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The Presence of Absence: Places by Extraction

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Every act of design is first an act of disturbance. Whether the preexisting field is natural or contrived, construction must necessarily disturb that which has been. The term disturbance should not be regarded negatively, however, since in this broader sense disturbance can actually improve the existing state or provide an equally appropriate alternative.

Psychology tells us that we first perceive by contrast: we read the outline of the tree before we discern the color and shape of its leaves; we note the presence of the sound before we ascertain the rise and fall of its melody. Perception is at least a twofold process: the first stage is an awareness; the second attends more directly to the particular stimulus. In sitting out our place in the world, we begin by reforming the prevalent order as a means of overlaying significance onto that terrain. Disturbance, whether by adding or subtracting from the landscape, is the first realization of environmental design.

In the developed world, we tend to regard construction primarily as an act of displacement. The mass of a building occupies real space in the wilderness by replacing rocks, trees, or earth; in the city, buildings replace other buildings or open space. But there is an

Photographs by Marc Treib unless noted

1 Tatra Mountains, Poland, 1969
The rectangular clearing and the hard forest edge brought one's perception of the landscape into consciousness.
2 Naiku (Inner Shrine), Ise, Japan, fifth century A.D., with 1973 rebuilding.
Although the wooden structures and concentric fences overlay the specified space, the primary act of place-making is the removal of the trees.
Photograph courtesy MIT Press.
3 Gekko (Outer Shrine), Ise
Alternates are. Lining the forest floor with white gravel distinguishes the rectangle of the zone from its surroundings. Note that certain trees remain within the purity of the geometric figure.
alternate way of looking at architecture and place demarcation. Instead of adding more elements to the site, let us consider removing material from it and rearranging that material already present. Perhaps by looking obliquely at the more common process of additions, we can more readily accept an existing condition as worthy of continuity or build for an economically greater return.

The power of absence does not depend on a conscious aesthetic intention. High in the Tatras mountains, on the border between Poland and Czechoslovakia, evergreen forests blanket the slopes and normally read merely as the articulated texture of the hillside. On the road toward the small lake at the mountain’s summit, the tree cover remains a background presence. Rounding a critical bend, a rectangular clearing in the conifer blanket brings the terrain into the foreground of consciousness for the first time. The tandem pairing of the visually stilled natural order with the contrived regularity of human intention is manifest in the play between the irregular spacing of the trees and the clarity of the remnant. The power emanating from that rectangle is intense, informing simultaneously the unpredictable composition of the forest and the metamorphosis of the clearing from a negative to a
positive statement. Grass emerges the equal of
counters.

In the forest, the dense, matured texture of the
trees provides the basic ground against which design
intention must be measured. In Japan, forests blanket the
vast majority of the land
surface, the valleys and the
plains but especially the
mountain slopes. During
the early centuries of the
Christian era, the hegemony of the Yamato clan
consolidated on the land around what today is Nara
and Kyoto. The gradual
separation of the practice
of Shinto religion from the
person of the reigning
shogun—in time, the
emperor—necessitated
religious structures distinct
from residential types.
Although the high shrine
style did derive from artistic
architectural forms, the
disposition of the shrine
 precinct drew upon
principles of geometric order
foreign to the indigenous,
topographically derived,
precedents. 4

The Shinto shrines dwell in
places at times announced by
unusual geographic features. Shrine architecture taps
upon and articulates the
power of the site rather than
creating an internalized
sanctuary representative of
Christian traditions. At the
Shinto shrine all visitors pass
through the sacred
precinct, but no one sacred
celebrants alone are privy to
the interior of the centermost
structures. To differentiate
the zone of the shrine,
the order of the site is
consciously disturbed, a
practice common to many
peoples throughout the
world. “When the sacred
manifests itself into any
hierophany,” explained
Mituzuki Ishide, “there is
not only a break in the
homogeneity of space; there
is also revelation of an
absolute reality, opposed to
the nonreality of the vast
surrounding expanse. The
manifestation of the sacred
ontologically founds the
world.” 5

At the Ise shrines, since the
fifth century continually
reconstructed in almost the
exact form every twenty
years, the first act is to clear
and demarcate a zone within
the forest. The pure
geometry of the rectangular
site—divided into two sites
and built on in alternating
cycles—is softened by the
native Japanese acceptance of
natural accident. Some trees
remain within the cleared
field or on its perimeter.

