“It seems inevitable that we should leave behind the nostalgic notions of a site being essentially bound to the physical and empirical realities of a place.”

by Martin H Age

Introduction
Within architectural thought and process, the site is traditionally thought of as a physical location, a piece of ground that is bound to the earth and subject to its physical laws. Site is also commonly conceived as a location for an intervention, a neutral or unfinished “lot” to be completed by an architectural project. Site and project are often thought to be distinct, one making way for the other.

Work performed in the context of land and conceptual art provides a unique challenge to these assumptions. There the site and the project have been understood as interwoven in the production of art. For many of these artists, “site” is integral to the activities of reflection (design) and making (production). The location of the work is often established by the artist, and the material qualities often emerge from a manipulation of found conditions as much as from new construction. In such projects, the “site” not only invites artistic activity but often constitutes its constructive result: “one does not impose, but rather expose the site.”

Within architecture, then, the notion of site might be similarly broadened by thinking of it as a fundamental part of the design and building process. To conceive the site as “constructed” is to challenge its given, immutable qualities. It is to enter into a contentious territory of creation, one that is vulnerable to new and exciting interpretations.

What follows is a discussion of land and conceptual art projects that suggest a reconsideration of the relationship between site and project within architecture. To do so, three key concepts central to the way we understand the site will be challenged: the role that imagination, location, and time play in constructing the site.

Constructing the Site:
Imagination
There are latent assumptions to be challenged. For example, the persistent consideration of site as existing solely at or above the surface of the earth.

In her seminal article “On Site: Architectural Preoccupations,” Carol Burns proposes the notion of the “cleared site” to describe the traditional thinking about architectural sites—that the site is no more than that which awaits architectural intervention, something empty or cleared of content either physically or intellectually. She shows this concept to be simultaneously pervasive and destructive, suggesting that the cleared site is really no more than a formal strategy, an unhelpful habit of architectural thinking. For her, a more fruitful direction lies in the recognition that all sites are constructions, whether out of a set of empirical conditions, the imagination, or both. The site is never simply found, but instead always constitutes an act of making.

Perhaps there are always two landscapes: one which we physically perceive and one which we mentally construct. We could say, perhaps, that the successful earthworks are those which generate a presence at both levels.

Robert Smithson’s “nonsites” provide a challenge to the traditional notion of site described by Burns. For him, the site was never simply a repository of features ripe for intervention, but served as the artistic project in itself—the site as project. Located in a gallery or museum, each nonsite is an installation intended to represent, through a number of constituent parts (maps, extracted soil samples contained in manufactured bins, photographs, written narratives), an actual “site” located outside the gallery and visited by the artist. For Smithson, the role of the imagination is not to complete or build upon a suggestive canvas provided by the site, but rather to point out the gap that exists between the unprocessed, found reality of the land and its appropriation in ways that provide specific interpretations of the site. The artist described this process as a “Dialectic between Site and Nonsite,” a process that directly engages both the empirical and the imagined, the sight and the nonsight.

The artifacts or parts that form the nonsite, taken individually, yield a series of distinct operations that define the site as constructed: the rocks indicate collecting and displacing, the bins frame or establish boundaries, the photographs suggest walking or moving about the site, the maps indicate location, and so on. Although the sum of these artifacts resists definition as a single, cohesive whole or “site,” the land that has been transposed into the gallery reclaims above all else the status of the neutral piece of ground that we come to associate with the traditional open site awaiting intervention:

