

Site Matters

Design Concepts,
Histories, and
Strategies

Edited by
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ROUTLEDGE
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Around the Corner: A Photo Essay

Lucy R. Lippard

Buildings are usually constructed to be seen frontally, but sites are more elusive. Few present themselves head-on. Around the corner, in the distance, even out of sight, they conspire to illusion. The viewer's mobility is inevitable, the viewer's experience of a place is inarguable, but the site is not static either. Expectations of the site can affect what happens there. So seeing *through* a site is a necessity. A site is a half-full, half-empty container, its content(s) visible to some and invisible to others. We choose the lenses and then the frames. When a site is *exposed*, it's the last time we'll see *into* it.

When is a site not a site? When there is nothing on it? What constitutes "nothing"? Something that was or never was? The ripple effect: The best way to know a site is to move out from it in varying radiuses. When the ripples subside into the surface, or into the depths, it fades. Or, going the other direction, once you penetrate to the urban core, there may be a hole at the center: ground zero, the site *of*...

Like everything else, a site is defined not merely by its "own" qualities and quantities but by those of its neighbors. When the surroundings change, the site and what has been built on it change too. Open may become closed; closed may become open; tall may become ordinary; striking contrasts may be obliterated. Views *of* (the outside) and views *from* (the inside) can contradict each other. Every window offers a new angle on the surroundings, and the site itself is sucked into the kaleidoscope. Landscape features are notorious shape-changers.

As one comes around the corner, the site itself seems to move, or even unravel. Urban sites are seen on the run, or the fast walk. Rural sites seen from a car are a photographic blur of allusion. Walking makes them more real.

However much “place” is downplayed in favor of generic space, to ignore it means to create a placeless space. Site-specific is not the same as place-specific. The site’s narrative can be downplayed but never entirely erased. The site is the past, and what will happen on it is the future. The present mediates. It makes history.

The grid is beloved by Americans for its comfort, legal clarity, and aesthetics. Breaking the grid is still acknowledging the grid as master. Around the corner, one of those modules is being filled—real estate simmering over the invisible flame of context.

Some of the following images suggest the secrets of places that are so naked or so bundled up in disguise that we can barely see their subtexts, their “true” characters. These images are fragments and/or illusions of sites, some enhanced by artists trying to see through them, contributing to the definition of site by evading it.



SOMETHING OUT THERE / NOTHING OUT THERE

Wanda Hammerbeck

Something Out There, Nothing Out There

Dunes, Idaho

1990

The “naked” landscape suggests content and lack thereof; the desert has long been perceived as a *tabula rasa* on which humans impose their greed and desires. This hole at the center is an apparently transparent site, but there may be a gas station just out of the frame. Maybe it will stay the same for millennia; maybe it will be inscribed soon. Everywhere in the West, development is just around the corner. Areas that look just like this are already, almost unimaginably, the sites of resorts, golf courses, or dams.

NATURE/CULTURE



Charles Simonds
Loisaida Growth House
 (Altered photograph)
 Lower Manhattan, New York
 1977

This project for a “Lower East Side Museum” combines, juxtaposes, and superimposes human habitation and native flora (all the hardy vegetation that survives urban life and in turn invades the built environment) as well as fauna (rodents, roaches, feral cats...). On the upper stories, nature would reclaim tenement culture, bursting out of the windows to meet the ground of the vacant lot next door. A ruin disguised as a new landscape.



Agnes Denes
Wheatfield—A Confrontation (The Harvest)
 (Two acres of wheat planted and harvested by the artist on the Battery Park landfill in Manhattan’s financial district, summer 1982.)
 Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan
 1982

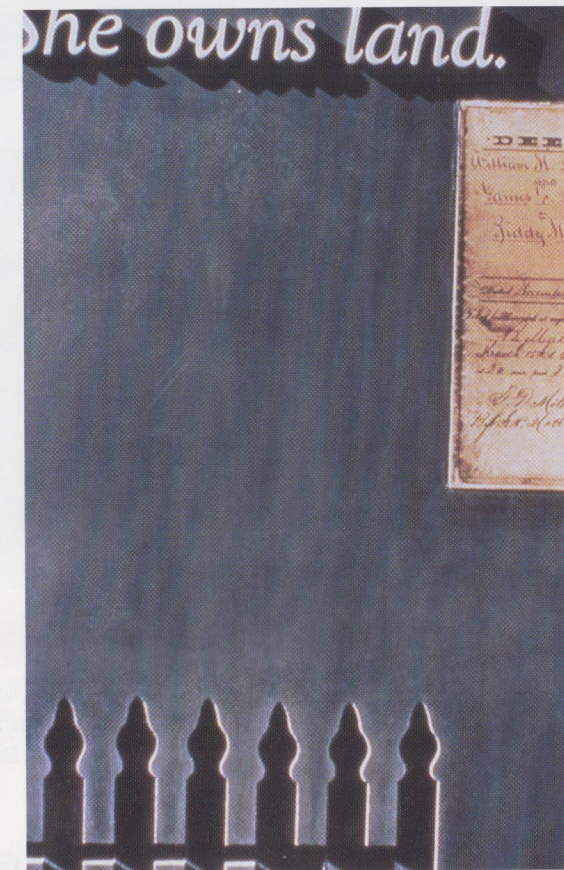
The confrontation was both geographical (city/country) and social (given the proximity to the New York Stock Exchange and the World Trade Center, Denes was making a point about world hunger and the exploitation of resources). The artist tilled, sowed, and harvested almost a thousand pounds of wheat on a landfill that was to become high-rise Battery Park City. It was a strangely prophetic homage to natural cycles in an urban landscape that seemed on its way to permanence. Less than twenty years later the Twin Towers vanished.

