THE MARGINAL SITE:
INTERVENTIONS WITHIN THE VOIDED CONTEXT

The city has tended to be subject to one of two forms of evolution; it either undergoes continual transformation and adjustment subject to the economic fluctuation, technological advancements, the shifting status of institutions, changing modes of living and work, and many other manifestations of modern culture. Or, parts of the city have been legislated to be preserved and endure in the original historic fabric, thus denying the influence of external forces. The former type of change is one of direct translation, in which the city becomes a referential index, or physical manifestation of external causes; the other is marked by resistance, in that the context establishes a rigid, immutable structure which suppresses any expression of cultural transformation or desire.

Both conditions are highly problematic relative to the form of the modern city. The referential, or "transparent" city suffers from its inability to confront the crises of modern society that have eroded the quality and meaning of the city. The breakdown of institutions, the forces of suburbanization, the privatization of space, the influence of electronic communications, shifting patterns of employment and industry, rampant speculative development, and manipulative zoning ordinances have assaulted the spatial cohesion, social patterns and cultural traditions of urban societies. It seems that every aberration of culture, any and all private initiatives, every casual burp and fart of re-construction no matter how insensitive or inappropriate is almost instantaneously realizable, with little possibility to "hold it in" once the process is set in motion. The precious, responsible act of building, to enter into the social agreement of the city and contribute to its ongoing text of the evolution of civilization has been continually violated. At a certain point, new buildings in such a discordant context no matter how well conceived, loose their ability to establish a meaningful, focused dialogue either at a formal or cultural level; they seen inconsequential, and have little impact to resolve the vastly larger magnitude of the disaster.

Consider just one example of the fragile, extreme volatility of New York City's development (and of the American city in general): during the early 1980's, the Office of Mid-town Planning gives zoning relief (i.e., increases the FAR limits) on the West side to relieve some of the development pressure that was being experienced on the East side. Did anyone predict that within 3 years, some fifteen or so new high-rise buildings would be planned or in construction? And as a result, the Times Square area would be totally transformed in scale and character, and that the barrage of new construction would be a significant contribution to later economic stagnation in New York? The horror would have been worse if not for the oncoming recession in the late 1980's, which postponed the construction (or should we say destruction) of the sites around One Times Square. Even the slightest changes in developmental mechanisms can have almost instantaneous, overwhelming, and sometimes unpredictable results, typically at the expense of the historic city.

The "preserved" city suffers from the opposite malady, that of stagnation, a physical "lie" which has lost its ability to reference the evolution of modern culture. This condition of camouflage includes existing historic districts, as well as newer areas of the city (Battery Park City, New York, or Charles Moore's Beverly Hills Civic Center are notable examples) which are generated by re-using historic models. This is not to say that it is wrong to preserve historic contexts, or that they can not be vital, active places to live and work. Indeed, these areas tend to still be the most successful examples of urbanity, are highly adaptable, and are vitally important to maintain as a record the city's evolution.

The dilemma is that if culture continually evolves, and the role of the city is to accurately record the manifestations of its transformation, it can never be properly expressed by a context that must remain constant. On the other hand, once the purity of the context becomes "contaminated," or adjusted (i.e., new interventions are allowed) that reflect the influence of modern civilization, the essence of its original form is severely compromised. As a result, the quality of the physical record is once again distorted (damned if we allow change, damned if we don't). Clearly, sensitive historic contexts should never serve as the battleground of recent architectural "wars."

THE VOIDED CONTEXT

One way out of the dilemma is to search for an alternative urban context—one which exists further away from the influences of cultural imprint yet can also absorb change, perhaps *radical* change, based on other criteria and parameters for development. The issue is to remove the less-than-honorable, compromised, extraneous layers, or excess baggage of the modern city, as well as explore settings outside of traditional historical contexts in which one can exercise greater freedom and speculation, allowing exploration of alternate architectural paradigms.

One context of this type would be certain marginal, underutilized contexts surrounding the central city, including older, what might be called "post-industrial" sites, existing usually along river fronts or water inlets. These areas played a central role in the industrial revolution at the turn of the century, and have now, through changes in economics and production, have become obsolete. Buildings often lie in ruin, interspersed by vacant lots, storage buildings, devoid of significant activity or human presence. Such sites can be found in many of the older cities throughout the United States (and probably throughout the world). In New York, for instance, they exist most prevalently along the Brooklyn waterfront—including Greenpoint, Hunters Point, Queens, and the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn.

