

# The Site as Project Lessons from Land Art to Conceptual

"It seems inevitable that we should leave behind the nostalgic notions of a site being essentially Art bound to the physical and empirical realities of a place."<sup>1</sup>

by Marvin Hogue

## Introduction

Within architectural thought and process, the site is traditionally thought of as a physical location, a piece of ground that is bound to the earth and subject to its physical laws. Site is also commonly conceived as a location for an intervention, a neutral or unfinished "lot" to be completed by an architectural project. Site and project are often thought to be distinct, one making way for the other.

Work performed in the context of land and conceptual art provides a unique challenge to these assumptions. There the site and the project have been understood as interwoven in the production of art. For many of these artists, "site" is integral to the activities of reflection (design) and making (production). The location of the work is often established by the artist, and the material qualities often emerge from a manipulation of found conditions as much as from new construction. In such projects, the "site" not only invites artistic activity but often constitutes its constructive result: "one does not impose, but rather expose the site."<sup>2</sup>

Within architecture, then, the notion of site might be similarly broadened by thinking of it as a fundamental part of the design and building process. To conceive the site as "constructed" is to challenge its given, immutable qualities. It is to enter into a contentious territory of creation, one that is vulnerable to new and exciting interpretations.

What follows is a discussion of land and conceptual art projects that suggests a reconsideration of the relationship between site and project within architecture. To do so, three key concepts central to the way we understand the site will be challenged: the role that imagination, location, and time play in constructing the site.

## Constructing the Site:

### Imagination

*There are latent assumptions to be challenged. For example, the persistent consideration of site as existing solely at or above the surface of the earth...<sup>3</sup>*

In her seminal article "On Site: Architectural Preoccupations," Carol Burns proposes the notion of the "cleared site" to describe the traditional thinking about architectural sites—that the site is no more than that which awaits architectural intervention, something empty or cleared of content either physically or intellectually. She shows this concept to be simultaneously pervasive and destructive, suggesting that the cleared site is really no more than a formal strategy, an unhelpful habit of architectural thinking.<sup>4</sup> For her, a more fruitful direction lies in the recognition that all sites are constructions, the imagination, or both. The site is never simply found, but instead always constitutes an act of making.<sup>5</sup>

*Perhaps there are always two landscapes: one which we physically perceive and one which we mentally construct. We could say, perhaps, that the successful earthworks are those which generate a presence at both levels.<sup>6</sup>*

Robert Smithson's "nonsites" provide a challenge to the traditional notion of site described by Burns. For him, the site was never simply a repository of features ripe for intervention, but served as the artistic project in itself—the site as project. Located in a gallery or museum, each nonsite is an installation intended to represent, through a number of

constituent parts (maps, extracted soil samples contained in manufactured bins, photographs, written narratives), an actual "site" located outside the gallery and visited by the artist. For Smithson, the role of the imagination is not to complete or build upon a suggestive canvas provided by the site, but rather to point out the gap that exists between the unprocessed, found reality of the land and its appropriation in ways that provide specific interpretations of the site. The artist described this process as a "Dialectic between Site and Nonsite," a process that directly engages both the empirical and the imagined, the sight and the nonsight.<sup>7</sup>

