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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.¹ In staking out our place in the world, we begin by reforming the prevalent order as a means of overlaying significance onto that terrain.² Disturbance, whether by adding or subtracting from the landscape, is the first realization of environmental design.

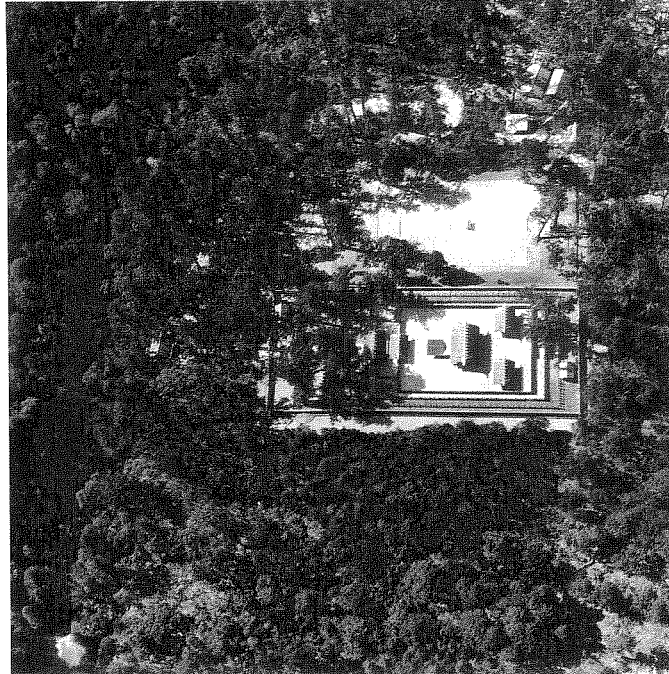
In the developed world, we tend to regard construction primarily as an act of displacement. The mass of a building occupies real space in the wilderness by replacing rocks, trees, or earth; in the city, buildings replace other buildings or open space. But there is an



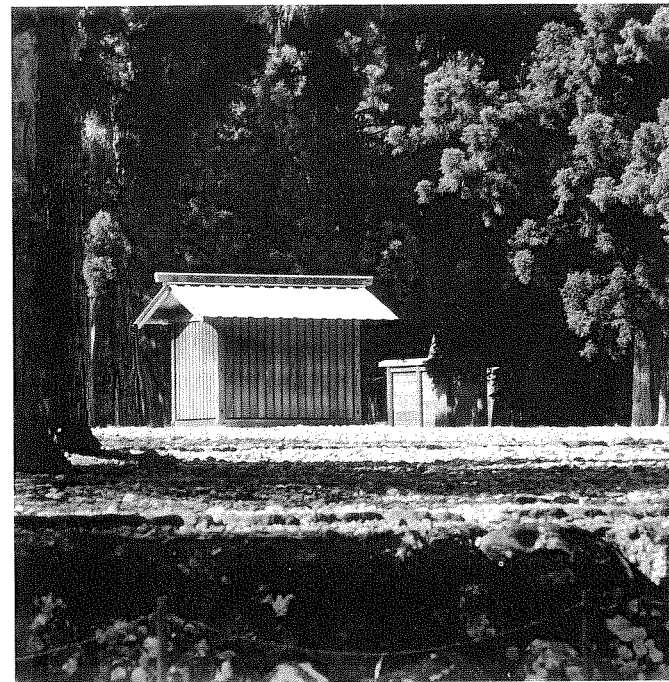
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- 1 **Tatra Mountains, Poland, 1969**
The rectangular clearing and the hard forest edge brought one's perception of the landscape into consciousness.
- 2 **Naiku (Inner Shrine), Ise, Japan, fifth century A.D., with 1973 rebuilding**
Although the wooden structures and concentric fences overlay the sanctified space, the primary act of place-making is the removal of the trees.
Photograph courtesy MIT Press.
- 3 **Geku (Outer Shrine), Ise**
Alternate site. 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.

Photographs by Marc Treib
unless noted



2



3

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 addition, we can more readily accept an existing condition as worthy of continuance or build for an economically greater return.³

The power of absence does not depend on a conscious aesthetic intention. High in the Tatra 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 jumbled 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 their removal. 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 conifers.