The site, in a sense, is the physical, raw reality—the earth or the ground that we are not really aware of when we are in an interior room or studio or something like that—and so I decided that I would set limits in terms of this dialogue... and as a result I went and instead of putting something on the landscape I decided it would be interesting to transfer the land indoors, to the nonsite, which is an abstract container.
However, it is the displacement of earth from the actual "site" to the gallery nonsite that produces the shift in awareness between found and constructed ideals of site desired by Smithson. In Mono Lake Non-Site, the samples of earth extracted from the site and the map are purposely displayed differently. (See Figure 1.) The samples sit on the floor of the gallery and are presented perspectively to the viewer, and the map, hung on the wall at eye level, appears in orthographic projection as an undistorted image. Thus the same site is presented in two ways: one concerned with the experience of sight, the other with an intellectualization or rationalization of the land. A full recombination of the actual site is possible only in the mind. The sites of each nonsite are firmly rooted in the mind not as a single "picture," but as a rich set of representations open to the viewer's scrutiny. In the outside world, however, the passage of the artist has left no physical traces. Visits to the site are possible, but Smithson offers that "once you get there you're on your own."** The repercussions of this idea are profound: although we traditionally expect the "site" to be that place which awaits intervention, for Smithson "the site is where a piece should be but isn't."** Ultimately, the nonsites suggest that what we have come to understand as the site for work might be a little more than the set of ideas we have about that site. The lesson is then twofold. First, what is empirically present is never enough to serve as a site. Second, a site is also never only the set of ideas about a place or its representations, but is always submerged within the dialectic of both ideas and concrete experience.

Smithson's cryptic statement that "the site is where a piece should be but isn't" suggests a deeper reading of site that is not yet considered. Like a palimpsest, any actual site could be seen as a specific set of locations, a variety of narratives, and therefore suggests many possibilities for fiction. But it is also possible to conceive, based on Smithson's work and statement, that the site might be nothing more than the structure of one's experience. In this he prefigures the work of Richard Long. Within much of his work, the site is conceived not as a clearly delineated place, but as a structure for experience in the form of a process (to walk in a straight line) or map (to walk in the landscape the radius of a circle as drawn on a map). (See Figure 2.)

**Fixed Walks**
- A walk of 30 miles
- A walk passing 30 farmhouses (34 miles)
- A walk crossing 30 crows (34 miles)
- A walk seeing 30 blackbirds (29 miles)
- A walk lasting 30 hours (96 miles)


Considering this work, Long lays out a set of conditions (miles, farmhouses, crows, blackbirds, and time) that provide a structure to a site without describing a specific site at all; it is the rigidity of the established itinerary (or project) that leads to a concrete experience of the landscape. This produces a kind of reversal in which it is the "project" that is given and where the "site" becomes the object of creative specialization. In this example, the "site" is the site formed by the "project," a walk that passes thirty farmhouses, or a walk seeing thirty blackbirds.

Long's trajectories through the landscape also suggest new ways in which we might reconsider our own initial visits to a new site for the architect, such trajectories or visits typically include a careful mapping of the land, taking account of its critical features, and the like. What becomes possible are site investigations that might reveal the qualities of a site that we could never have conceived without the use of conventional surveying procedures. The work of Long and Smithson suggests the importance of the imagination in enabling more diverse and richer concrete experiences of these landscapes. Smithson helps architects to consider the richness of...
creativity and freedom were achieved in their work in this way. These projects invite speculation for both the potential for far-flung sites in architecture and the notion that access to these marginal places can constitute an integral part of the constructed experience of site.

Matt-Claude's site, the Fole Estates, serves as an inspiring example of marginal land used literally to refer to spaces left over within the urban environment. (See Figure 4.) The project embraces conventions of mapping and surveying traditionally employed in establishing the location and the precise boundaries of the site. Fole Estates explores those particular moments in the process of subdividing property where such conventions produce a conceptual "eunice of surveying," as it were, thus fostering unexpected anomalies in the fabric of the city. Survey lines become so numerous that now, uninhabited parcels begin to appear.