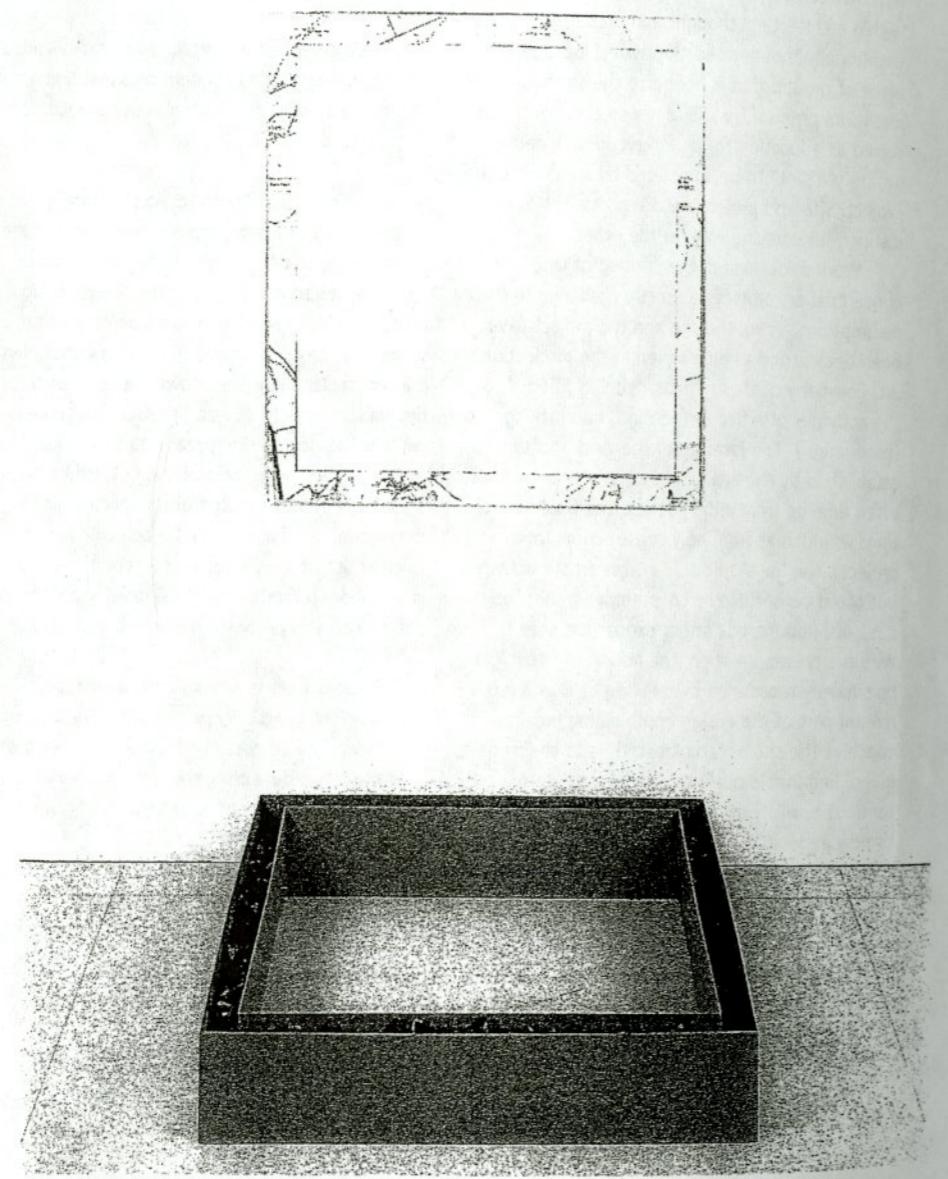
The artifacts or parts that form the nonsite, taken individually, yield a series of distinct operations that define the site as constructed: the rocks indicate collecting and displacing, the bins frame or establish boundaries, the photographs suggest walking or moving about the site, the maps indicate location, and so on. Although the sum of these artifacts resists definition as a single, cohesive whole or "site," the land that has been transposed into the gallery reclaims above all else the status of the neutral piece of ground that we come to associate with the traditional open site awaiting intervention:

The site, in a sense, is the physical, raw reality—the earth or the ground that we are not really aware of when we are in an interior room or studio or something like that—and so I decided that I would set limits in terms of this dialogue... and as a result I went and instead of putting something on the landscape I decided it would be interesting to transfer the land indoors, to the nonsite, which is an abstract container.<sup>8</sup>

However, it is the displacement of earth from the actual "site" to the gallery nonsite that produces the shift in awareness between found and constructed ideals of site desired by Smithson. In *Mono Lake Non-Site*, the samples of earth extracted from the site and the map, hung on the wall at eye level, appears in orthographic projection as an undistorted image. Thus the same site is presented in two ways: one concerned with the experience of sight, the other with an intellectualization or rationalization of the land. A full reconciliation of the actual site is possible only in the mind. The sites of each nonsite are firmly rooted in the mind, not as a single "picture," but as a rich set of representations open to the viewer's scrutiny. In the outside world, however, the passage of the artist has left no physical traces.<sup>9</sup> Visits to the site are possible, but Smithson offers that "once you get there you're on your own."<sup>10</sup> The repercussions of this idea are profound: although we traditionally expect the "site" to be that place which awaits intervention, for Smithson "the site is where a piece should be but isn't."<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, the nonsites suggest that what we have come to understand as the site for work might be little more than the set of ideas we have about that site. The lesson is then twofold. First, what is empirically present is never enough to serve as a site. Second, a site is also never only the set of ideas about a place or its representations, but is always submerged within the dialectic of both ideas and concrete experience.

