of the industrialization to come.

But it is the picturesque, domestic image that is popular. With the late evening light raking through the trees, the house glows like a Japanese lantern at the end of the tunnel of oaks. In this setting it is easy to forget the river nearby, today a corridor of petrochemicals, where the fantastic, magical, cities of light of the oil refineries stand as logical manifestations of the colonial desire to organize, control, and exploit the land.

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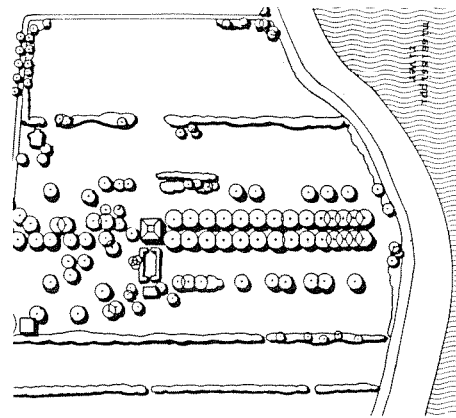


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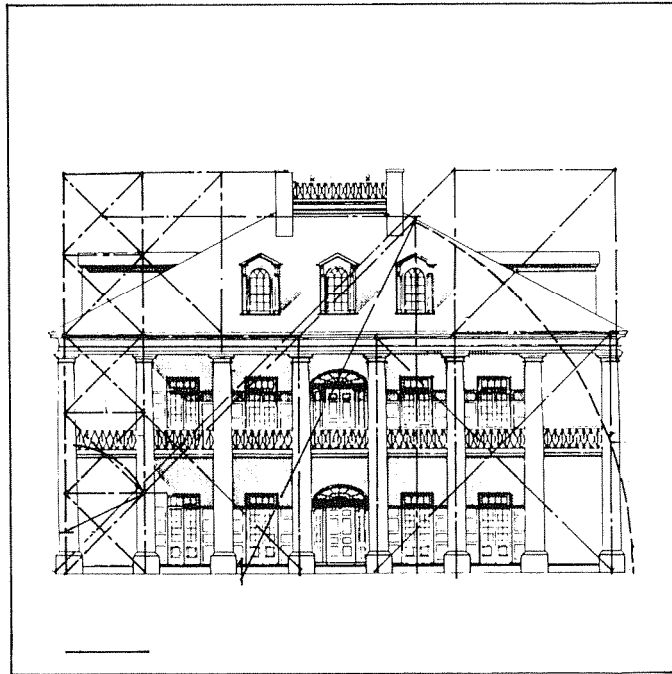


3 Sketch Plan, Section and Elevation of the Allée'.

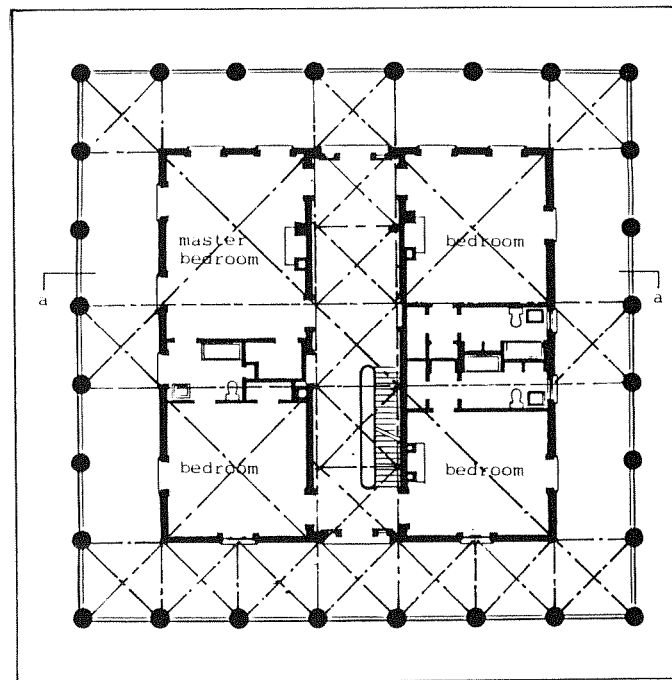
4 Sketch Plan of Oak Alley Plantation:

1. River
2. Allée'
3. House
4. Main Farm Road
5. Drainage Canals
6. Fields
7. Railroad
8. Uncleared Swamp
9. Drainage canal to Lake des Allemands

5 Plan of House and Grounds



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- 6 North Facade with regulating lines
- 7 Plan with regulating lines
- 8 The House seen from the allee'. Photograph by Marc Treib.
- 9 The river seen through the allee'. Photograph by Marc Treib.

Bishop Miquel Pontich's Ninety Steps.

Lars Lerup

This text is about a very large stair in a small city, and if glorification occupies the center of the architectural enterprise, this stair sits squarely in this glorious center.

Public stairs are common in cities that are built along steep river banks or on mountainsides. In Gerona, which is situated on the river Onyar in the province of Catalunya north of Barcelona, there are four public stairs that are named in the official tour guide: Escales de la Pera, Escales de Sant Domenec, the Escales at the Pujada del Seminari and the Bishop's steps. The Bishop's steps are not like the other public stairs, even though they are built from the same rock, with similar balustrades and topped with identical classical spheres. In fact, the Bishop's steps are not only not like other public stairs in Gerona, but in the region and in Barcelona.

Purportedly, Bishop Friar Miquel Pontich had the ninety steps built in the Placa de la Catedral between 1685 and 1699. The Catedral is itself one of those unexpected religious assemblies that the modern traveller cannot quite match with his own map of geopolitical understanding, since there is no relationship between the minor importance of the modern Gerona and the size, complexity and splendor of the Catedral. Yet this state of apparent discrepancy between architectural and

sociopolitical importance fits neatly with the Bishop's steps.

The Catedral was many centuries in its building and the ninety steps were only one of many fragments added at different times that make up the current scene of the church and two plazas: the upper Placa dels Apostols, and the lower Placa de la Catedral—the seat of the steps.

The ninety steps are divided into three sections, each consisting of thirty steps, a landing and surrounding balustrades, occasionally topped by a perfect sphere set on a pedestal. The entire stair ascends some 60 feet to the entry of the cathedral with its main door, eight niches, two balconies, and a giant rose window built in 1733 by Pere Costa. Behind this facade lies the Great Nave, which reaches 70 feet across, making it the widest nave in Europe. Yet all this splendor, size, and spatial power fades somewhat in light of the ninety steps.

