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[Essay by Raimund Abraham]

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Raimund Abraham

As much as I have dissociated myself from the theme of art and architecture as opposing entities, I very much identify with the theme of site, for it is my belief that the intervention and transformation of a site is the true beginning of architecture. Charles Olson expressed the idea of place in, *Call Me Ishmael*, his 1947 critical study of Melville's *Moby Dick*:

I take space to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.

It is geography at bottom, a hell of wide land from the beginning. That made the first American story (Parkman's): exploration.

Something else than a stretch of earth—seas on both sides, no barriers to contain as restless a thing as Western man was becoming in Columbus' day. That made Melville's story (part of it).

Plus a harshness we still perpetuate, a sun like a tomahawk, small earthquakes but big tornadoes and hurrikans, a river north and south in the middle of the land running out the blood.

The fulcrum of America is the Plains, half sea half land, a high sun as metal and obdurate as the iron horizon, and a man's job to square the circle.

I believe that where the sky and the earth collide, elements of the earth and the sky produce an intervention—the first architectural event. Architecture as an intervention is primarily not the designing, but the conquest of the site, the transformation of its topographic nature, that manifests the ontological roots of architecture. The process of design is only a secondary act whose

purpose is to reconcile and harmonize the consequences of the initial intervention. I see the process of architecture as one that oscillates between negation and reconciliation; it is a continuous confrontation between idea and image, intellect and emotion, technology and spirituality. More specifically, architectural space can only be defined as a collision of geometric and physiological space, of the ideal matter. And while the ideal represents the notion of infinity or the eternal, matter can be regarded as the symbolic representation of the body, its presence and absence. While man's conceptual powers aspire to the infinite, his body is essentially fragile, temporal—a corpus which will be laid waste, like material itself, an unremitting and critical action of time. These primary events, the intervention with the horizon, digging the hole, or grading a mound, manifest to me the beginning of architecture. It is the concept of topographical intervention. Or, it is that conquest reflected in the idea to create, to transform the abstract concept of space into the metaphysical concept of place.

Besides the intervention of the site, one of the ontological roots of architecture is the possibility to create place and also signify through that place, not the presence of man, which may be both the beginning of tactile or physiological space, but the absence of man. Architectural space can only be understood as a polarity between physiological space and geometric space. Physiological space is limited to sensory experience; geometric space is the pure invention of our mind, reflecting upon the infinite.

I believe there is a very definite limit to geometry as the idealized language of architecture, and I believe that geometry alone can never produce an architectural idea. Because I think architecture has memory, as this memory is imprinted

in the history of matter, geometry can only be a device to idealize it.

Geometry has no memory. Geometry can only produce an architectural idea and not an architectural event. It anticipates matter which it tries to idealize. Or where architecture itself becomes the site, geometry reflects upon the immediate conditions of the surroundings, a reflection of decay, a reflection of decomposition as a place where architecture can be reborn. In that sense, built architecture reflects upon the metaphysical phenomena of the existence of man which signifies decay, death and resurrection.

In my early work I was obsessed with the conquest of site, the theories of universal cities where either the site itself would aspire to the formal structure of the city, or where the city as an artificial man-made structure would conquer the entire site of the globe. I believe that architecture has to deal with use, and maybe this is one of the limits of the language of architecture. But use and form remain autonomous and didactically polarized. I do not speculate about the limits of sculpture or any other language, because I believe one cannot define limits from the outside. I believe one can only define limits of a language one speaks.

Raimund Abraham
House without Rooms 1974–75
Sections and elevation
colored pencil on paper
Courtesy the architect

Raimund Abraham
House with Projected Landscapes 1976–77
colored pencil on paper
Courtesy the architect