The artist purchased fourteen parcels of residual land, deemed "gutter space" or "rubbish property," in Queens and Staten Island that had been put on the market for $25 each: a 2.33-by-335-foot strip of land, a 1.83-by-1.11-foot lot, and among others. Many were literally inaccessible and landlocked between buildings or other properties. Of these, Matt-Claude remarked, "that's an interesting quality, something that can be owned but never experienced." The artist created an exhibit of his newly acquired "properties" by assembling for each, with disdain, an accurate photographic inventory of the site, its exact dimensions and location, as well as the deed to the property. For Matt-Claude, "the unravelling of this land— and the verification of the site's existence through the laws of property—is the principal object of [his] critique." Thus, the role of the site in relation to unreal or unlocated locations is neither in relation to a possible site, a place that cannot be located or seen on standard maps or registers. Our traditional assumptions of possible locations as a "site for something" are disrupted. In this regard, Matt-Claude's occupation of unoccupied buildings and Tusell's open-skyl site serve to suggest that sites can exist outside of traditional frameworks of reference. Both margin and marginalization have been important themes behind works of land art. Smithson's journey to the industrial wastelands of New York (the early twenties, the beginnings of Pop, in New York, and the southwestern desert (Troy Jett) with Michael Heizer and others, indicates the importance of a search for increasingly marginalized sites. For Walter de Maria, "isolation is the essence of Land Art" because it severed connections to the art world and its institutions by seeking locations remote from major urban and cultural centers. Many felt that a greater degree of
The building surveys and interventions of historians, such as Jereme Claudia, Matta-Clark, and others, in which built structures are themselves critically reinvoked as sites. Architectural sites additionally refer to that interval of time in which a project is conceived (project site) and built (construction site). Before this period of reflection in which the architect is involved intellectually with the site, the location exists merely as a place of unused attention, a place that doesn’t command any specific meaning attached to architecture and building. Upon completion, both project and site are bound within a new order that often designates a new site and is used as a primary conceptual element of each project. The architect or landscape architect constructs the site as infrastructure in ways that can be further altered by others and that comes to fruition over time.

Similarly, for many land artists, the notion of time and its actions on the site is understood as a creative shaping force. Michael Heizer and Dennis Oppenheim have acknowledged the powerful role that time plays in transforming their work, even to the point of eventual disappearance.

Given this extended context set by Smithson and Long, a walk, like the most lasting buildings or landscapes, constitutes events that occupy relatively short increments of time in the history of a site. These events are a construction without a single author. The role of architecture may not be to establish permanence but rather to acknowledge a certain richness of experience on the site. To operate in this way is to accept the inevitability of change. Future events are fused with the history of the site through the imagination as a substitute for direct experience. In recent large-scale landscape architecture commissions such as those of Downsview Park in Toronto, and Fresh Kills on Staten Island in New York, the capacity of the site to adapt and transform over extended periods of time was a primary conceptual element of each project.

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To conclude, Conclusion: Constructing New Paradigms of Site

The works considered here are quite literally, site projects—projects concerned specifically with the issue of constructing or making a site. They offer provocative ways to rethink the role of the site in architecture. By folding the concept of site into the concept of project—by making the site either a part of or the object of the project—new associations between these terms emerge. When site and project are constructed as elements of a dialectic, we are freed to reconsider and/or reorganize the relationship of one site with others. (See Figure.) For Michael Heizer, "the work is not put in a place, it is that place." Along similar lines, landscape historian Janice Hainley proposes the phrase "landscape that creates a way to think of art, architecture, and landscape projects that, like Heizer's, share a formally and conceptually blurred relationship to their site. For Treu, the process through which the landscape is inflected is often an act of transforming the site rather than one of new construction. In terms of site specificity, one might argue that what indeed lacks specificity is neither the site nor the project, but rather the relationship between the two. To challenge these traditional presumptions is to summon in our imagination new realities of opportunity for architecture: more than an empty lot awaiting building, the site is a project for intervention—ephemeral or permanent, fixed or mobile, received or chosen, marginal or central, physical or virtual, real or fake. Within these conceptions of the site, a potential richness for architectural design lies in conceiving of the site as being a part of a architecture's futures to more fully take charge of the formulation of architectural interventions, and to take initiative in actively shaping the built environment.

To suggest that the site is the project does not question the primacy of site in architecture. Rather, to construct the site is simultaneously to recognize the immutability of the site/project relationship and raise the possibility of expanding this relationship. Within this framework, the site remains the foundation upon which any project is established, but it is a very new foundation that becomes the subject of critical inquiry.

Notes
4. Ibid., pp. 177-178.
5. Further, such designation as "This is the site project" contradicts our frame of the site in terms of specific relationships to other known places.

The Site as Project.