We have visited Gerona twice. The first time stumbling accidentally and very briefly on the steps, we did not quite believe our eyes. Afterwards, we commented on the curious encounter and promised to return. The second time we rushed with anticipation back across the river, and through the narrow streets to confront the stairs: breaking through the perimeter of the *placa*, it was no longer

disbelief but size-shock, scale-disorientation, and bulk & magnitude-collision that stunned us. For a moment we were children in the company of a giant.

Restored to proper size we thought: the shock had to do with the juxtaposition of their **giant** size and their simple, **rational** design—thirty steps of roughly eight inches each, a landing, an additional 20 feet of steps, a landing, and the final stretch of steps. Somehow, this heterogeneous combination of unusual size and common design arrested the natural flow of the stair—it was as if getting to the Catedral was less important than the stair itself. Through this sudden change of size, the solidity and inherent predicability of the type-object with its implicit internal balance between parts and characteristics had been ruptured.

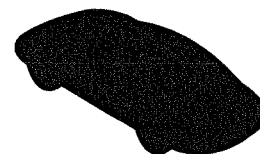
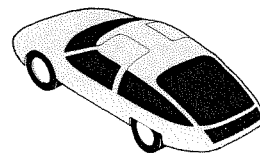
Further, the extraordinary size is apparent not only because of the level difference between the *placa* and the Catedral, but also because the stair fills the entire square, leaving space only for narrow streets and a narrow strip of its original footprint. Gargantuan, the stair has become so large that just like Yeats' dancer and his dance, the stair cannot be separated from the square. Like a new alloy, the stair-square has muscled a new place for itself in the urban taxonomy.

However, this new urban

presence can only incidentally be apprehended through reasoning—primarily, it is felt in the gut like the way our organs are pulled by gravity in a fast-moving elevator ascending towards the thirtieth floor of a skyscraper. No loss of symbolic importance of architecture can take this most fundamental experience of presence away from us. When the good Bishop slipped the giant stair into the Placa de la Catedral, he dropped a large rock in our experiential stomach. Not even the ear-shattering noise from a blue car struggling up the narrow street towards the Placa Apostols and the stars beyond manage to displace the weight of the steps.

There is, of course, a conspiracy against such ineffable experiences in modern culture since they fall through the Cartesian net. Curiously enough, these gastronomic forms of architectural experience are for all of us, regardless of class or creed, provided of course that we are willing to go to Gerona instead of Paris or Barcelona.

For us, the stairs show clearly that by changing only one parameter in the type-object complex, common stairs can surreptitiously, on the wings of blue cars, slip into the stratosphere of architectural glory.



The Park of La Villette: Urban Park as Building

Betsy Cann

Until recently the descriptive phrase *around buildings* would not have been adequate to describe an urban park. A park, according to dictionary definitions and common usage, is an enclosed piece of ground, reserved from settlement, and usually kept in a natural state; that is, as a landscape. Thus, the conventional usage of the term *park* describes a landscape with grass and trees or other natural elements. Because such land is reserved from settlement and maintained in a “natural” condition, it is by definition distinct from the city in which it exists.

But the idea of *park* seems to be moving away from this definition. In recent urban theory and design, the urban park is not always considered a place fundamentally *different* from the city, able to provide a change in experience and perception. Rather, it is considered *part* of the city, not merely spatially continuous with it but an arena for further expressing the ideological structures that underlie the city as a whole. Of course, *park* may also identify an enclosed space that is not a landscape, such as an amusement park, a car park, or a ball park; nonetheless, there seems to be a shift in the dominant meaning of the term.

The most significant recent park demonstrating this shift is the Park of La Villette in Paris. Bernard Tschumi’s plan was chosen in an international competition and is currently under construction. This project has been well publicized and eventually may have

tremendous influence on the design of future urban parks. It has even been described as the “Park of the Twenty-First Century.” But the innovations promoted by the competition and the winning design must be carefully investigated before they are adopted uncritically as the new model for urban park design.

The program for the competition filled two volumes and included detailed descriptions of the elements and functions to be accommodated on the 55-hectare site.¹ The sponsors of the competition requested a huge number and variety of activities distributed across the site within both a “garden city” and a “garden-in-the-city.” The “garden city” was intended to be “the center of activity, shows and experimentation” and would include facilities for sports, exhibits, clubs, workshops, schools, and even housing.² In addition, numerous buildings on the site were to be retained, the two largest of these to be renovated as a museum of science and technology and a “Music City.”

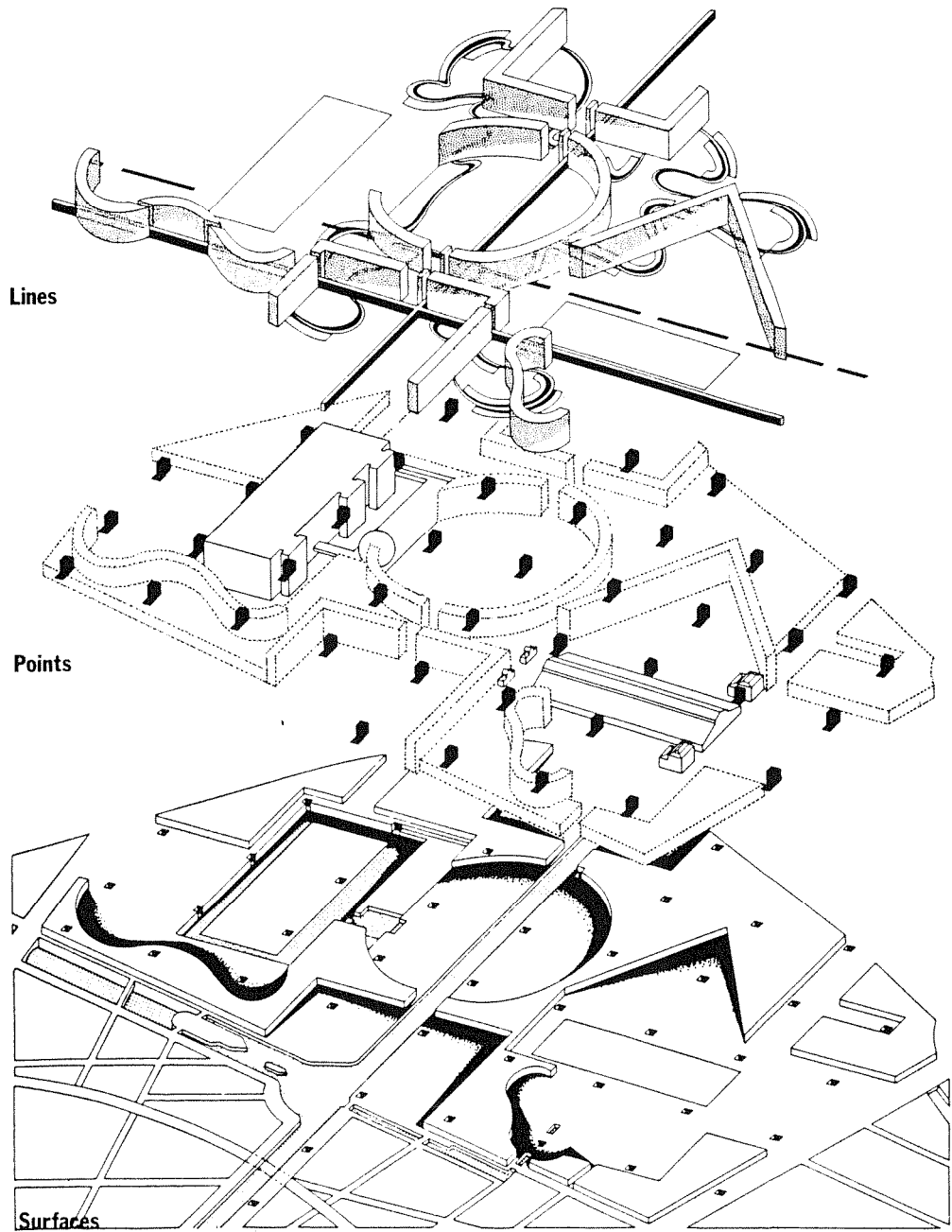
The “garden-in-the-city” was intended to be the center of “relaxation, of well-being of both body and mind,” in which Nature would be the “guiding force.”³ It was suggested that it contain a “subtle series of gardens that would abnegate the nature-culture relation.” The sponsors of the competition explicitly rejected the model of the nineteenth-century Parisian park as “exclusive and

