

## Robert Smithson's Extended Site: Thoughts on the Dialectical City

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Late in 1968, the artist Robert Smithson formulated his first "Nonsite" art works, initially comprised of rocks removed from various sites stacked in metal bins or placed on mirrors, and displayed in an art gallery.<sup>1</sup> Later, in the "Cayuga Salt Mine Project" of 1969, Smithson developed more complex arrangements of mirrors, mounds of salt, and photographs, parts of which were placed in a local salt mine, while salt extracted from the mine was displaced into various arrangements in an art museum some distance from the site.<sup>2</sup>

The common thread in these projects was the removal of a material (rock, earth, salt) from an exterior, natural setting, and placing it into a manipulated, geometrical configuration within the artificial, interior confines of a gallery, or museum context. The idea was to set up a dialectical relationship, in which the mirror, or the void functioned as a displacement of an actual site, which is then cross-referenced to the removed material in its new setting. As the mirror was placed adjacent to the same salt material in both the salt mine and in the gallery, the cross-referencing occurred at two levels, concurrently: first, in terms of the mix of both the virtual and real within each local setting; second, as a condition to be "reflected" back from the salt mine to the gallery, and vice-versa. Thus it was the *displaced site*, rather than the immediate gallery that performed as the immediate context for the work, or, as described by Robert Hobbs, "the Nonsites negate both the gallery's space and the primacy of perception as they point away from themselves and to the Site."<sup>3</sup>

There are several kinds of complexities related to the nature of a particular site that result from this operation. On the one hand, the notion of site has been extended in such a way that the actual spatial dimension separating the Site from Nonsite becomes a mental construct rather than an actual physical experience. The displacement of material from one location to the other "splits" the site, and sets up a discontinuity in the perception of the work that can only be completed cognitively by the viewer. Yet one also has to deal with the discontinuity

developed within the gallery setting itself, in which a condition has been inserted which exists outside of the space (having no causal, or conceptual relationship to it) – yet it is still contained, and perceived within the space. The mirror and rocks are confined and perceived within a specific local which now contains something extraneous to itself, and that local has been inhabited by a particular presence which shifts the generic identity of the context into a specific and complex agent of unification.

### THE EXTENDED SITE

It is suggested that Robert Smithson's formulation of the Site-Non Site dialectic presents a basis for also examining sites of urban development and cultural identity. An imposed intervention of a foreign condition into a context which exists on different terms presents, in fact, another kind of contextual relationship that can establish new types of places and habitation in the city. It is the nature of the a-contextuality between the two events that forces a change in the conception and meaning of particular places. The idea is to carry out an intentional form of displacement, discontinuity, or forced combination of other urban forms that may be separated both spatially and temporally. The result is a new form of hybrid, synthetic city made up of generic conditions that are challenged by imposed, external oppositions, resulting in new, mixed forms of urbanity that could provide richer, and more complex contexts for habitation.

The strategy is to transform the city through an "interchange" between sites, or transplanting one form of organization, typology, life style, or institutions into another site of differing characteristics. The result is intended to challenge the insular nature of particular places with limited qualities, characteristics and potentials, into dialectical, extended sites, or synthetic combinations of potentially far greater variation and choice.

One possibility for generating a composite context is through a forced displacement, or voiding of a part of a site, and its replacement of a different condition from another type of context, resulting in a discontinuity of the consistent characteristics found in both originating sites. This in effect substitutes Smithson's displacement of materials from their local context into another context, by the replacement of the structural characteristics of a larger territory into another context. While there still remain vestiges of the earlier authenticity and forms found in the original area, the forced juxtaposition of contexts transforms their overall identity into a new synthetic hybrid with unique characteristics.

The other shift from Smithson's Site-Nonsite model is that there is neither physical substitution or displacement of actual materials from a given site to another, or the literal transporting of a specific given context to another location (which in certain limited cases, would not be impossible to achieve). Rather, the attempt is to interchange the general structural/organizational characteristics found in either an existing context, or a prototypical urban condition, which is to then be "placed," either as an evolutionary process over time—or abruptly implanted—into another context.

