

# Representing Local Conditions: CITY/SITE/WORK

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Today the site has been substituted for extension which itself had replaced emplacement.

- Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces"

This city can be known only by an activity of an ethnographic kind: you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience;... it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left in you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it; the address not being written, it must establish its own writing.

- Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*

This student work was performed under the auspices of The Temple University Summer Program for Architectural Studies.<sup>1</sup> The Summer Program's goal was to explore the interrelationship of landscape architecture and urban design through focusing on the vast, marginal and often residual *meta-scapes* within the city of Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup> The *meta-scapes* studied in these studios were formed by the roadbeds, bridges and viaducts of the interstate highway system and regional rail lines that cut through the three centuries-old fabric of the city. Ranging in size and scale from the narrow wedge-shaped zone between I-95 and the city's *Fishtown* neighborhood, to the base of Market Street at the Delaware River, this work attempts to offer an expanded view of defining, demarcating, and drawing architectural sites in the city.<sup>3</sup> The following work is from the second year of the program — an exploration of a marginal site in the East Falls section of Philadelphia, beneath U.S. Route 1.<sup>4</sup>

For the first 250 years of its occupation by European settlers this site in East Falls marked the coincidence of two major transportation arteries; the Schuylkill River and Ridge Avenue. A Native American trail that pre-dates the Pennsylvania colony, Ridge Avenue continued to serve as the major transportation link with the once rich mineral reserves of northeastern Pennsylvania until the construction of the Interstate Highway System after W.W.II. In addition to the elevated roadway of Rt. 1, two major train lines, a stone rail bridge, a steel tower for electric power lines and the northern tip of Mount Laurel Cemetery (a national historic site) all co-



Figure 1: Installation/Exhibition of Temple University Summer Program for Architectural Studies, September, 1993, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

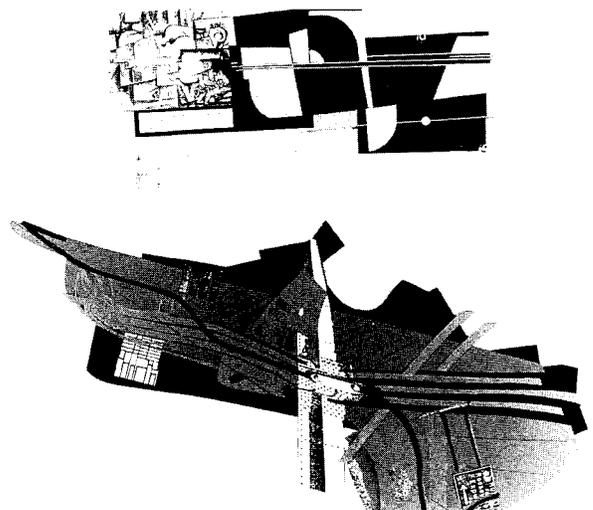


Figure 2: Initial collage/site studies. Student: José Rodriguez

occupy the study area that included both banks of the river. The difficulty of seeing this palimpsest of histories and adjacencies is compounded by the enormous excavation that

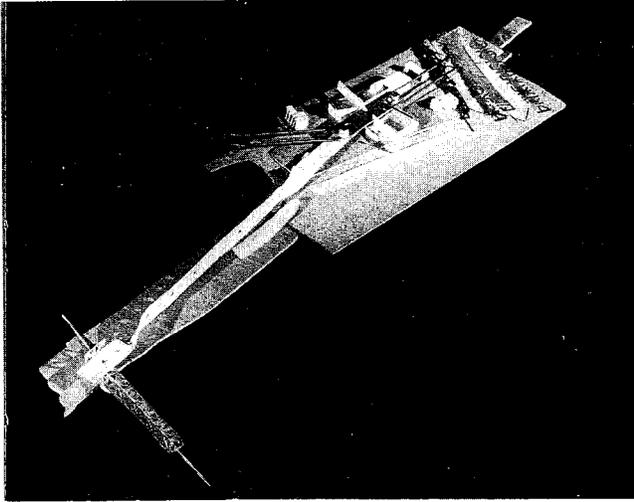


Figure 3: Three dimensional collage/semblage of site study. Mixed medium. Student: Jose Rodriguez