VISIBILITY/BOUNDARIES



Candace Hill-Montgomery
Black and White Enclosure
 (Installation on found site)
 Harlem, New York
 ca. 1979

When Hill (then Hill-Montgomery) arrived at the site, the boat, an emblem of a certain economic status not usually associated with the inner city, was unexpectedly already on site, high and dry in a Harlem vacant lot. By adding the picket fence, she brought to bear a series of assumptions about class, race, gentrification, imprisonment, and unknown potential. Twenty-five years later that reading of the site may have been confirmed.



Sheila Levrant de Bretteville
Biddy Mason: Time and Place
 (Limestone panel and "fossil" picket, details of 82'-long memorial wall)
 Downtown Los Angeles
 1989

A public art piece by a designer/artist, this wall creates its own memory, on site, commemorating the African Diaspora through the life of a woman born a slave who refused to leave a free state to return to slavery with her master. She remained to become a prominent citizen of black Los Angeles and to live out the Jeffersonian American dream—to own land.

INVISIBILITY



Drex Brooks
Pyramid Lake Battlefield
 (Black-and-white photograph)
 Pyramid Lake Reservation, Nevada
 1988–1989

In May and June 1860, two battles initiated the Paiute resistance to white invasion of their lands. They were subdued and scattered to reservations, not allowed to return to Pyramid Lake until 1883. The prophet Winnemucca had dreamed three times of “women crying and I also saw my men shot down by white people...and I saw the blood streaming from the mouths of my men....” The construction of a children’s playground by the descendants of those who died transforms the site of these battles, hope overcoming despair and sacrilege.



John Ammirati
The Plume Project
 (Charcoal and water, tested and approved by state ecologists, 560' × 210')
 State Park land in an industrial area bordering San Francisco Bay
 Completed September 1991

This temporary site-specific installation on an urban site already in the process of unraveling was an attempt “to imagine in a giant drawing” one of the Bay Area’s several major industrial plumes— invisible underground masses of toxic liquid spreading out over miles from an initial source. The drawing “flowed across property lines and beneath fences,” an elusive and mobile site of an ongoing event, although the drawing itself was erased by rain five weeks after installation. (*The Plume Project* was sponsored by the Museo Ibero Americano, the California State Department of Parks, the Bayview Opera House, and the San Francisco Arts Commission.)

SITES OF SUSTENANCE



Tom Jones
Ghost Meal
 (Black-and-white photograph)
 Indian Trust Land, Wisconsin
 1999

Jones, a young Ho-Chunk photographer, examines sites of tradition and modernity in his own Wisconsin communities. The path to the jerry-rigged tent is made of sustenance. It leads to a kind of home—temporary, but traditional—a path and a tent that have occurred in this place for perhaps hundreds of years in ever-changing contexts. An unpeopled communal meal calls attention to the land, to the changing but unbuilt site that is of crucial importance to Native peoples.



Nicholas Tobier
Hot Chocolate Cart (in use)
 Alfred, New York
 2000

Tobier creates and enhances “everyday places” by surprise. (For instance, he has built a structure of wood, Plexiglas, wheels, and rubber floor to encase a public phone and turn it into a private office; as a comment on the ubiquitous facilities for men, he created a prototype for a Ladies Toilet, for use by all genders.) This colorful hot chocolate cart simply appeared on the “cold monochrome days” of winter in western New York State, serving free warmth and sweetness. Its resemblance to an indigenous tent or *yurt* not only transforms the site but comments on monocultural towns and perhaps makes a case for the immigration and cross-cultural vitality that is changing towns across the United States, as well as the possibility of a more caring urban life.