irrelevant to the city and city life.”⁴ At the same time they attempted, perhaps futilely, to retain certain aspects of the traditional landscape park. The extensive list of gardens and other outdoor spaces indicates their continuing desire for the park to provide an experience of nature in the city.

Tschumi’s scheme, however, does not respond equally to both parts of this agenda. While it does address the sponsors’ desire to include a huge variety of cultural activities, it is less successful at creating the experience of nature within the city. Bernard Tschumi’s critical stance relative to the conventional idea of park was to reject the notion of the park as a landscape at all. “The inadequacy of the civilization *vs.* nature polarity under modern city conditions has invalidated the time-honored prototype of the park as image of nature,” he wrote. “It can no longer be thought of as an undefiled utopian world-in-miniature. . . .”⁵ Instead, he completely subordinated the landscape elements of the park to the architectural elements of the design.

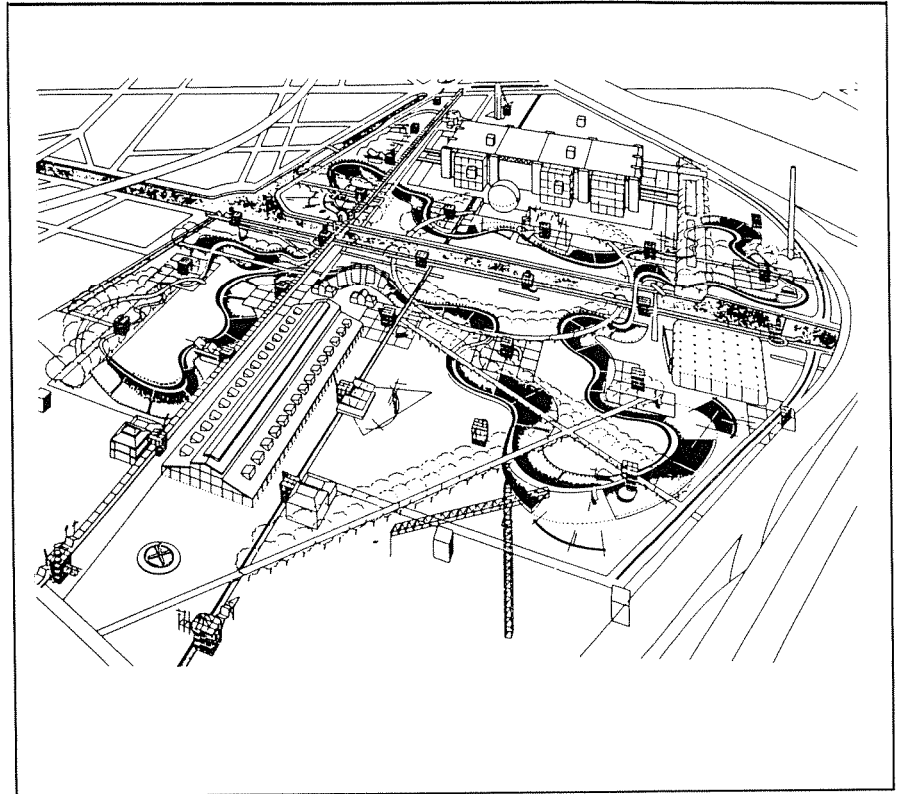
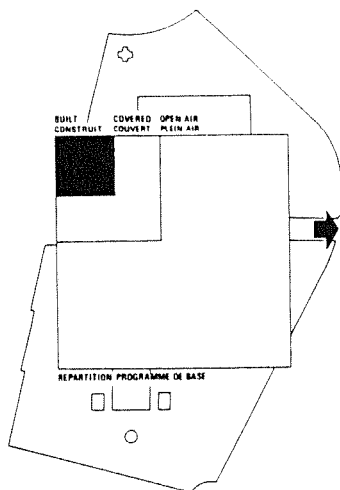
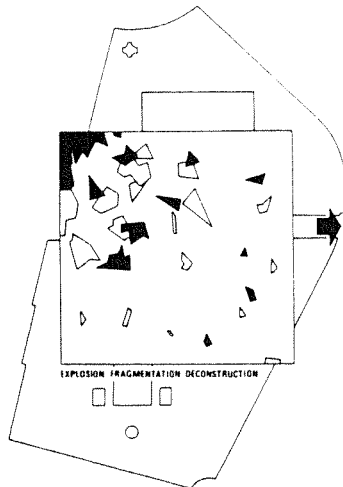
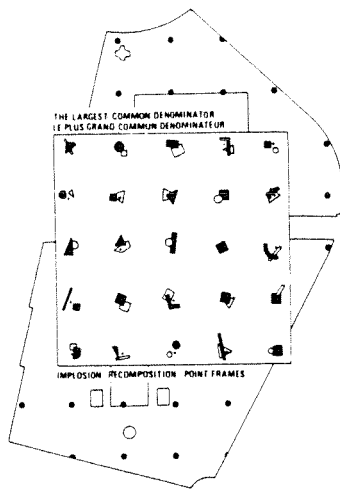
In rejecting the notion of the park as a landscape, Tschumi has tried to confirm the concept of the park as a new type of urban creation. He has created instead a “cultural park” that will be “a distinctive and innovative kind of park embodying a change in social programme, physical form, and social context.”⁶ His park design includes an “open-air cultural center,” with space for “workshops, gymnasium and bath

1



1,2 The systems of surfaces, points, and lines are combined on the site to create the design of the park.