Smithson's cryptic statement that "the site is where a piece should be but isn't" suggests yet a deeper reading of site that we have not yet considered. Like a palimpsest, any actual site could be seen as a specific set of locations, a variety of narratives, and therefore suggests many possibilities for action. But it is also possible to conceive, based on



1. Robert Smithson, *Mono Lake Non-Site (Cinders Near Black Point)*, 1968. Painted steel container, cinders, and site map. (Photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman. Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. © Estate of Robert Smithson/Licensed by VAGA, New York.)

Smithson's work and statement, that the site might be nothing more than the structure of one's experience. In this he prefigures the work of Richard Long. Within much of his work, the site is conceived not as a clearly delineated place, but as a structure for experience in the form of a process (to walk in a straight line) or map (to walk in the landscape the radius of a circle as drawn on a map). (See Figure 2.)

#### Five Walks

- A walk of 30 miles
- A walk passing 30 farmhouses (24 miles)
- A walk crossing 30 crossroads (34 miles)
- A walk seeing 30 blackbirds (29 miles)
- A walk lasting 30 hours (96 miles)

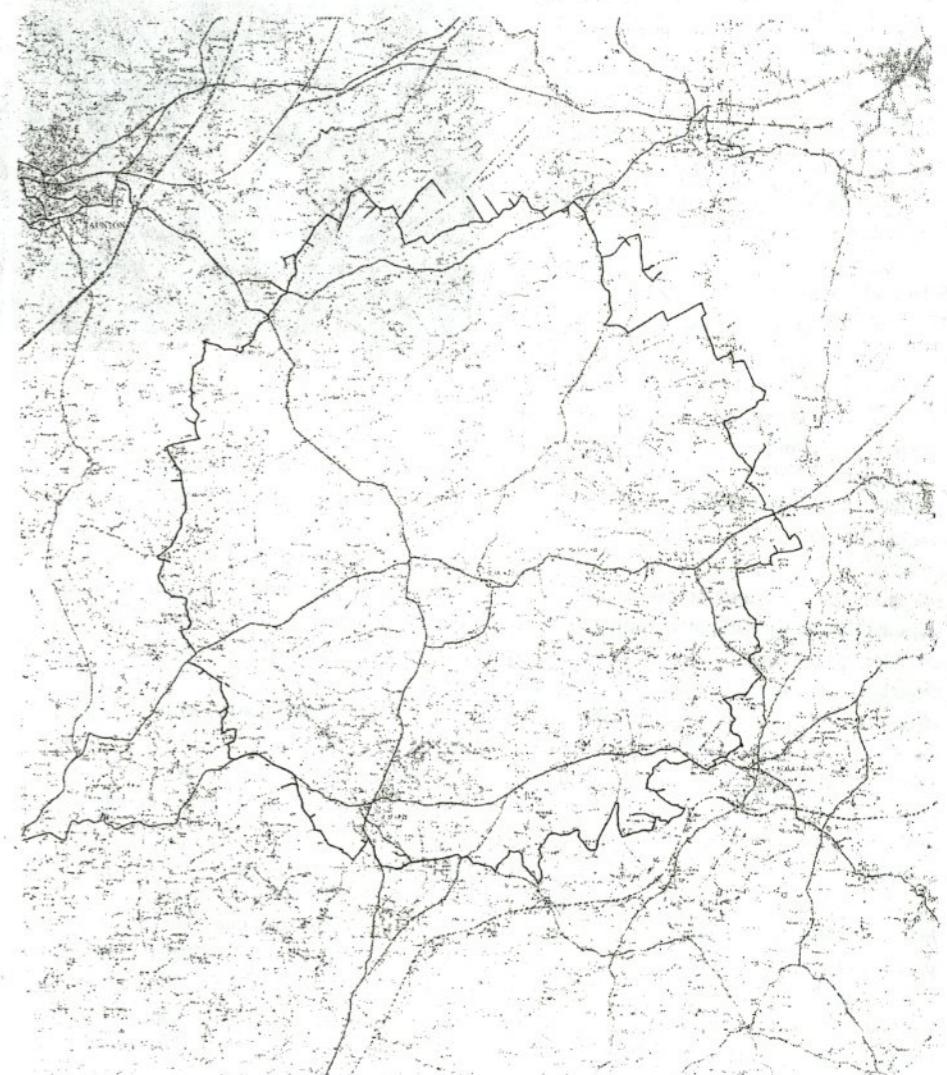
(Richard Long, *Six Days and One Night in England*, 1993)