FREEDOMS



Mark Brest van Kampen
Free Speech Monument
 Sproul Plaza, UC Berkeley
 1991

A unique place that almost does not exist. The site itself is three-dimensional. The winner of a competition for a monument to the Free Speech Movement, it consists of a granite circle surrounding a six-inch circle of bare earth. The text reads: "This soil and the air space extending above it shall not be a part of the nation and shall not be subject to any entity's jurisdiction." In the era of the Patriot Act, this five-foot space is the site of absolute freedom, the site to trump all sites, establishing an area permanently out of control.



Blaise Tobia
Untitled (from series *Pillars of the Community*)
 (Color photograph)
 Detroit, Michigan
 1981

Two forms of "obscenity" overlaid on the same site, which is defined by the contrasts between its past and present. Rippling out from this center, the neighborhood and its residents reflect the changes of use in this building. The former Highland State Bank, a minor monument to capitalism, is now an adult movie theater. (One can only guess at the transformation of the interior.) The freedom to profit remains a consistent theme, as does the democratic freedom to exploit others; the "all male" movies and "live show" sites are protected by freedom of speech.

CIVIC BOUNDARIES



Shawn Records
John G. Alibrand Stadium
 (Color photograph)
 Syracuse, New York
 2000

The stadium is the focus in this photo from the series *Points of Interest*, inspired by the photographer's move to Syracuse, New York, from Boise, Idaho, and his attempts to orient himself via the official city map. Using photography and geography as tools, he cites "a mythology of exploration, conquest, and a flawed sense of objective observation...photographs that are both here and there." In this case, *here* is the foreground, an impressive sports stadium, a competitive, and decidedly male space (although a small group of girls stands on the track in the background). *There* is the unexplained pyramid looming in the background, a vanishing "point of interest," barely visible, providing a mysterious context and temporal jolt to an ordinary urban amenity. Off-center but connective, the red carpet leads back into time.



Martha Rosler
Untitled (JFK)
 (Color photograph)
 New York
 1990

The luridly anonymous airport tunnel is a site of controlled and centered mobility, a site-nonsite, a road to nowhere. The airport is a site on the edge, channeling people into abstract space. Eero Saarinen's famous modernism has become vintage, or even primal. Rosler suggests the tunnel resembles, "a hut, a home, a temple, a dome."

NEW NARRATIVES



Michelle van Parys
Future Exhibit
 (Black-and-white photograph)
 Arizona
 1991

A randomly discovered image in the *Scenes from the New West* series contradicts the cherished “timelessness” of western landscape. It leaves to our imaginations what the “exhibit” will be, what new agenda will be staged in this place, which at the moment is more a setting than a site.



Lucy R. Lippard
Monument Valley
 (Color photograph)
 Navajo Nation near Kayenta, Arizona
 2001

Monument Valley has been the site of spectacle and fantasy in endless Hollywood films. Contemporary cowboy and Indian reality is introduced by the “development” in the foreground, federal housing for Navajo.



Charles Keating, Jr., began developing this planned community in the desert near Estrella Mountains while he was the chief executive officer of Lincoln Savings and Loan. In 1989 the bank collapsed due to mismanagement. Estrella was never completed.

Keating was convicted of multiple fraud and racketeering charges and was sentenced to twelve and a half years in prison. Twenty-two thousand of the bank's uninsured depositors, many of them elderly, lost their life savings.

Joel Sternfeld
Estrella Development
 (Color photograph)
 Near Southern Avenue, Goodyear, Arizona
 1995

An apparently “natural” landscape is in fact a multileveled narrative of capitalist ambition and failure. In American myth, the palm tree stands for leisure and tropical pleasures. But this is a landscape of desolation and despair. The grid of subdivision is broken by greed and a modicum of justice.

2

Claiming the Site: Evolving Social–Legal Conceptions of Ownership and Property

Harvey M. Jacobs

When we think and talk about “the site,” allowing the concept to form in our minds, we associate it with two ideas. The first is the idea that an isolatable site is owned, and that ownership is identifiable. Whether the ownership unit is a private or public entity (an individual, corporation, government, or some combination of these) is immaterial; what matters is the assumption that a legal someone has control over the site. The second idea is that the owner has a set of rights that may be freely exercised as a function of their ownership: for example, the right to keep others off the site, the right to use the site for the owner’s own enjoyment, the right to develop the site, the right to extract profit from the site, and so on.

Commonly understood to be static, these two base ideas have in fact always been issues of intense social contention in the United States. What it means to own and what comprises the rights of ownership have evolved in response to changes in technology and changes in social values and relationships over the course of the nation’s existence.

This essay seeks to explicate how we, as owners of, neighbors to, and people concerned about a site, claim it, given changing ideas about ownership and rights. I start deep in American history, with the debates over ownership and rights during the time of the American Revolution. Despite a popular rhetoric that often seeks to simplify this history, what I show is that any contemporary ambiguity about the ideas of ownership and rights is encapsulated in the country’s founding