2



3

- 3 Only a small area of the park consists of "built" or "constructed" space, but this built space forms the primary system that organizes the remaining "covered" and "open air" portions of the park.

facilities, playgrounds, exhibitions, concerts, scientific experiments, games and competitions” in addition to the buildings already existing on the site.⁷ Tschumi accomplished this in his design by using abstract spatial devices to organize and distribute the required activities across the site: the systems of “Points, Lines, and Planes.” The most important of these were the “Points,” consisting of a grid of “Follies,” small cubical structures that can be transformed for a variety of uses. Not only are these built structures essential to his proposal; Tschumi expanded the idea of the buildings to the scale of the park itself. He has described this park design not as green space but as “one of the largest *buildings* ever constructed” and compared the grid of Follies to the “canonical modern spatial scheme, . . . the columnar grid of a modern building.”⁸

The enormous number of buildings, objects, and other functions required in the park certainly disallow the possibility of a “real” natural landscape at La Villette. In Tschumi’s scheme the landscape has been removed from the picture almost entirely. The landscape elements, formerly the most important aspect of an urban park, have suddenly become merely the infill between the built structures that organize the project spatially and functionally. The conventional idea of the park as a landscape has been subsumed into the supremely architectural notion of a *building*, the human creation out of which the city is constructed.

The dislocation of the landscape implicit in this conceptual framework transforms the conventional elements of the landscape park—those expressive of the forces of nature—into neutral space and objects organized by the same abstract systems that organize the rest of the city. The landscape elements—gardens, playgrounds, allées, fields—are relegated to the role of meaningless “stuff” that fills the space between the Follies and other buildings. The landscape of the park is no longer a positive, holistically conceived place in which to experience nature. It is merely that part left over around the buildings.

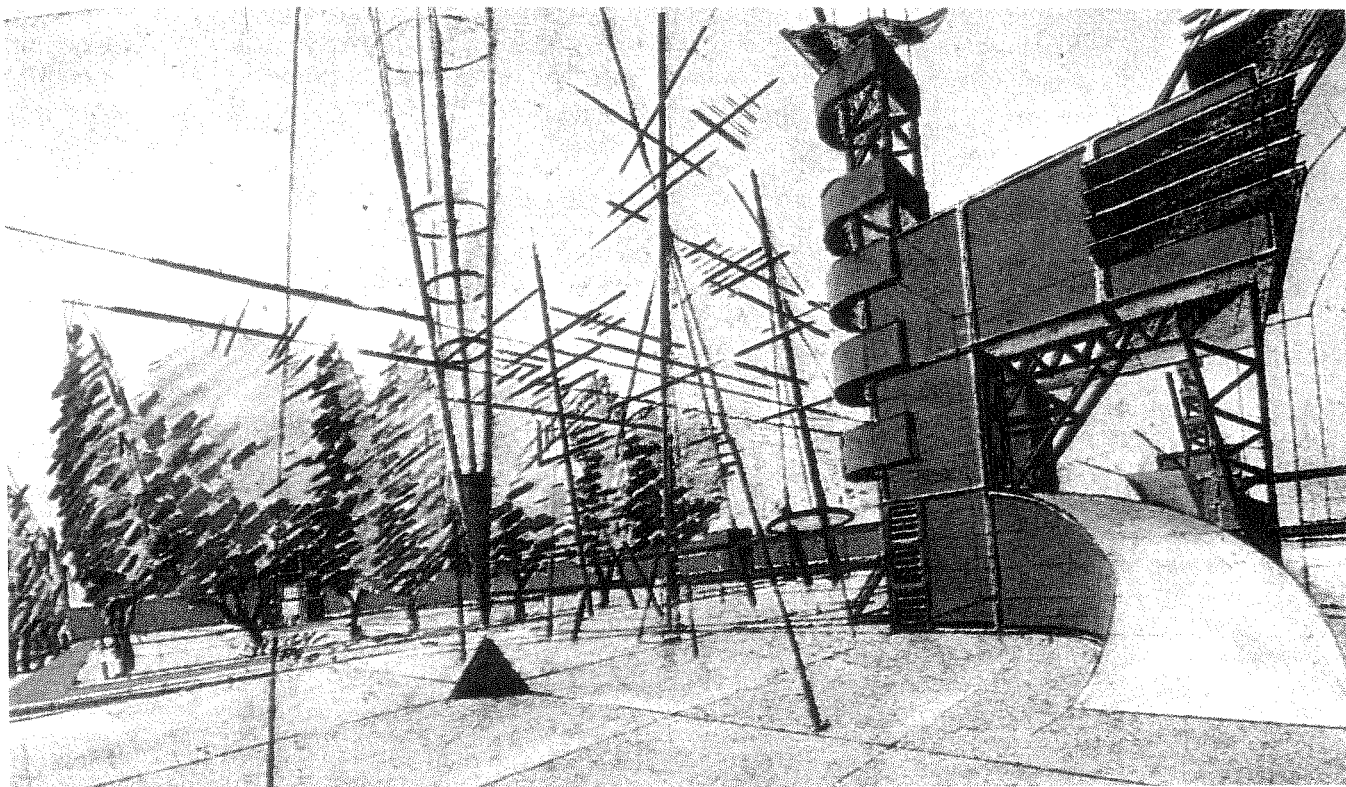
Designed landscapes always exist somewhere on the continuum between culture and nature, and the urban landscape is the place where nature and culture may interact most eloquently. The removal of nature from this relationship in Tschumi’s park polemic raises numerous questions about the continuing significance of the urban park as landscape. True, this was only one aspect of the original program for La Villette. And the program mentioned the amusement park Tivoli in Copenhagen as a possible model, so Tschumi’s park as urban generator is not without legitimate prototype. As a unique park designed and constructed under specific circumstances, the Parc de la Villette may be an excellent solution. But whether it should be promoted as the “Park of the Twenty-First Century” is another matter. The city is full of buildings; why should the park fit

another? This notion overlooks the aspect of the park as a bounded landscape, a monument to nature in the city. The complex relationship of humans to nature that occurs in the urban landscape may be difficult to describe, but perhaps it should not be exorcised from our notion of park so quickly. The urban park may still be more than just a parking lot for buildings.