In the forest, the dense, inarticulate 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 chieftain—in time, the emperor—necessitated religious structures distinct from residential types. Although the high shrine style did derive from archaic storehouse forms, the disposition of the shrine precinct drew upon principles of geometric order foreign to the indigenous, topographically derived, precedents.⁴

The Shinto deities 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 tradition. At the Shinto shrine all visitors pass through the sanctified precinct, but the most 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 Mircea Eliade, “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 incident. 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 earthen 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 sites 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 subjects 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 hillsides, 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 *yuniwa*, 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.



4



5

gravel field," thrived beyond the confines of Shinto and has become a basic element of the Japanese garden vocabulary.

The act of extraction at Ise 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 blocky, 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, rather 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."⁷ 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. No thing in life requires a symbol since it is clearly what it is: a visible manifestation of an invisible nothing."⁸ Similarly, there are no visual silences in the environment. By simplifying, by abstracting, 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



6

6 Peat Bogs, Shetland Islands, Great Britain, 1969

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

7 Isolated Mask Circumflex, Massacre Dry Lake, Nevada, 1968. Michael Heizer.

The artist terms this "drawing" in the desert's surface sculpture with the weight removed." Photograph courtesy of Xavier Fourcade, Inc.



7

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.⁹ 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.”¹⁰

Double Negative (1967–1970) is the largest of Heizer’s works in the Nevada desert: two mammoth straight channels in a mesa that align 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 Smithson’s *Asphalt Rundown*

(Rome, 1969).¹¹ 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 blinders, the sides of the cut rock rise into one’s consciousness. The unreinforced 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—lucidly recorded the process of its making. Serra regarded the room as the negative, using the mold for his positive casting.¹² Heizer, on the other hand, saw the desert as a positive from which he removed two linear sections to create a



8

8, 9 Double Negative, Mormon
Mesa, Nevada, 1967–1970.
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.



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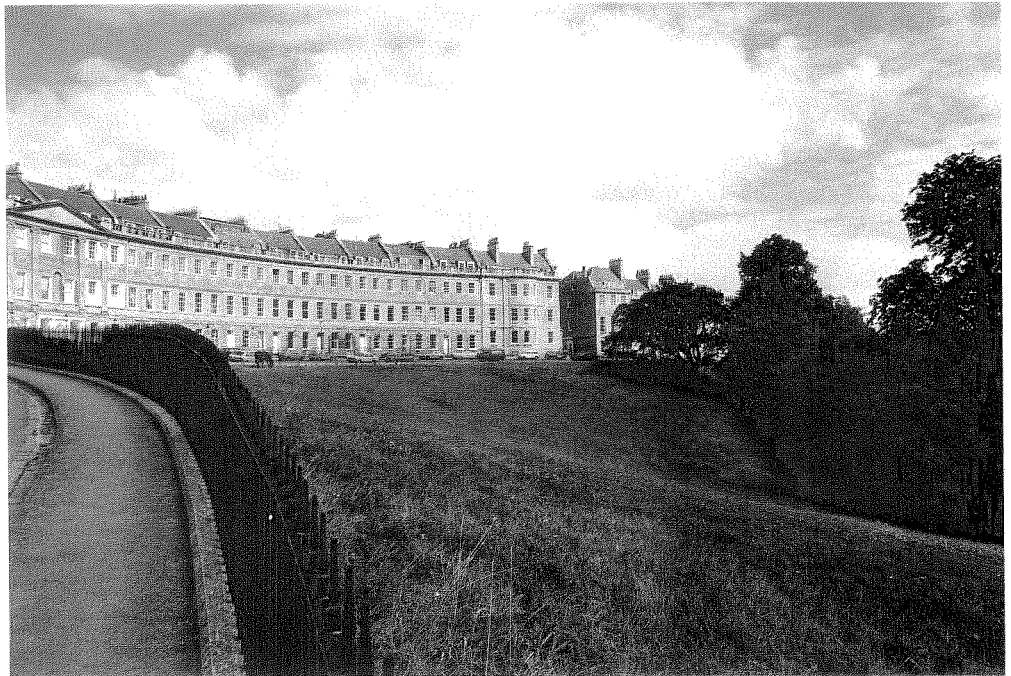
prescribed void. It is just that absence of the rock in *Double Negative* that creates its vitality.