Considering this work, Long lays out a set of conditions (miles, farmhouses, crossroads, blackbirds, and time) that provide a structure to a site without describing a specific site at all; it is the rigidity of the established itinerary (or project) that leads to a concrete experience of the landscape. This produces a kind of reversal in which it is the "project" that is given and where the "site" becomes the object of creative speculation. In this example, the "site" is the site formed by the "project," a walk that passes thirty farmhouses, or a walk seeing thirty blackbirds.

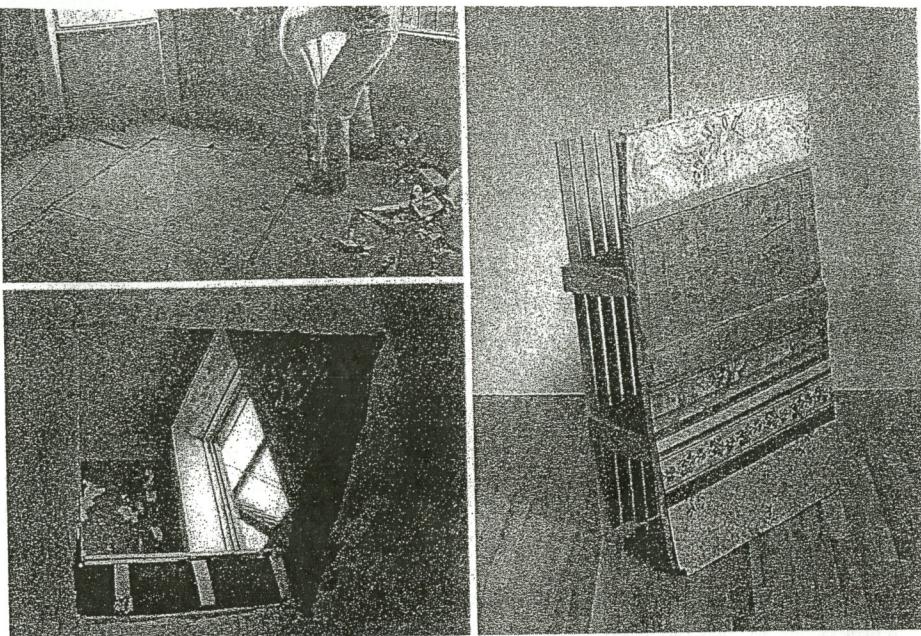
Long's trajectories through the landscape also suggest new ways in which we might reconsider our own initial visits to a new site: for the architect, such trajectories or visits typically include a careful measuring of the land, taking account of its critical features, and the like. What becomes possible are site investigations that might reveal the qualities of a site that would otherwise remain latent with the use of conventional surveying procedures.

The work of Long and Smithson suggests the importance of the imagination in enabling more diverse and richer concrete experiences of the land. Smithson helps architects to consider the richness of

2. Richard Long, *A Walk By All Roads Touching or Crossing An Imaginary Circle*, Somerset, England, 1977. Framed work map and text. (Photo by Prudence Cumming Associates Ltd., London. Courtesy of Haunch of Venison Gallery, London.)



A WALK BY ALL ROADS AND LANES TOUCHING OR CROSSING AN IMAGINARY CIRCLE  
SOMERSET ENGLAND 1977



a site outside of its physical properties and features by establishing the importance of ideas and the imagination in site definition. Long and Smithson together suggest that it may be enriching to think of a site as the structure of action that conditions our experience of any environment. With both, we are confronted with the idea that sites can exist in the mind's eye before they are established as precise locations in the world.