Illustrations courtesy of Bernard Tschumi

Notes

- 1 The complete competition documents were issued by the Etablissement Public du Parc de la Villette in June 1982. I am grateful to Cherie Kluesing and Victor Walker for providing me with copies of these documents.
- 2 Etablissement Public du Parc de la Villette, “Rapport d’objectifs,” June 1983, p. 20.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 5 Bernard Tschumi, “An Urban Park for the 21st Century” *UIA/The International Architect* (1983) p. 27.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

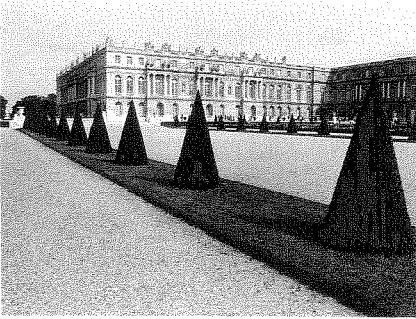


4

- 4 The park contains many built and vegetative elements, yet the conceptual system that holds it all together is the grid of follies. Each folly consists of a $10\text{m} \times 10\text{m} \times 10\text{m}$ cube of space that has been transformed to enclose a specific function.

a round about around . . .
Buildings . . . a round
about around

Catherine Howett

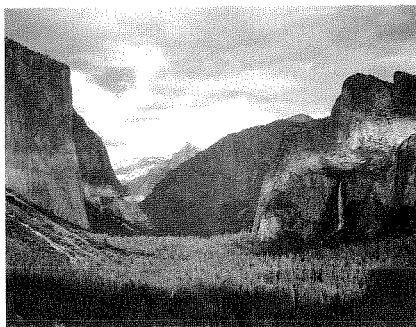


I

A meditative round probably ought to begin with the very words in which the invitation to reflection is expressed, and *around buildings* suggests worlds of meaning right at the start. Look at the way the word *buildings* sits there, smugly assertive, accented on the first syllable like *cannon* or *righteous* or *solid*. And it's got those fine explosive shots to fire—a *b* . . . a *d* . . . a *g*—striking straight through the ear to the mind. *Around* is a weak word, centered on vowels that make the lips form a circle, a void, a pitiful whimpering *ow* to which *buildings* must boldly respond.

Together, the two words seem related to those great dyadic categories by means of which we humans like to order our world, a propensity that undoubtedly began with distinctions observed by Adam and Eve and that still conditions us to make associations between such terms as male/man/mankind/active/positive/mass on the one hand, and female/woman/nature/passive/negative/void on the other. There are myriad subsets, of course, that get assigned to the “appropriate” side—innocent things like day and night, light and dark for the poets; figure and ground for the painters; as well as more portentous dichotomies like rational/intuitive and strong/weak. (My copy of *Roget's Thesaurus* suggests the adjectives *effeminate*, *feminine*, *womanish* as synonyms for *weak*, *feeble*, *impotent*, and *powerless*.) On this issue, psychologists and semioticians acknowledge the same reality as plumbers describing pipes or electricians, plugs. Or architects, buildings.

Thus the building and the space around it are perceived as polar opposites, just as in the city the aggregate of buildings stands against its “open space.” Building and city are virile expressions of culture and civilization, while their surroundings remain identified, however remotely, with the province of Dame Nature. Every act of building recapitulates the primal strategies by which the human animal first contrived to shelter itself from a threatening environment. A building creates its own, new world in which all is ordered to serve and secure human purpose; beyond it extends that other, virtually nameless reality, for which *environment* and *landscape* are terms too broad, *site* and *grounds* too narrow. What is it that one looks out at through the windows, walks out into through the doors? Familiarly we refer to it as the *out-of-doors*—a description rather like “Mrs. Building.” The space surrounding buildings most often borrows its identity from the buildings that occupy it.



2

When we project our domain outward from the building, imposing form on a previously amorphous, undeveloped or inappropriately developed surround, the shadow-play of Man in confrontation with Nature is re-enacted. The landscape is transformed through single or multiple acts of will or omission, according to rules and conventions analogous to those that determine building form, and in response to an articulated or at least intuited design program. The nineteenth-century innovation, attributed to Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, of referring to professional designers of landscape as *landscape architects*, rather than by using the traditional but more effete-sounding *landscape gardeners*, represented a deliberate effort to underscore the parity of intellectual rigor and similarity of methodology that the discipline shared with architecture. Olmsted knew that he was doing a great deal more than merely “working with” nature; he was most often, as was the case in the design of New York’s Central Park, creating a particular kind of landscape out of whole cloth, carting in mature trees and mountains of soil in order to change an urban wasteland into an image of serene pastoral order. Nature was manipulated and controlled as thoroughly as she ever was at Versailles.

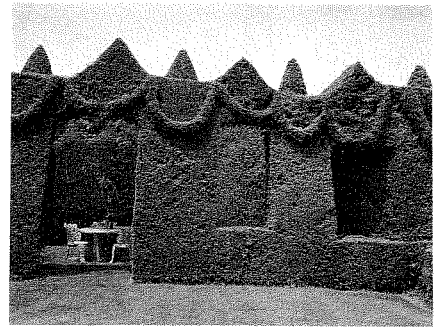
We approach the problem of figuring out what to do with the space around buildings in the same spirit, aiming to produce a good plan, whether for an orchard or a garden, a plaza or a shopping arcade, parking or passage. We aim to make *something* out of it, a new world out there in nature that complements the world of the building. In this way, the natural world becomes more habitable and familiar; we celebrate the “humanized” landscape, comfortable in the knowledge that the Forest Service and the National Park Service are taking care of enough wilderness to supply years of Sierra Club calendars. The face of nature that we wish to see has nothing to do with the awesome reality that made a dark cave more inviting than the open plain and inspired the first fences and walls. Weather is practically our only daily reminder that there are aspects of nature still beyond our control, especially on those occasions when she “goes on a rampage” and the worlds we have built for ourselves are suddenly no longer safe from storm and flood, lightning, wind, or tides.

But it is not just the physically threatening power of nature that the architects of the landscape overcome or conceal in creating what are deemed to be more appropriate environments around the buildings in which we live and work. “Original” nature is so infinitely complex that it must often seem to us disordered, random, even chaotic—in a way that has continually challenged us, over the course of history, to simplify, order, and set it right. We *master* nature. So the places we make for ourselves in nature, the out-of-doors places around buildings, strive for a pleasing impression of orderliness; good design comes down to sensitive composition of the spaces and selection of materials, responsive to the needs of the program. We add “amenities” around buildings: places to sit, handsome paving, lights, shrubs and flowers; fountains are especially nice to have. Enlightened cities make the addition of well-designed outdoor environments an important priority, firm in the belief that such places make our lives better, if only economically. We aim, in fact, all of us, for a look in the landscape that suggests solid economic prosperity, and we produce a great many more-or-less clean, more-or-less comfortable, easily comprehensible, but spiritually and emotionally sterile outdoor places.