Geometry is not taken as a
pure abstraction but becomes
instead an abstract
ordering tempered by the
particularities of the site’s
topography and the great
cryptomeria forest.

Carpeting the rectangular
zone, white gravel reinforces
the definition of its limits by
vividly contrasting its texture
and brilliance to the soft
coreth and needle-covered
forest floor.

From this point, the
operations become more
architectural, adding in
concentric layers an
arrangement of four fences of
varying density and building
the wooden shrine structures
themselves. In many ways
these buildings are secondary
to the primary definition of
the site at Ise. More than
any other single act, the
removal of the preexisting
forest—disturbance
heightens the presence of the
sacred space.

The Shinto tradition of
suggestion has continued
into the modern era. One
can conceive of absence as
omission or one can think of
it as abstraction. Normally
we consider dry gardens such
as the famous rock garden of
Ryoan-ji (ca. 1499, with
later modifications) in
Kyoto as absence: only
gravel, moss, and fifteen
monumental stones comprise
the essence of this landscape.
In looking at the sheet of
gravel and the objects
embedded in its surface, we
tend to think of it two-
dimensionally, that is, as a
plane. One must, however,
consider the garden in
context. Seen against the
surrounding earthen wall, the
flowering cherry trees
just beyond the garden, the
maples that assume brilliant
colors in autumn, and most
of all the adjacent hillocks,
the rock garden is less a
single plane and more a
spatial void, as Ise is the
void in the forest. In Zen, the
tradition of the yumiwa, the

4 Ryoan-ji, Kyoto, Japan,
ca. 1499, with later
modifications.

The garden clearly reads as a
void against its vegetative and
topographic backdrop.

5 Ryoan-ji. The fifteen rocks
that comprise the subject of the
garden also articulate the
presence of the ground.
gravel field," thrived beyond the confines of Shinto and has become a basic element of the Japanese garden vocabulary.

The act of extraction at he was intended for perceptual effect. At other sites the landforms are the trace of prior use, like the forest cut in the Tatras, they are not necessarily aesthetically intentioned. The peat bog on the Shetland Islands, for example, are distributed in rectangular lots: the peat from the bogs is incised, removed, and burned in rectangular blocks. The extraction of the peat, each slab following a relatively constant dimension in thickness, depth, and width, over time creates a negative, rectilinear pit, a continually varying relief that unconsciously maps the removal of a natural resource. The grass triumphs in the summer months when the reduced need for heating fuel allows it to integrate the cuts into an abstract relief of blocks, irregularly stepped contour, both soft and hard at the same time.

Here sight parallels sound. At times it is silence rather than noise that exerts the greater presence. Indeed, the Japanese say that a whisper can be heard when a shout cannot. Composer John Cage once stated that "the music never stops, we just stop listening." Thus, it is natural, more than completely, ironic, that the composer
entitled a book of his writings, Silence. Cage, who has been influenced by Asian religion and aesthetics as well as Western mysticism, also created a piece entitled 4′33″, "a silent piece in three movements." Of course, there is no true silence; Cage is telling us that we will always hear something, if nothing other than normal surroundings of our lives that ordinarily are left unheard or the pulsing of our own blood in our bodies. Absence is presence in his music: "We are in the presence not of a work of art which is a thing, but of an action which is implicitly nothing," Cage wrote about the music of Morton Feldman. "Nothing has been said. Nothing is communicated. And there is no use of symbols or intellectual references. Nothing in life requires a symbol since it is clearly what it is: a visible manifestation of an invisible nothing." Similarly, there are no visual silences in the environment. By simplifying, by abstraction, we may focus but we may never reach point zero.

During the 1960s a number of artists left the confines of the art gallery to create works in open space. To some of these artists, to create works that could not be purchased was a political statement against treating the art object as yet another commodity of capitalist society. But questions of scale and content also occupied

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6 Peat Bogs, Skerlaid Heath, Great Britain, 1969

In time grass covers the site, transforming the excavations into a rectilinear relief, the record of human activity.