#### Site and Location

The work of Long and Smithson calls into question the traditional assumption that a site is a location that precedes the project. Further, they question the idea of a site as belonging only to the realm of the concrete, the known, and the quantifiable, that is, conditions thought to be "received" by the architect and over which s/he has little or no control.<sup>12</sup> In this they dislodge the assumed primacy of location in the definition of a site and place it alongside the site as a concept—as a set of ideas and relationships in the mind. Similarly, others artists have extended this challenge to the relationship between project, location, and site by making site selection an integral part of the creative process. Examples include instances in which a project once formed is completed by a choice of site (as with Long), or in which the location of the site is established by selecting that place that most closely matches specific attributes of an imagined, "ideal" site.

Much of the distinctive power of the early Matta-Clark interventions like *Bronx Floors* were developed through the appropriate selection of sites.<sup>13</sup> (See Figure 3.) The artist had begun experimenting with the idea of extracting building wall and floor fragments during the renovations of his own loft and the restaurant *Food* in New York, which he co-owned. Recognizing the artistic potential to this kind of intervention, Matta-Clark later actively solicited city officials for the use of abandoned buildings as potential "sites" for more extensive projects of the same nature.<sup>14</sup> As a case of the project preceding the site, Matta-Clark hoped to

project the idea of abandonment primarily by reinforcing, through careful interventions of removal, the state and feeling of abandonment that was already a part of these buildings. Receiving no response, the artist forged ahead and completed the project without permission from the buildings' owners, thus lending additional subversiveness to the project itself.

In a more linear fashion, James Turrell spent more than six months searching for an ideal location for what would later become the site for *Roden Crater*. In his previous work on natural light, Turrell had begun experimenting with a series of "skyspaces," small vertical chambers in which a large, single opening created in the roof allowed the viewer to experience the changing quality of the light in the sky. He began to envision an extinct volcano as the earthly "site" of a much larger skyspace that would need to meet a number of spatial and phenomenological expectations.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the crater project literally preceded or determined the selection of the site.<sup>16</sup> Upon discovering the *Roden Crater* site near Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1974, Turrell went on to purchase not only the volcano itself but also large quantities of surrounding land. Thus, he was able to control views from the top of the crater, and in the process match the expansiveness of the sky above

to the views he has carefully sculpted and constructed within. For Turrell, the true site of this project is not so much the volcano itself, but the territory of the sky.

The relationship between location and site is further brought into question through the notion of the margin. In this regard, sites are thought possible in places that we would not normally understand as sites or in places that cannot be located or appear on standard maps or registers. Our traditional assumptions of possible locations as a "site for something" are disrupted. In this regard, Matta-Clark's occupation of unoccupied buildings and Turrell's open-sky site serve to suggest that sites can exist outside of traditional frameworks of reference.

Both margin and marginalization have been important themes behind works of land art. Smithson's journeys to the industrial wastelands of New Jersey (the early nonsites, the *Monuments of Passaic* travelogue) and later the southwestern desert (*Spiral Jetty*) with Michael Heizer and others, indicates the importance of a search for increasingly marginalized sites. For Walter de Maria, "isolation is the essence of Land Art" because it severed connections to the art world and its institutions by seeking locations remote from major urban and cultural centers.<sup>17</sup> Many felt that a greater degree of

creative freedom was achieved in their work in this way. These projects invite speculation for both the potential for far-flung sites in architecture and the notion that access to these marginal places can constitute an integral part of the constructed experience of site.<sup>18</sup>

Matta-Clark's *Fake Estates* serves as an intriguing example of margin used literally to refer to spaces left over within the urban environment. (See Figure 4.) The project embraces conventions of mapping and surveying traditionally employed in establishing the location and the precise boundaries of the site. *Fake Estates* explores those particular moments in the process of subdividing property where such conventions produce a conceptual "excess of surveying," as it were, thus fostering

unexpected anomalies in the fabric of the city. Survey lines become so numerous that new, unintended parcels begin to appear.