Sterile. As soil is that lacks the yeasty mix of chemical nutrients that supports the life of living things. Every trace of the seductive mystery and wonder that is part of our childhood experience of the natural world seems to have been banished from the designed spaces around the buildings that we are forced to inhabit as adults. Why is it only at the edges, just beyond the limits of the world that we're keeping tidy, that the richly layered processes are most clearly revealed—in waste places, derelict lots, marshes and riverfronts (the ones that have not been sanitized and converted to shopping promenades), in patches of woods and untended verges of roadway? Why is it that torn-up places in the city, like a construction site that lays bare the strata of dirt and rock and lifts the pungent smell of earth into the air, exercise a strange allure, quite apart from the excitement of watching the work being done? Why have we never accommodated the experience of mud, of ice, of weedy thickets where birds nest, of engagement with trees and plants in some way other than as ornaments or architectural form-givers? Why must we obliterate from our landscapes any suggestion of death and decay, sweeping away the detritus that is the stuff of regenerating life and growth?

We cannot escape our human need, in designing the small pieces of the world that surround buildings, to filter the vision of what is so much beyond our comprehension through the distorting lenses of our own conceptions and desires. We must inevitably abstract from nature if we are to know her at all, if we are to conceive the forms through which our understanding and reverence and delight are to find expression. If the forms and conventions that we have inherited from the past show signs of having lost their vitality and meaning, that's probably just as well. The world beyond the building is not a void waiting to be filled, or a chaos waiting to be ordered. Designing in nature is not at all like designing a building; the building, in fact, exists in the midst of living nature. Right now, it appears, we find it difficult to handle the world around the building in ways that reflect what our minds know or our souls sense about the way that natural system works. We need to engage in a new conversation, a dialogue with nature through the language of design, creating landscapes that reflect questions rather than routinely imposed answers.

3



Photographs by Marc Treib

- 1 Versailles, France
- 2 Yosemite Valley, California
- 3 Ladew's Topiary Garden.
Monkton, Maryland.

Drawing on the Bus

Anthony Dubovsky

*January 1, 1982.
New Year*

Bright sun, 10 A.M. The F bus up Solano; one other rider (shotgun) Chicano (?) with large tattoo. Few stops. "I'm goin' up to get me some records."

Impetus, impulse. Begin again.

At one point some years ago, my car needing a new engine and the mechanic, though good, being also very slow, I found myself a pedestrian, on the street, at the mercy of public transit. I had to ride the bus.

Having grown up in California, where driving is close to an involuntary reflex, my first reaction was dismay and frustration. What an inconvenience! However, what had seemed a burden

soon proved a delight. Let me explain.

The doors swing open, you lift your foot high to catch the first step, a muscular gesture, one which takes a certain energy. You enter the chamber.

Initial confusion; the correct change; is there a seat? The machine lurches off.

After a few rides, one gets the hang of this, develops a certain panache. Experienced riders flash transit passes, swing into their seats. Only the novice fumbles, or the occasional exhibitionist who plants himself firmly at the driver's side and calls out down the aisle, "Anyone have change?"

Women with small children are a special case, for they have to deposit the youngsters first, an acceptable indiscretion, then return to pay the fare. Older riders mount slowly, their backs bent, one hand always on the railing. If they're lucky, younger ones move over to make room up front.

Asian women with strong voices, language unknown, chat across the aisle. A band of elderly Russian émigrés off to church on Sunday morning, sitting as a foursome, on two seats, looking at each other, speak in voices low. A high school student, full makeup, fashion review. And once behind me, two women speaking in

animated tones, strained, intelligent: "Those doctors don't know anything. They just give us drugs." Veterans of Napa, the state mental hospital.

Three young black men, claiming the back seat, sweatshirts with hoods up and caps on top, slouched, stretching out their legs. The drivers vary, too. Some are talkers, with their favorite routes. "Yeah, the Union Pacific stopped me for a while, but we'll make it up by Ashby and Adeline." They have their effects: a jacket, carefully draped over the back of a seat, a particular leather bag. Their gray serge trousers seem to be made in one size only, loose or pulling tight over the thighs. Blacks and Chicanos, people without cars, off to work, going home, some of them just riding.

I have my place in all this, second row behind the driver, a bit of privacy and yet a clear view of the front. Paper ready, I learn to gauge the length of a ride: how one person sits leaning forward a little, slightly tense, watching the street for familiar signs, ready to get off—don't draw! Or another, turned inward, more contained, set for a long haul. Aha!

Each route has its particular character; a kind of litmus test of the city, of people's lives. Take the 72 bus, for example. Running the length of San Pablo Avenue, the

original wagon road and later a streetcar line, from downtown Oakland up through Emeryville, Berkeley, Albany, and on to the outer reaches of Richmond, the blocks unroll like geology, core sample layers both subtle and clear. In Albany, a foreign couple, young, sitting close together, bound for the WWII-vintage married students' housing; in North Oakland a man with a heavily bandaged foot and worn hands; a group of boys, on excursion, wild, retarded, accompanied by a pair of middle-aged women, placid but firm.

El Greco drew madmen, the inmates of asylums; Goya, too. For Degas it was the café, the racetrack, the dance. Delacroix journeyed to North Africa, while Toulouse-Lautrec revelled in the denizens of Montmartre. John Sloan and Raphael Soyer brought us the streets of New York, and Walker Evans rode the subway, his camera hidden.

For me it's the bus. People reading, reflecting, gazing out the windows or at each other, sitting without looking at all—distracted, perhaps, or lulled by the ride. These are moments in between events, gaps in the give and take of everyday life. Joyce's epiphany, instants of freedom. Here we are riders together, as if independent of time, yet immersed in history, and in our own stories.

1 July 87
FBms - Pm.



10.11.85



1.10.85



6 May 1989

To Ben Am. To animate
a history of landscape -
in painting I know
this concept. Deconstruct
Gore at home.
Yakking - little
from Brown seminar.
I should have
described this...



23.11.86
22.9.86





28.VIII.96
72 Bm





The Block and the Towpath Reconsidered

Michael Dunas
and Sarah Bodine

The Block

Although sociologists and architectural critics have railed against the socially destructive nature of modernist housing experiments; as a child growing up in New York, I was unaware of modernist experiments. My immediate environs never changed during my fifteen-year tenancy there. We were reassured that we would probably grow out of the neighborhood but that the buildings were there forever. Television was just arriving on the scene, so I was not really informed about a sense of place. However, I knew I lived in an apartment house because there were many mailboxes in the entry and my mother kept dreaming of moving to the suburbs and a house of her own. Nevertheless, my formative years provided a lasting impression, an urban experience confined by the space between apartment buildings, the street, or, in colloquial terms, the block. Ours was truly a socially constructive rather than destructive experiment, and we took the public arena as our own, transforming it from a need for our own vernacular.