The artist terms this "drawing" in the desert's surface sculpt with the weight removed. Photograph courtesy of Xavier Fourcade, Inc.
central positions in the conception of these works. Robert Smithson directed us to re-examine the quotidian environment—often taken as ugly—to expose a reality fraught with considerable power and aesthetic possibilities. Sculptors such as Michael Heizer have depicted the order of situation through the structure of their works. Heizer's series of excavated displacements, for example, were created by removing portions of the desert floor, reforming the surface into a noticeable configuration while unveiling the geologic composition below the surface. For Heizer, "the subject matter of sculpture is the object itself, sculpture is the study of objects." But, "a statement about anything physical becomes a statement about its presence." The "drawings" (Nine Nevada Depressions, late 1960s) engraved in the desert floor are "sculptures with weights removed." 

Denial Negative (1967–1970) is the largest of Heizer's works in the Nevada desert: two mammoth straight channels in a mesa that dig across the irregular, eroded edge of a cliff. To make the cuts, bulldozers scraped two sloped ramps, each incision pushing deeper below the Earth's rocky surface, dumping the excavated material over the edge in a manner paralleling Smithsonian Asphalt Ramdom (Rome, 1969). The residue of Heizer's process is a broken spatial channel approached by ramps at either end. As one descends the ramp, the desert disappears and in its place, like a pair of gargantuan blenders, the sides of the cut rock rise into one's consciousness. The unrefracted sides of the channels expose the sedimentary strata and reveal the effect of time on the development of the land. In the descent, one is, in effect, traveling backward in geologic time, while one's view is focused across the opening toward the reciprocal void. In this work, the sculptor has done little more than disturb the condition of mesa edge; the straight cuts betray the human presence as the strata elucidate the geology.

Richard Serra's Casting (1969) was created by slinging molten lead against the intersection of a wall and floor. As the metal cooled, the sculptor pulled it from the intersection which had become its form. The piece's configuration—the straight edge and the rough edge, the irregular grain produced by the successive throws—facingly recorded the process of its making. Serra regarded the room as the negative, using the mold for his positive casting. Heizer, on the other hand, saw the desert as a positive from which he removed two linear sections to create a
Michael Heizer
The sculpture is created solely by removal or displacement; two aligned cuts into the mesa edge are linked visually.
Photograph courtesy of Xavier Fourcade, Inc.
prescribed void. It is just that absence of the rock in Double Negativity that creates its vitality.

While we read certain urban open spaces as positives, we read others as voids. John Wood the Elder’s Queen’s Square (1756) or John Palmer’s Lansdown Crescent (1793) at Bathwrap new architecture around air to form places. Although one may feel that they are only as deep as the buildings themselves—open places gridled by buildings—the spaces and the architecture that define them may yet read as positives.

In contrast, there are urban spaces that thunder as voids: the noise of silence, the power of absence. The populace must have read the drastic cuts of Haussmann’s Parisian renovations or the avancement of Mussolini’s Rome in just that way: brutal incisions on the body of the city whose new order defiled the existing texture like the great high-voltage coxswains that cut mercilessly through the forests. Mussolini, an impressive and powerful orator, also understood the manipulation of spatial context. His redevelopment projects often called for the isolation of ancient monuments in their “necessary solitude” to heighten both their presence and the role of the present in the sweep of Roman history.”
Of all the world’s urban spaces, perhaps none reads more powerfully than the justifiably oft-mentioned “drawing rooms of Europe”: the Piazza San Marco. Populating the Venetian lagoon was a trying task, and dwellings, churches, and other structures came to occupy every available square meter of dry land. Only the campos around which a neighborhood centered and narrow paths remained between the densely packed structures. While there are many campi, there is only one great piazza. Fronting the basilica and linked perpendicularly to its smaller piazzetta, the Piazza San Marco appears as a vacant site awaiting to be filled. One feels the tension, the long procrastinating wings acting as retarding walls against the thrust of urban development. Like the police cordon, they hold the city at bay, allowing the crowds to gather on the piazza, to promenade, to view the church, deal, have coffee, or watch the pigeons. In a manner that recalls the extraction from the forest at be, the Piazza San Marco appears as a removal from its urban fabric, in feeling if not in historical fact.