Such sites offer both poetic and literal potentials to resist the dilemma of the modern American city discussed above, which could be described as the following:

Emptiness

The post-industrial site is desolate; while much of the earlier building fabric still exists, there are many vacant lots, empty buildings, and other voids. The site still functions for marginal industrial/commercial/storage functions, but not in any way at the level or role of its early development at the turn of the century. There is little human presence or activity. Some functions still use the canal--but in most cases, random businesses have

simply found the cheapest rents in previously vacant, accessible space. In a sense, the site has lost its functional role, its reason, and identity.

Fragmentation

The post-industrial site is highly fragmented; there is no consistent building typology, or notion of "urban fabric" (which does, in fact, surround the area.) It is has been cut by elevated viaducts, access ramps and streets leading to highways and tunnels, as well as demolished buildings. The canal slices through the site, with limited connections between the east and west sides. Adjacent development denies visual or physical connections to large parts of the canal. The ability of the urban grid to establish a continuous, field of built development is undermined by *divisions*, both implied and physical, which undermines our ability to establish traditional notions of order through continuity and connections.

Timelessness

The post-industrial site possess few physical or cultural clues which refer to its particular historical origins, or suggest the nature of a possible, or desired future. There are no monuments that instill a presence of the past (although a few industrial and architectural ruins), and little that speaks of progress, or the possibilities of a better future (once the underpinning of our modern age). The site somehow expresses a collapse of temporality, a kind of infinite convergence of past and future into the eternity of a suspended present, (not unlike the nature of Surrealist cityscapes, such as those of De Chirico.)

Negation

Most contexts establish rich texts of signification; they speak of the aspirations and beliefs of past and present cultures, or reference changing economic and commercial activity. The post-industrial site, however, contains no institutions or dwellings that signify cultural values; the industrial remnants reflect only a particular moment in time, whose significance lingers, but becomes faint. Current uses are unplanned, arbitrary, and circumstantial--while not without commercial value, they

are not major anchors for the economy, or represent particular trends for redevelopment. While the site still functions, it doesn't express an identifiable functional role--it has been cleansed of functional, programmatic cause--a state of "anti-function."

There is no meaning, no symbolism, no culture, no intention, no style, no beauty, no purpose, no dreams, no progress, no necessities, no cause, and no effect.

There are some remnants from the past--but this is not Rome--the traces don't refer to cultural imprints. They do not "speak" to us, but remain as abstract material. We are left with utter muteness, indifference, a pure silence, removed from the intentions, preconceptions, and conditions of modern civilization.

Strategies of Resistance, or, The Synthetic Implant

Such is an interesting situation to find ourselves. A kind of *tabula rasa*, but also a "filled" *tabula rasa*; not the empty canvass that generates the detached utopian visions of, say, Le Corbusier's *Ville Voisin*, or any number of bulldozed urban renewal sites, but a site filled with material presence that allows transformation, mutation, and adjustment. We are placed in a context of ultimate freedom; freed from contextual responsibilities, freed from functional/aesthetic constraints, and freed from having to maneuver within the restrictions of immutable site boundaries and permanent edifices. Now devoid of symbolic meaning, or cultural contamination, the built site exists as an abstraction--a canvass of pure material fabric that establishes a degree of spatial "resistance" to be overcome, absorbed, denied, or accepted. Given its neutrality, but also spatial density, such a context can probably take almost any kind of intervention, of either known, or unfamiliar origins. The nature of the dialogue between existing and proposed fabric is no longer one of "contextual relationship" between object and field, but to conceive of the object and field as one. Contact between adjacent events occurs as a chance meeting of radically different forms in forced participation, which ultimately become attached, if not dependent on one another for their mutual benefit. The problem of architecture in the city becomes one of

positioning synthetic "implants" or interventions that challenge the fabric in a particular way, or "charge," (encode) the voided context with new meanings and significance. The potential is to actually reinvent the context itself through architecture, to transform the empty, silent and innocent, and give it new life, spirit, and presence.

There are a number of avenues which can be explored that could lead to a reinvention of the city, which could include:

1. An ambiguity/mix of existing and proposed fragments, or, the formation of the "modern ruin."

There is a potential to merge existing and proposed building fabric, either in terms of: parts of existing buildings or building remnants to be incorporated into new programs, or existing architectural and infrastructural ruins to serve as armatures for new development. Abandoned buildings can suggest other forms of architectural language, such as Louis Kahn's "windows without frames," Peter Eisenman's "cities of artificial excavation," reversals between interior and exterior, or other architectural ambiguities (footnote). The notion of ruin also suggests a dynamic process of form in a continual state of change, or decay, in which the artifact undergoes physical transformation.