On the surface, this may not seem so different than many of the a-contextual developments that have occurred continually in the city over the last century, in which projects of varying scales, possessing internal characteristics that come out of new programmatic, technological, economic, or social demands are transposed into a context of completely different characteristics. Examples include the tower-in-the-park paradigm and so many other urban renewal projects in cities throughout the U.S. built during the 1950s and 1960s, such as Stuyvesant Town, Baruch Houses, and other modernist projects inserted into the fabric of Manhattan's 1811 grid. Also could be included are the building of large-scale mixed-use, shopping malls, or sports complexes of more recent vintage, which are arbitrarily placed into the fine-grained fabric of existing cities, or into natural landscapes in rural contexts. In most operations of this kind, there is no relationship between the structural nature of the new intervention and the existing context—both exist as separate entities, side by side, and maintain their same essential characteristics irrespective of particular site differences.

The difference in what is being proposed here is the attempt to attain new organizations based on an *overlapping*, or cross synthesis of different types of contexts. The characteristics of one are intertwined into the characteristics of the other, resulting in a new integrated hybrid that share multiple identities. While they may have come from different sources, and have few formal qualities in common, they are to speak to each other, act together, and perform together, if only in dialectical terms, and over time, develop cross associations that allow themselves to be assimilated into a new, complex unity.

The models for this kind of evolution of hybrid forms go back much farther than urban renewal, when a nation or culture took over existing urban contexts that then needed to meet different cultural and social needs. The Roman Emperor Diocletian's palace at Split formed the infrastructure of later medieval habitation, in which the cellular subdivision of dwelling units exist independently of the fortifications and cross-axial plan, but at the same time allow subdivision into neighborhood sectors, which ultimately become unified as the walls disintegrate. Haussman's Paris street interventions are planned independently of local fabric, but serve to define the dialectical nature of municipal control and individual freedoms, while the imposition of new apartment building types defining the street organization also clarify the social/class hierarchies of the day. In both cases, the composite hybrid is a far more interesting and responsive narration of the relationships between culture and city form than the characteristics of each urban development existing in isolation.

One possibility for investigating contemporary forms of composite sites would be the development of a new type of urban-suburban form.<sup>4</sup> This type of hybrid context could address changes in culture and technology that are beginning to blur the characteristics of traditional city and rural patterns of development. Such a context would also respond to conflicting desires: Those who have chosen to live in suburbs generally also miss and desire many of the qualities of urban living, while those who have chosen to live in the city generally also miss and desire the qualities of life in the country.

While inner city and suburban forms have developed in diametrically different ways due to many factors, largely related to differing land economics, transportation, and life styles, both models could be greatly improved, and be made more desirable by combining certain spatial/physical characteristics into a newly combined, hybrid form. What is proposed is to combine the characteristics of each model in its singular, idealized form into a complex, composite state in which the characteristics of one are contaminated by the counter conditions of the other, as follows: The problem of dispersion, automobile dependency, and lack of spatial cohesion and hierarchy found in typical suburban development is addressed through imposing traditional urban patterns onto the model. This will distort the generic pattern through exposure to alternate characteristics based on spatial definition, pedestrianization, density, and other conditions of urban living. Conversely, the problem of congestion, lack of light and open space typical of traditional urban development is addressed by overlaying suburban patterns onto the model. This will distort the generic pattern through exposure to opposing conditions, based on the preference towards maximum open space, the incorporation of landscape, natural light and other characteristics of suburban living.

It is suggested that through a strategy of interchanging sites, it may be possible to merge a cross-formation of urban and

suburban development that literally combines both sites into a new type of synthetic organization that addresses the problems, and enhances the qualities of each site found in its pure pedigree form. The operation would result in two urban-suburban hybrids, one based on using the urban condition as the displaced context layered on to the suburban site, and the other based on using the suburban condition as the displaced context layered on to the urban site. Each context would retain certain fundamental qualities inherent with their own site condition, but would also be contaminated by the qualities of the other site. The urban-suburban hybrid on the urban site would be essentially urban, with some suburban characteristics, while the urban-suburban hybrid on the suburban site would be essentially suburban, with certain urban characteristics.

Such a combination of urban and suburban forms can take on two different types of evolution. In one case, an initial organization is constructed from the outset that superimposes both models. The hybrid is evolved as a new city form, whereby individual development is sequenced and controlled to force a specific mixing of conditions and project types within an overall plan. The other model is applied to either an existing city or suburb; through an evolution of planned removals and condemnation along with the implanting of specific catalytic projects, the desired mixed, hybrid condition is ultimately achieved.