The power of absence is felt in varying contexts. We notice for the first time certain structures when they have been torn down for a parking lot or when the site is vacant, awaiting construction. Like the
10 Lansdown Crescent, Bath, Great Britain, 1789–1793.
John Palmer
The building wraps the air to enclose space, but one senses that the architectural definition is thin.

11 Via dell'Impero, Rome, under construction.
Deductions at the Markets of Trojan, ca. 1930. Photograph: Museo di Roma, courtesy of Spiro Kostof

12 Piazza San Marco, Venice, Italy
One feels the tension along the space’s outer edge, which acquires the role of restraining wall against the pressure of urban development just beyond the square.

exaggerated sense of the missing tooth, one becomes more aware after it has been extracted. Departure from the normal order, whether it be construction in the natural setting or destruction in the urban environment, controls our attention. We can focus only on the void, at times forgetting the subject that has been removed.

One artist concerned with calculated removal was Gordon Matta-Clark (1941–1978). Matta-Clark’s later work provided conceptual transparency in an opaque environment. Using a chainsaw to cut through structures—usually buildings marked for demolition—Matta-Clark simultaneously revealed the building’s physiognomy while formulating new spaces comprised of the voids. Perhaps his most powerful work was Circu (1978), also called The Caribbean Orange, which was cut from a structure to be renovated adjacent to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. By cutting through the floors and walls in a series of varying shapes based on the arc, the composite space emerged, distorting and billowing as it traversed the definite structure’s three floors.

His was a conjuring trick, making three-dimensional spaces using two-dimensional layers of space. Judith
Kirchner wrote the following about Matta-Clark’s sculpture:

Like spiral forms, the dynamic volumes Matta-Clark carved in these last major works gave the feeling of being endless. They eluded comprehension as one passed haltingly through the spaces, climbing up and down, walking to and fro, even jumping as one looked. On the third floor of Circus, a truncated section of a sphere, a circle of Sheetrock with a door in the center, was dramatically suspended as if to defy gravity, architectural reason, and visual understanding. Matta-Clark often spoke of the apprehension of his multilayered works being dependent on recollection, of the impossibility of their being instantly assimilated.

This, however, was no cause for despair: “of course, it recognized that fragments can be more telling than totalities.”

We have all seen urban wall remnants upon which the records of once-abutting spaces have been deposited on the party walls of their neighbors. The incongruence of residual ceramic tile, the curiously tinted plaster surfaces floating on brick, or the fragments of residual concrete overlay scale and history to the normally blank walls that turn away from the street. Matta-Clark’s work provides us a similar chronicle of building history, but he augments residue with a vision of the positive void that charges through floor planes, claiming space and identity. Incisions reiterate memory, proving that the power of the void can superecede architecture’s repository of pragmatism.

The act of construction is an act of covering, each addition overlays an existing formal condition and grants it a new configuration. Enclosure usually disguises structure, a favorite target of modernism’s call for truth in building. Memory, too, plays a role in creating the presence of absence, for we must know or remember what has been before we can fully comprehend what is now. Perhaps this need for recall engages us in a more active discourse than those acts of addition normal to architectural construction. The void induces us to participate in ways that the solid cannot. Intrigued, we question just what is going on here, just what has changed, just what is different in the picture. Party walls exposed after building demolition tell us—in section—the story of the building now passed, rendered transparent for the first time since it was enclosed by the act of construction. Demolition can serve as an act of revelation. Gordon Matta-Clark and Michael Heizer, in their sculptures, clarify by
“discovery” and provide us with a lens with which to see, as if enlarged, the world we usually pass without notice.

Notes
3 Economy here should be distinguished from cheap. Cheap refers to the lowest possible cost in spite of return; economy is the greatest return for the amount of resources invested.
11 The Writings of Robert Smithson, pp. 192–193. Both works involve the removal of spoilage and therefore are physically related, but more importantly, both concern the powers of entropy and its effect on sculpture.