The artist purchased fourteen parcels of residual land, deemed "gutter space" or "curb property," in Queens and Staten Island that had been put on sale for \$25 each: a 2.33-by-355-foot strip of land, a 1.83-by-1.11-foot lot, among others.<sup>19</sup> Many were literally inaccessible and landlocked between buildings or other properties. Of these, Matta-Clark remarked, "that's an interesting quality; something that can be owned but never experienced."<sup>20</sup> The artist created an exhibit of his newly acquired "properties" by assembling for each, and with deadpan accuracy, a photographic inventory of the site, its exact dimensions and location, as well as the

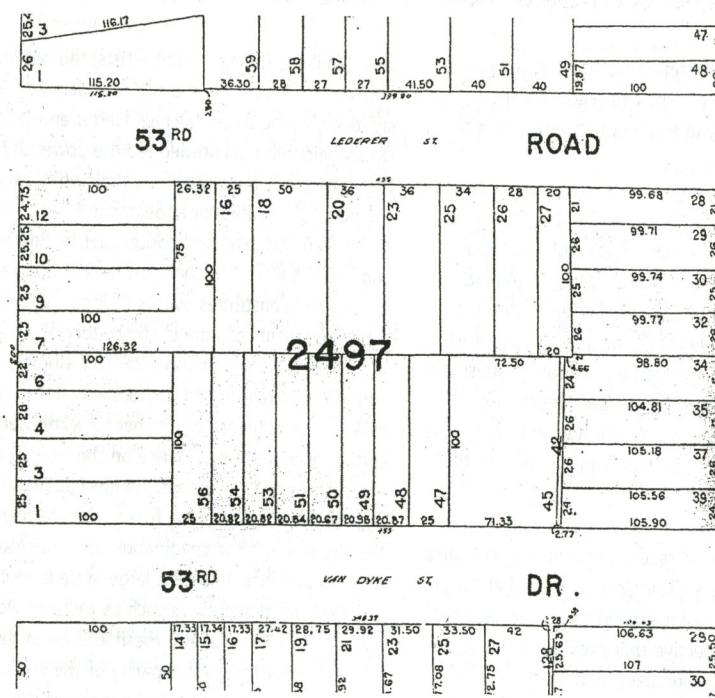
deed to the property. For Matta-Clark, "the unusability of this land—and the verification of space through the laws of property—is [the] principal object of [his] critique."<sup>21</sup> Thus, the role of site in relation to unusual or unusable locations is rhetorical; they cannot receive a building within a traditional understanding of an architectural project. *Fake Estates* invites speculation as to the value and purpose of land and reveals the conceptual potential of "real" sites, even small and unusable ones. It suggests an aggressive seeking of sites in unexpected locations, or simply in those places that we assume do not have architectural potential.

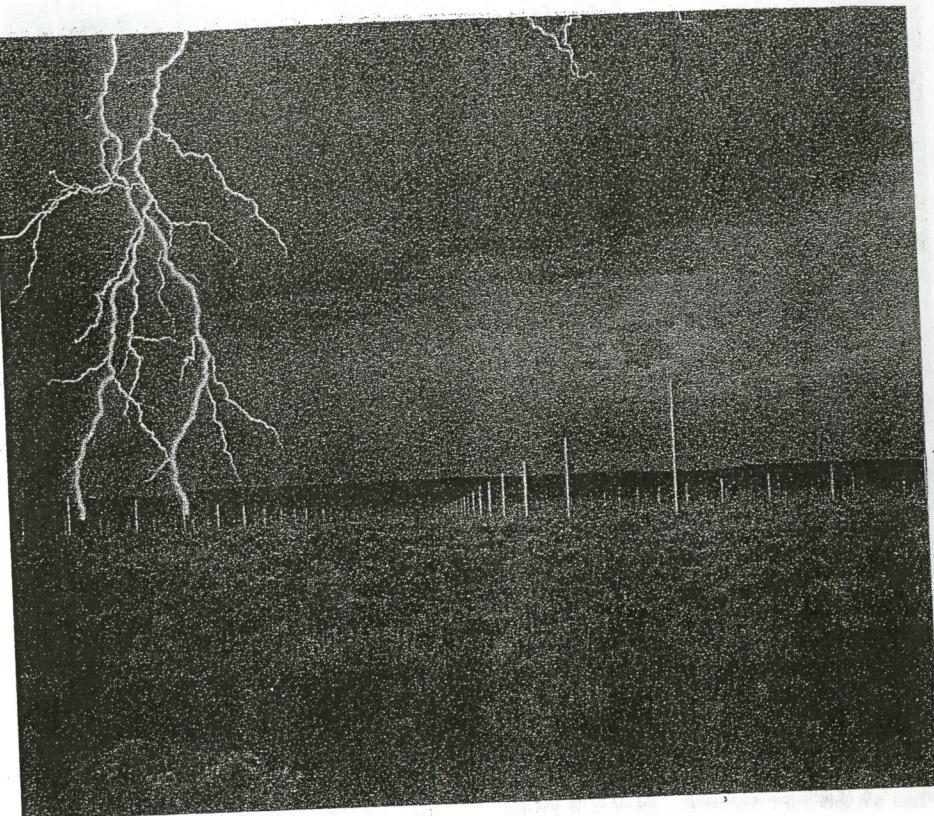
The *Fake Estates* project also firmly established architecture as the "site" of Matta-Clark's creative work.<sup>22</sup> Seen in a larger context, *Fake Estates* is part of an artistic tradition of projects within conceptual art concerned with neglected architectural environments that make up the urban and suburban fabric. In many of these projects, again, the site is first an object of the mind, looking critically, as it were, at familiar conditions in the built environment. These works include the documentary surveys of Dan Graham (suburban housing); Ed Ruscha's studies of parking lots, gas stations, and apartment buildings in Los Angeles; Hans Haacke's mapping of real estate holdings in Manhattan; the work of Robert Smithson; as well as the interventions of Matta-Clark, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Rachel Whiteread, and others. The implication for architects is an interesting reversal of assumptions in that the finished building (and not the land on which it resides) becomes the site for work. These projects constitute a reminder that most buildings and structures are often conceptually neglected over time and thus can serve as rich sites for future projects.