While we read certain urban open spaces as positives, we read others as voids. John Wood the Elder's Queen's Square (1736) or John Palmer's Lansdown Crescent (1793) at Bath wrap new architecture around air to form places. Although one may feel that they are only as deep as the buildings themselves—open places girdled 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 *sventramenti* of Mussolini's Rome in just that way: brutal incisions on the body of the city whose new order defied the existing texture like the great high-voltage easements 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.¹³

Of all the world's urban spaces, perhaps none reads more powerfully than the justifiably oft-mentioned "drawing room 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 *campo* 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 *procuratie* wings acting as retaining 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 Ise, 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



11

10



12

10 Lansdown Crescent, Bath,
Great Britain, 1789–1793.
John Palmer
The building wraps the air to
enclose space, but one sense
that the architectural definition
is thin.

11 Via dell'Impero, Rome,
under construction.
Demolitions at the Markets of
Trajan, 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 retaining
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
(1943–1978). Matta-Clark's
late work provided
conceptual transparency in
an opaque environment.
Using a chain saw to cut
through structures—usually
buildings marked for
demolition—Matta-Clark
simultaneously revealed the
building physiognomy while
formulating new spaces
comprised of the voids.
Perhaps his most powerful
work was *Circus* (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 derelict
structure's three floors.

His was a conjuring trick,
making three-dimensional
spaces using two-dimensional
layers of space. Judith

Kirshner wrote the following about Matta-Clark's sculpture:

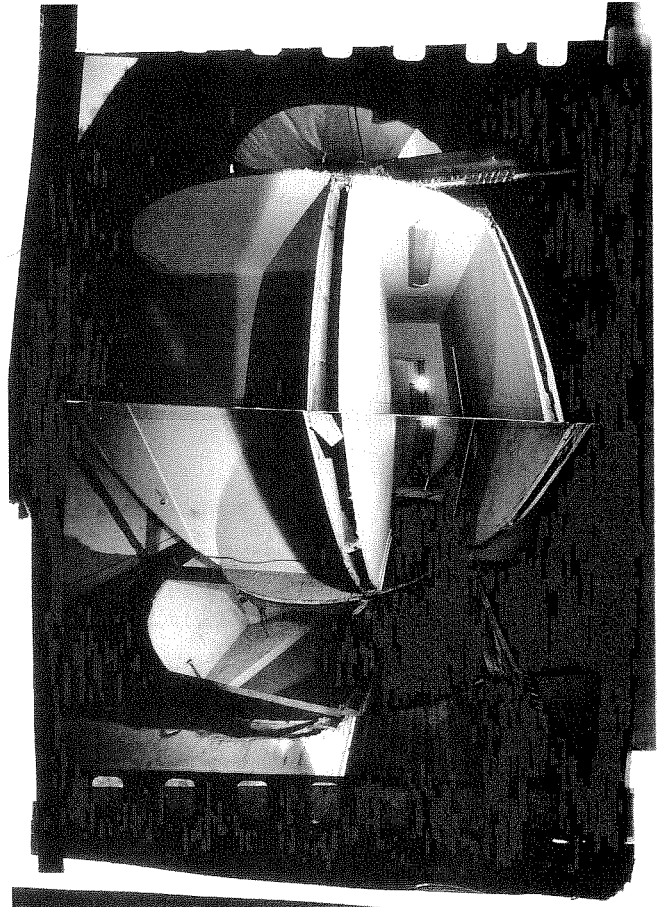
Like spiral forms, the dynamic volumes Matta-Clark carved in these last major works gave the feeling of being endless. They eluded comprehension as one passed haltingly through the spaces, climbing up and down, walking to and fro, even jumping as one looked. On the third floor of *Circus*, a truncated 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."¹⁴

We have all seen urban wall remnants upon which the records of the 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 reactivate memory, proving that the power of the void can supersede architecture's repository of pragmatics.