The goal is partly to offer an alternative that corrects previous attempts to suburbanize the city and urbanize the suburbs (Le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine*, the Urban Renewal projects of the 1950s, Charlotte Street, Bronx, and the nostalgia of the "New Urbanism" proposals, come to mind.) But the larger issue is to suggest the power of the dialectical city, achieved through radical acts of grafting, removal, implanting, layering, and superimposition, leading to a complexity that generates energy, and multiple possibilities for living. The transformation of earlier, simplistic, singular models into new combinations can provide new choices and the emergence of new identities through a necessary blurring, a form of "fuzzy" unification and continuity between the inner and outer city.

### THE DIALECTICAL SITE

To continue reflections of the work of the artist Robert Smithson as a source for defining aspects of the synthetic city, one can examine his seminal article, "Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape."<sup>5</sup> In the essay, Smithson presents an interpretation of Central Park that serves to suggest a model for the controlled transformation of landscape (or, I would suggest, the city) based on the power of artifice in the context of natural (or uncontrolled) systems.

Smithson first recounts the history of the park, and its vast geological metamorphosis (virtually nothing remained un-

touched from its original, "natural" found condition) in the context of the pictorial theories of the English Landscape movement that served as an underlying formal and philosophical premise for the park. The picturesque only comes about through the initiation of deformities, or acts of destruction, that ultimately become smoothed over and subsumed within the larger intended aesthetic. He states that the curves, smoothness and the sublime that resulted from the operation must also be read in the context of the "terror, solitude and vastness of nature, both of which are rooted in the real world," and the role of chance that affected the outcome.

Smithson sees the park as "a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region," so that early stages of construction, or changes in the landscape (the real) become integrated into the larger perception of the planned artifice (the not-real).<sup>6</sup> And even when one visits the park today, these interruptions, or disturbances in the scene—the functional division of the reservoir, the rubble, trash cans, signs of erosion, homeless squatters, an exposed gas meter, the groundskeepers and trucks, storage facilities, views of reconstruction, graffiti, political interventions (Strawberry Fields), entertainment events, constructed events (playgrounds, the zoo, Wolman rink), oil slicks and dixie cups on the Pond, an imagined (or real) mugger, etc. — all present a conflicting dose of reality that lie within, and sometimes dominate over the larger message of the sublime. The park presents "an endless maze of relations and interconnections, in which nothing remains what or where it is, as a thing-itself, but the whole park changes like day and night, in and out, dark and light. . . . Central Park is a ground work of necessity and chance, a range of contrasting viewpoints that are forever fluctuating, yet solidly based in the earth."<sup>7</sup>

The power and vitality of the artifice is to be grounded in something else, continually rub against the real, and allow the cracks in the deception to show through and be exposed. The presentation of the synthetic city must always be placed in a condition of being seen in the context of a larger cultural and physical presence. This insures that we can perceive the penetration of the artifice and approximate the points of contradiction and difference, and not allow the man-made construction to encircle itself as a total, self-contained replacement of everything else that we know and value. For Smithson, the success of the park is that the natural processes and pictorial reconstruction are never "viewed *in isolation* [my italics] . . . detached from physical interconnection, and finally replaced by mental representations of a finished absolute ideal."<sup>8</sup>

The suggestion is to open, or find cracks, as it were, in the seams of the framed artifice and develop an open, dialectical relationship with its surroundings rather than place immutable brackets around the prevalent fantasy.<sup>9</sup> The frame then becomes more of something closer to a filter, allowing readings

of one condition to influence, disturb, qualify, and intensify the perceptions of the other.

The goal is to define a dialectical city, one that openly accepts and recognizes the artifice (the not-real, with traces of the real) through being placed in opposition to other forms of information (real, with traces of the not-real). The struggle is to maintain a state of tension within the dialectic, so that places and events stay sharply focused, yet open to reevaluation and reinterpretation through being exposed to larger processes and other information defined by context. By the selected orchestration and confrontation of natural and artificial forms, places and events, one can manipulate perception, and ultimately, meaning—not as fantasy, but as a clarification, intensification, or reinterpretation of the world around us.