#### Site and Time: The Site as Process

There is a conceptual elegance to the idea that a site can be a project in itself. One can design with this sense of time and change in mind; rather than follow the logic of the term project that in architecture suggests a more arrested state of things.

4. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Fake Estates*, detail ("Little Alley," Block 2497, Lot 42), Queens, 1973. (2004 The Sanborn Map Company. The Sanborn Library, LLC. All rights reserved. Highlight of the site by the author.)





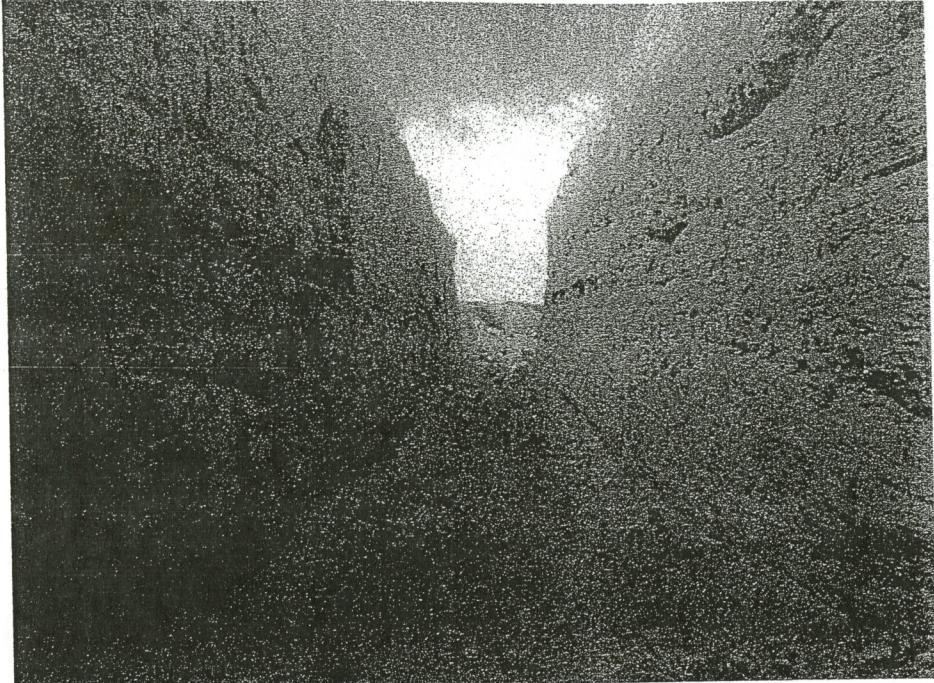
where needed, and in reference to what is already there. It invites the designer to recognize the potential of a site and tease out its qualities without overpowering them.