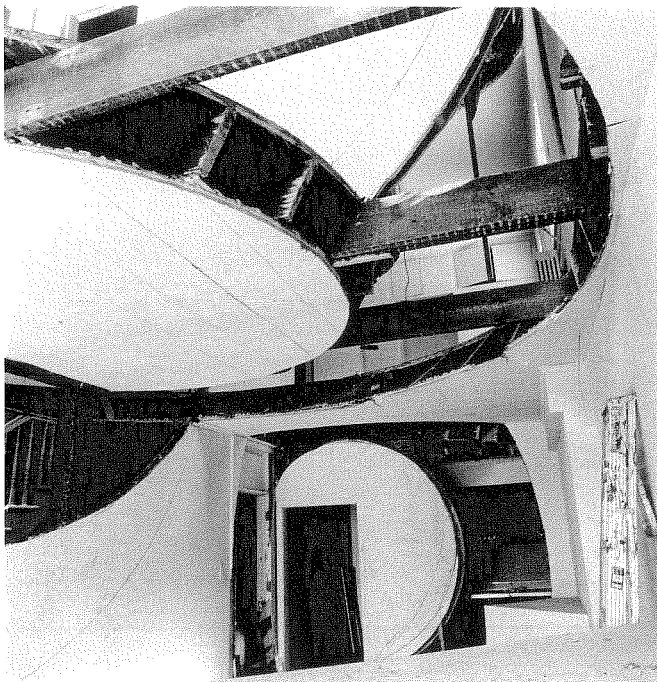
The act of construction is an act of covering, each addition overlays an existing formal condition and grants it a new configuration. Enclosure usually disguises structure, a favorite target of modernism's call for truth in building. Memory, too, plays a role in creating the presence of absence, for 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



13

13, 14 *Circus* (or *The Caribbean Orange*) Chicago, 1978. Gordon Matta-Clark
The sculpture was created by selectively removing portions of a structure slated for renovation. Spatial figure and sculptural definition derive from conceptually traversing cuts into the wall and floor planes. Photograph courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

15 *Demolished building site*, Berkeley, California, 1987



14



15

“dis-discovery” and provide us with a lens with which to see, as if enlarged, the world we usually pass without notice.

Notes

- 1 See Ulrich Neisser, *Cognition and Reality: Principles and Implications of Cognitive Psychology* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976).
- 2 Marc Treib, “Traces Upon the Land: The Formalist Landscape” *Architectural Association Quarterly*, no. 4 (1979).
- 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.
- 4 See Günter Nitschke, “Ma: The Japanese Sense of Place” *Architectural Design* (May 1966).
- 5 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), p. 21.
- 6 See Teiji Itoh, *The Japanese Garden* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 142–147; and Marc Treib and Ron Herman, *A Guide to the Gardens of Kyoto* (Tokyo: Shufunotomo Publishing, 1980), pp. 4–6.
- 7 Anne d’Harnoncourt, *John Cage: Scores and Prints* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982). Unpaginated.
- 8 John Cage, “Lecture on Something” (1959), in *Silence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), p. 136.
- 9 Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey” (1967), in *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), pp. 52–57.
- 10 Michael Heizer, Interview, in Julia Brown, ed., *Michael Heizer: Sculpture in Reverse* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp. 30–31.
- 11 *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, pp. 192–193. Both works involve the residue of spillage and therefore are physically related, but more importantly, both concern the process of entropy and its effect on sculpture.
- 12 See Clara Weyergraf, *Richard Serra: Interviews, Etc., 1970–1980* (Yonkers, NY: The Hudson River Museum, 1980); and Rosalind Krauss, *Richard Serra/Sculpture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1986).
- 13 Spiro Kostof, *The Third Rome: 1870–1950: Traffic and Glory* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1973).
- 14 Judith Russi Kirshner, “Non-uments” *Artforum* (October 1985), p. 103. See also Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), especially pp. 112–130.