One implication of all this is that the city expresses a form of entropy, or, the tendency towards energy loss, disorder and chaos. Another implication of decay could be architecture's capacity to imply, or parallel a kind of "life force" or state of biological metamorphosis, whether in a state low energy, near death, or entering renewed states of stimulation and revival.

2. The making of architecture through actual, implied, latent, or imposed manifestations of order.

This might include the investigation of the site's archeology, a mapping of earlier land forms or development, or discovering alternative readings of architectural remains or traces that allow new contextual readings to emerge. Essential here is the cross-referencing between "hidden" and visible orders, that causes that which is exposed to be open to new

possibilities of transformation . A process that layers orders from external sources has been described by Peter Eisenman and others as "grafting," which in the field of genetics, has to do with the insertion of a foreign body into a host context to establish a new result, or, an invented context.

3. The development of urban strategies of transformation through subtractive processes.

Given that the marginal context is largely filled with existing fabric, most of which is programmatically nonspecific, generalized loft space, circumstantially ordered, not critical to any given structural and conceptual organization, and thus expendable, one is free to undertake extensive reformations of existing fabric by removing buildings, or *portions* of buildings, in order to allow new relationships, sequences, or juxtaposition of opposing forms.

4. The development of unique programs, or combination of programs, as a basis for architectural invention.

The neutrality of the context, as well as the residential population residing around the context suggest any number of possible overlays of new functions not intrinsic to the area, but which can be reasonably inserted into the fabric and serve the surrounding residents. These programs may tend to develop moments of high degree of organization, or intensity, either as autonomous structures, new development embedded within existing buildings, or combinations of both conditions.

5. Establishing a new narrative for the city's development.

In many ways, the post-industrial site represents "virgin" territory--it exists in a somewhat indecisive state, and awaits to be reinvented. The notion of invention here does not have to parallel traditional forms of development, or even reality. For instance, one could develop a new scenario for taking over the context that could drastically change its meaning. One possibility would be for the area to be "given over" to a particular population (either existing, or invented--the homeless, urban outlaws, renegade scientists?) who must build or transform buildings to

serve new uses and needs. This again suggests the importance of programmatic invention--if one wants to evolve a new architecture, one must first posit cultural, social, technological developments that call for traditional architectural paradigms to be questioned and transformed. (But even then, success isn't guaranteed--to wit, the ambiguous "victories" of the Modern Movement).

Another kind of narrative involves the building itself read as an artifact, in which its own markings, or traces become "a palimpsest of its own history," both actual, and fictive. The word palimpsest literally means "scrapped again," a process from antiquity in which the text written on a parchment was rubbed out in order to imprint new information, while traces of the old writing is still left, and merges with the new text. The idea applied to the city is to allow remnants, or traces of an existing condition which is about to be altered, to partially remain, or "bleed through." New projects become combinations, or "re-writings," mergers of pre-existing structures (the clues to the site's actual history), with the newly imposed transformations that redefine the site, but then selectively allow certain historical information to remain, or if hidden, be re-exposed.

Thus, the site's "aura" still lives within the new development, sometimes suppressed, but at other times, slipping out and observed, sometimes in the most outrageous ways (Carlo Scarpa's Castelvechio museum in Verona previously discussed is a particularly superb example). The dialectic is a powerful one—the old and new, past and present, are confronted in a co-existence of conflicting vocabularies. The process of design is no longer one of arbitrary stylization, but acts of exposure, accommodation, masking, dueling, carving away, filling in, opening up, and resurfacing. to allow distant, or conflicting relationships to collide. Memory itself becomes a form of resistance that never allows an imposed architecture to slice itself off from its temporal and physical context, and turn the site into a mere vehicle for the packaging of space and applied imagery. Rather, the formation of new architecture in the city becomes an assertion of an authentic, if not contradictory statement of an evolving culture.

Such are possibilities for a new form of synthetic city, not so much in terms of the ubiquitous simulation generated by advertising and entertainment media, but more in the ability for the city to absorb radically different forms of development. The "city of controlled difference" is inclusive of existing physical limitations, systems of subdivision, or imprints and traditions of previous habitation. How the void is filled in terms of the program of events and associations can be radically manipulated, and is able to take on an unprecedented range of formal and programmatic innovation. The only necessity is the desire and confidence to leave the comfort of the familiar that has become irretrievably contaminated, and based in a precedent that has become more than suspect. One is now free to exercise the given possibilities of exploration allowed within an emptied context, now waiting to be reinvented, newly imagined and re-conceived.