When I was old enough to be allowed out in the street, my first awareness was one of geographic boundaries. The continuous unbroken facades on both sides of the street became the physical and visual backdrop for activity. At both ends of the

block there were vast raging rivers of speeding cars that were to be traversed only by the most adventurous.

□



1

1 The stoop, 1955.

The Towpath

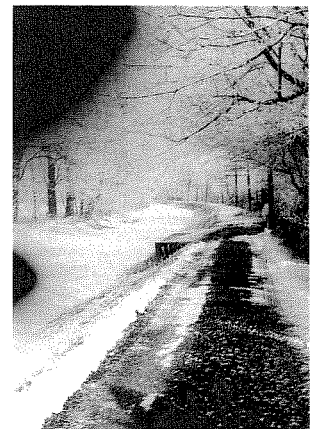
While Michael was growing up on a city block with only metaphorical rivers of cars, I was growing up on a towpath, a long, narrow alleyway between the real waters of a brackish brown canal and the sparkling and swift Delaware River. The towpath, this packed dirt lane, only wide enough for one car or two mules, passed by six houses, of which ours was the last and farthest from the main road. For me, it was the avenue for exploration.

When the canal was dug, it was intended for transportation, but by the time of my childhood this use was the furthest from anyone's mind. By then, the canal was a source of recreation: the summer brought mule-drawn barges full of boisterous camera-laden tourists past our door and winter marathon ice skating parties that demanded frequent warm-up stops at neighbors' houses along the route.

As on the block, the geographic boundaries of our environment were linear, self-contained and open-ended; yet, unlike the block, the towpath was solitary, without a sense of neighborhood, events were contrived in reaction to natural occurrences, and, as I now know, in the name of progress man could

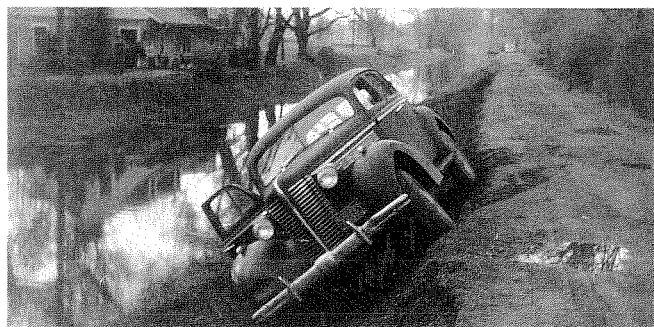
irreversibly change the environment with the swiftness of the river at flood time.

□



2

2 Canal and Towpath in winter, 1948.



Ostensibly, the buildings had no backs, and I can't remember ever venturing out to this vast, cavernous, barren hollow, used mostly to hang laundry. Our lives were oriented toward the street. Even the apartments were of little consequence. In fact, I don't even recall apartment interiors, yet I knew just about every tenant by sight and name—all from interaction on the street.

As I began to feel my way around the block, there were rules to be obeyed, a sort of rite of passage. At first you were only allowed to sit and play on your own stoop, then maybe your immediate sidewalk, to be followed by triumphant forays into the gutter or down the block to visit other stoops and other sidewalks. You began to know the local haunts, where the young toughs sat defiantly on the fenders of parked cars, the "Spanish steps" where everyone gathered at dusk to listen to the radio. You knew the secret doorways where you could date. You began to identify with a particular group—a gang in a benign sense—who appropriated the turf around certain buildings, the leader perched on the highest step of the stoop, with his lieutenants congregating beneath.

□

I guess "bank" a canal or berm bank—that ledge of land that held the canal while forming the back wall

of our living room—was a part of our vocabulary unknown to city kids. Unfamiliarity with banks proved treacherous to numerous guests of my parents, such as the Canadian couple who arrived for dinner after dark and parked on the towpath. The unwitting wife, in her new mink and high heels, found herself plunging down a muddy bank into the waters of an icy cold canal rather than entering a warm foyer as expected. There was always trouble navigating cars on the one-lane towpath—even a pedestrian had to squeeze up next to a house or duck into a porch to let a car go past. Once my uncle drove up the bank from our driveway, missed the towpath, and landed his car sideways in the canal in broad daylight.

Banks provided a landscape with a hierarchy of artificial levels: the canal and towpath, the house and lawn, the river. Such terracing was our "street" grid, our orienting device as kids. Growing up meant the ability to leave the middle level and venture both to the towpath above and the river below.

□

3 Uncle's car down canal bank, 1947.

Noise was the energizing factor. Sounds were ironically mellifluous as they reverberated from the structures, an acoustic transcendence that rivaled the best of rock and roll. The sounds included not only the blaring of radios, occasional local scuffles, and squealing of a multitude of children but

the roar of crowds watching the monumental struggles of stickball games pitting one block against another: the 49th Street Barons versus the 50th Street Dukes, for example. Both organized and random noise focused attention on the street. There was also private noise made public, such as after-dinner discussions among adults who congregated in beach chairs on the sidewalk to debate local events over beer and cigarettes. The telephone was a convention of nuisance, and completely superfluous. All you really had to do was to lean out the window to communicate with your neighbor. When I needed to get in touch with a friend, I stood in front of his window, called his name, and a conversation ensued. If privacy was mandatory, the quiet lamplight of a proverbial corner, narrow hallways, or an abandoned car could provide it.

□



One side of the double-fronted houses along the towpath opened onto the higher level, a sort of formal second-story entrance. The other side looked out across a wide lawn onto the river below. The split levels of these houses, each situated on a couple acres of land, created an abundance of steps and passages that to me seemed secret and special. Three houses down from ours was my favorite haunt, in memory a sea of green—ivy that clung to the stone walls and shutters and a willow tree that swept out over the towpath and canal.

It was the only house perpendicular to the towpath, its orientation creating an alleyway stepped to the lower front door, cool and dark yet romantically luxurious.

The most friendly and at the same time scariest inhabitants of my towpath route were the dogs, creatures always somehow distinctly matched to their respective houses or yards. At the house of lush greenness lived an exotic, high-strung whippet, while next door at the practical neighbor's, who was forever building a boat in his yard under the mottled sycamores, languished two friendly collies. Upriver, in less familiar territory, skulked vicious German shepherds, who tore at one's clothes, attacking with neither warning nor mercy from hiding places down banks or behind walls.