This is surely not the agenda of the theme park, hotel casino, or “new urbanism” subdivision which never allows the imperfections to show through, the glimpse of the actual structure holding up the false front, yesterday’s crumpled newspaper, a wandering homeless, or decaying materials to confront us. But what if the underground controls and service tunnels below Disneyland, say, were exposed and cut into the scene above—not enough to destroy the fantasy, but enough to keep us aware that it is staged, and can be changed at will? Of course if the goal is pure entertainment, the walls and ceilings that contain the fantasy must remain closed (as necessary in the theater or cinema) in order to suspend belief and submerge us into a fabricated world. But entertainment can be numbing if the fantasy goes on too long—its terms and message is too simplistic, repetitive and familiar. It’s the sudden shift, the unexpected confrontation, the ambiguity of not being sure, that really stimulates, makes us shocked, happy, or at least aware of being alive.

This is what is so powerful, and possibly dangerous about Claes Oldenburg’s urban monuments, which expand out of the safe confines of the gallery, and interact with our daily life. What business does a gearshift have to take the place of the Nelson Column in Trafalgar Square, or a scissors to replace the Washington Monument? The former is inspired by the constant traffic congestion around Trafalgar Square, the latter morphologically equivalent to the Obelisk, but also a dialogue about division, and a more dualistic reference to both male and female sources, rather than only the phallic symbolism of the male.<sup>10</sup> The result of such a confrontation through removal can sharply define a content that is far more appropriate and relevant to current culture than the monuments which they replaced, which by now are no longer really seen, or receive any real conscious attention.

Both projects would subvert expectations, would certainly be shocking and improper, only partly due to their image, and more with the fact of their displacement of the sacred historical marker, seen in the context of the traditional city. These and

similar interventions<sup>11</sup> force us to re-perceive the familiar and instill a heightened understanding of the world around us (as all good art attempts to achieve), not through insulation with closed boundaries, but through an active engagement with a more complex reality that doesn’t necessarily play by the same rules.

One can conclude that the most effective possibility of the synthetic as an urban strategy is one of establishing a dialectic with context, history, material, as well as the collision with other overlays of artificial control that may not exactly be in agreement with each other. The difficulty, as well as the challenge in this is that the dialectic can no longer be achieved in the historical sense of *opposition*, or polarization. All forms, events and spaces in the city potentially exist in a sliding, shifting state of both real and artifice, aligned only through intent, degrees of transformation, and relationship to context. The carved steps in Central Park as described by Smithson are as artificial (and real) as other rocks brought in from other locations; the Oldenburg gearshift is not any less justified, or removed from historical relevance than the statue of Nelson; and the framed original museum artifact has been no more or less removed from reality than other advertised fabrications of modern culture. Any object can be shed of the necessity of utilization and acquire the aura (or re-representation) of the work of art by being placed into the museum context, as shown by Duchamp.<sup>12</sup>

The goal is to achieve awareness, heightened content, and possibly, enlightenment (if not a degree of entertainment) through the selected association, interaction, and sequence of perception of objects, places and events. It is suggested that the dialectical city, made up of any number of variations and possibilities, thrives on such confrontation, and can be as controlled (and perhaps “designed”) as much as the fabrication of any other art form, or product of modern culture.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Smithson, “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,” from Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Smithson, “Fragments of a Conversation,” *Ibid.*, pp. 168-70.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> This relates to the earlier work of Ebenezer Howard’s theories on the relationship between town and country, as described in: Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Smithson, “Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape,” from: Nancy Holt, ed., *Op. Cit.*, pp. 117-128.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>9</sup> The is contrary to the current tendency to present the complete fantasy of a totally removed narrative from an external context, as in the new entertain-

ment hotels in Las Vegas, such as the Bellagio, the Venetian, the Luxor, the New York New York, and others.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Haskell, *Claes Oldenburg Object into Monument* (Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum, 1971), pp. 41, 57-59.

<sup>11</sup> No less confrontational was Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" placed in Manhattan's Federal Plaza in 1981 (and forced to be removed some 7 years later). The placement of the sculpture redefined one's perception of the plaza, focused one's vision, and forced a new trajectory through space.

<sup>12</sup> Duchamp's seminal invention of the "ready-made" appropriated common objects, such as a urinal, and through de-contextualizing the object within a museum, and re-naming ("Fountain," 1917), transformed its meaning and identity. For a discussion of their various manifestations and meaning, see: Francis M. Naumann, Marcel Duchamp: *The Art of Making Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Abrams, 1999), pp. 62-68.