To rethink site and project is also to conceive the site as a process. For Richard Long, "a walk is just one more layer, a mark, laid upon the thousands of other layers of human and geographic history to the surface of the land."<sup>24</sup> Understood in this way, a site is something of a repository of its own history, some of which can be found physically embedded within the site, whereas much else resides more ephemerally in the human history of it. It is a repository that is forever in the process of change.

Smithson's work is deeply influenced by a sense of time beyond recent occupations and narratives, and in a site's geological timeline that far precedes and will likely far exceed its human occupation.<sup>25</sup> It is a perspective that provides him a sense of immediacy, indeterminacy, and insignificance in the sense that his works are always works in pro-

cess. Similarly, for many land artists, the notion of time and its actions on the site is understood as a creative shaping force. Michael Heizer and Dennis Oppenheim have acknowledged the powerful role that time plays in transforming their work, even to the point of eventual disappearance.<sup>26</sup>

Given this extended context set by Smithson and Long, a walk, like the most lasting buildings or landscapes, constitutes events that occupy relatively short increments of time in the history of a site. The site remains a construction without a single author.<sup>27</sup> The role of architecture may not be to establish permanence but rather to acknowledge a certain richness of experience on the site. To operate in this way is to accept the inevitability of change. Future events are fused with the history of the site through the imagination as a substitute for direct experience. In recent large-scale landscape architecture competitions such as those of *Downsview Park* in Toronto, and *Fresh Kills* on Staten Island in New York, the capacity of the site to adapt and transform over extended periods of time was as



a primary conceptual determinant of each project.<sup>28</sup> The architect or landscape architect constructs the site as infrastructure in ways that can later be altered by others and that comes to fruition over time.

Relatedly, Kenneth Frampton has encouraged architects to "cultivate the site" through design and construction in such a way as to uncover dormant narratives and strategies.<sup>29</sup> Taking the point further, Miwon Kwon challenges that site-specific strategies can be reactive of existing site conditions and thereby "generative of [new] identities and histories."<sup>30</sup> With both, the site is being rethought more in terms of process, less as a physical place, and more as the "site" of past events and potential futures rendered architecturally.

A consideration of time suggests an impoverishment in the way we understand sites in relation to projects. When sites are considered to be something more than a location awaiting a project, we are confronted more clearly with the quality of open-endedness and incompleteness that accompanies any completed project. It suggests a sense of humility and the need to design with change in

torian Marc Treib proposed the phrase *inflected landscapes* as a way to think of art, architecture, and landscape projects that, like Heizer's, share a formally and conceptually blurred relationship to their site.<sup>31</sup> For Treib, the process through which the landscape is inflected is often an act of transforming the site rather than one of new construction. In terms of site specificity, one might argue that what indeed lacks specificity is neither the site nor the project, but rather the relationship between the two.

To challenge these traditional presumptions is to summon in our imagination new realms of opportunity for architecture: more than an empty lot awaiting building, the site is a prospect for intervention—ephemeral or permanent, fixed or mobile, received or chosen, marginal or central, physical or virtual, real or fake. Within these conceptions of the site is a potential richness for architectural design. To conceive of the site as being a part of architecture is to more fully take charge of the formulation of architectural interventions, and to take initiative in actively shaping the built environment.

To suggest that the site is the project does not question the primacy of site in architecture. Rather, to construct the site is simultaneously to recognize the immutability of the site/project relationship and raise the possibility of expanding this relationship. Within this framework, the site remains the foundation upon which any project is established, but it is this very foundation that becomes the subject of critical inquiry.

#### Notes

1. Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80 (1997): 108.
2. Robert Smithson, "Toward the Development of an Air Terminal Site," *Artforum* 6/10 (1967). Reprinted in Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), p. 47.
3. Carol J. Burns, "On Site: Architectural Preoccupations," in Andrea Kahn, ed., *Drawing, Building, Text: Essays in Architectural Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), p. 165.
4. Ibid., pp. 149, 155.
5. Further, such designations as "this is the project site" construct or frame the site in terms of specific relationships to other known places