□

Street orientation was to be learned. Although building facades were an imposing, static perspective that vanished at each end of the block, I became cognizant of landmarks, distances, and direction from the dot zero of my house. I could distinguish different residences by color, doorway, or configuration of the stoop. I would identify the neighbors by their windows and more specifically by their fire escapes, which were usually outfitted with eclectic furniture, their public interiors. As I recall, many fire escapes were affixed to

4 Skating on the canal in front of our second-story entrance.

the front rather than the back of the houses, since no outlet exited to the rear. These were considered part of the street rather than the building, balconies rather than external stairways. People slept on them, did homework on them, cock-tailed on them, and used them as bleachers during street sporting events. Manhole covers and street lamps were very valuable, as all distance was measured by “sewers” and “poles,” as in, “I can hit three sewers,” a sure sign of athletic superiority.

□



My father resolved that he would never live anywhere but on a river. Just after moving into our house, he enlarged all the riverfront windows, allowing us to “live” outside as much as possible. He loved to sit in the dining room watching the river amble by, the glistening of reflected light. In fact, he installed a mirror on the back wall of the dining room so that no one would ever be without a river view while eating. The picture windows framed the stage of outdoor lawn activities as well—my brother’s periodic climb to the top of the spreading but shakey dogwood, batting practice and tree maze parties.

While the house seemed a sanctuary in this watery environment, flood time always proved suspenseful. During thaws or heavy rains we would post stakes on the lawn to measure the river’s upward progress overnight.

The potential confluence of river and canal, the dissolving of the bank, rendering our house a submerged container of mud, caused childhood nightmares, visions of fish, frogs and snakes in our beds, whirlpools carrying logs, old tires and floating islands from basement to attic. And in the summer of 1955 the river did keep coming, only receding after it was four feet high in our living room.

□

As I began to find acceptance in the society of the block, I became more aggressive in participating in the creative appropriation, the transformation of custom and ritual. Everything between the buildings took on the aspect of street furniture to be rearranged and reused. For me at that age, play was my primary and only objective. Lines scored into the poured concrete sidewalks were ideal for hopscotch and box ball. Walls offered the perfect surface for handball and served as buttresses for late-night games of Johnny-on-the-pony. Stoops were not only for sitting; they were inevitably adapted for stoop ball, some with dull noses giving back little; others perfect for high-arching “killers.” Lampposts were the natural vegetation; the two living trees on the block seemed alien. We climbed the lampposts like Jungle Gyms, hung effigies from them at Halloween, and rallied around them during games of hide-and-seek. Hide-and-seek proved the most

5 Our house from the tow-path looking down toward Delaware River, 1948.

adventurous of urban games, as we had to be resourceful in exploring unknown nooks and crannies of the built environment. Fire hydrants were to be vaulted and opened during the torrid summers, flooding the streets like Venetian canals. Trash cans, a euphemism for the building's detritous were our musical instruments and source of bottles returned for deposit to purchase the sustenance of penny candy.

□

Our driveway hurtled down a 45° bank from the towpath and occupied a large area between the house and barn/garage. Paved and enclosed by walls, the secluded parking area became the sports arena—my brother's basketball hoop installed on the two-story barn at one end and my sandbox at the other.

Living closely with nature, we were more conscious of the change of seasons and their accompanying colors than city kids. For example, along the canal bank my mother planted a cluster of azaleas, which in springtime covered the bank with a wash of hot pink that long predated Shappirelli. This gave notice that soon we could watch for nests of bunnies and begin turning rocks for crayfish along the river bank.

Solitary games come strongly to mind in remembering the towpath house. My sandbox, a locale of countless hours of self-amusement, occupied a protected corner of the

driveway, confined by stone walls so high that when I sat down I could not see out. Between the sandbox and the wall was our version of a manhole cover to which I usually paid little or no attention. Once, after fixing the pump, the plumber left the cover slightly ajar, and while standing back to observe a sandbox marvel of my own making, I stepped on the lid, flipped it over and found myself 20 feet down a dark, vertical cylinder. Stunned, yet unhurt, I discovered the steel rung ladder and pulled myself out. The experience of such an alien context, a dark underground void, contrasted sharply with the familiar spatial hierarchy of bank and level that I had learned to trust. And I experienced for the first time that disturbing feeling that comes with the consequence of ignoring the environment, that my uncle must have felt in driving his car down the canal bank and my father felt in watching his house bloated with river water.

□

Chalk was our artistic medium, as spray paint was not yet in vogue. Fluid and temporal, our chalk masterpieces were dissolved by recurring rain or buckets of wash water from irate landlords. Childlike scribbles and pithy sayings were commonplace, but schematic drawings were often the order of the day. Scoreboards on walls recorded the day's events. Love notes let us know who was going out with whom. Gameboards,

like skelsey, a sort of Parcheesi with bottle caps, were scribed and bases and playing fields were marked, all instigated by the urges for experimental play within the confines of the street's grid. At day's end, a rainbow of colors transformed the landscape of the block that was ultimately germane to the constructed experience yet visibly alien to the context.

□

All energy flowed up the bank and down the towpath from our house, that earthen berm defining our zone, our world of play and adventure. The banks not only supported the houses but also dictated their structure and orientation. My memory bank is filled with grassy slides and muddy rocks, with endless encounters at the watery perimeters of a house that in actuality no longer exists. Not long ago it was demolished to make way for a thruway bridge to span the river. Now all that remains are the walls, banks and flagstone terraces as reminders that the natural environment sometimes so threatening was less ferocious in effecting changes than those wrought by man.

□

All energy flowed into the street, that strip of black tar bordered by delineating curbs. The buildings, sidewalks and anthropomorphic street furniture focused attention on the arena of cultural enactment. The grand parade of the city block encompassed gang skirmishes, symbolic ball games, scooter races, promenades of young couples

and Elysian Fields of block parties. Time on our block was nonexistent. For me as a youngster, time was structured and arbitrarily terminated by my mother's call to come home and go to bed. As a block of time, a block in time, its duration eludes my grasp, beyond the notion that I am no longer there. My memory keeps recalling instances, impressions and revelations framed by those buildings that some unenlightened souls say are mute.

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Michael Auping is currently Chief Curator of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo. Mr. Auping is in the process of organizing an exhibition of Hamish Fulton's works, which will focus on the artist's special interest in the North American Indian. Other publications by the author include *John Chamberlain: Reliefs 1960-1983* (Sarasota: Ringling Museum of Art, 1983); *Francesco Clemente* (New York: Abrams, 1985); and *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments*, jointly published by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and Abrams in conjunction with the same exhibition this fall.

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