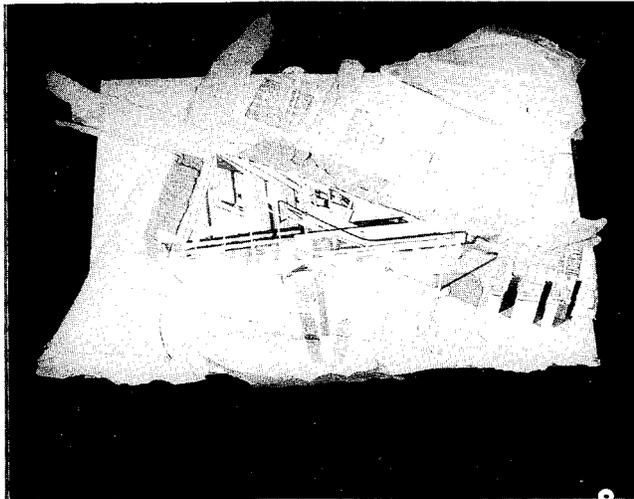


Figure 4: Final model of proposed intervention of Market/Motel. Mixed medium. Student: Jose Rodriguez

provided the clearance for the on and off ramps to the Rt. 1 viaduct. Thousands of tons of earth were removed along with dozens of buildings in the process of clearing the site.<sup>5</sup> Once a center of domestic, commercial, and civic activity, this studio has attempted to find ways of inhabiting the *heterotopia* of this ostensibly cleared site.

The ground of this speculative work presupposes that within an architectural project lays hidden a question that may help open-up our limited cone of vision as to what constitutes an architectural site. Where is the site of our drawing and how is drawing related to the ideas of site and sight? In large part, this studio work was a search for *ground*; the ground of drawing (sight) and ground of physical occupation (site). The space between the two is, perhaps what Roland Barthes refers to when he speaks of sites, "that have yet to establish their own writing." Barthes suggests that, at moments and places such as these, one is caught within the *making* of a site. The site is an inside with no outside; what

Omar Calabrese calls, a "formless form."<sup>6</sup> Consequently, we cannot know such a site as a whole; it is either partially or completely hidden from us, hidden from our view, from our *sight*. In effect, the speculative act of demarcating the ground of intervention is a demonstration of what is hidden *in the site* rather than illustrating what is revealed *on the site*.<sup>7</sup> Students in the studio developed programs on the individual sites they demarcated, choosing any two of the following activities; market, monastery, motel and SRO.

Through the construction of collages, the students traced the constructed site of the Route 1 viaduct — drawing-out the traces that the place had left in them. Having assembled these agglutinations of images, the studio discovered that although the site had been cleared, it was not a "cleared site". The representational technique of collage helped opened up an aperture through which we saw, not so much the physical form of the site, but the site as an activity of forms, of forming. Tracing the site as a matrix of activities, the student's representations of this "formless form" constituted the varied sites of their individual interventions.<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I founded Temple Summer Program in 1992, serving as Program Director for three years. I also co-taught a studio and the required theory seminar during this period. The eight week program consisted of thematically based studios and a required theory seminar augmented by a public lecture series. In its last year the program expanded to include a Rome studio/seminar and non-credit studies. While the Philadelphia-based undergraduate Summer Program ended 1994, the Rome studio and non-credit summer programs continue, as does summer undergraduate architectural instruction at Temple. **Figure 1** illustrates one of two installation/exhibitions I designed and built with students from the 1993 Summer Program.
- <sup>2</sup> Also see George Dodds, "Theater of the Residual City: Six Sites in a Metascape," *Sight Work/Site Works: Proceedings of the ACSA East Central Regional Conference* (Waterloo: University of Waterloo, 1992): 84-93.
- <sup>3</sup> Half of the students in the 1994 (3rd/4th yr.) studio completed their projects (an inhabited bridge) in Rome where we explored an idea first proposed by Michelangelo — a bridge connecting the Palazzo Farnese with the Villa Farnesina. Joanna Dougherty of Princeton taught the seminar component of the Rome-based program.
- <sup>4</sup> During this year I co-taught the 3rd/4th year studio and combined theory seminar with Mark Linder. Other faculty during the 1993 program included Kate Wingert, Marcia Feuerstein, David Cronrath, Barry Ginder and Joanna Dougherty.
- <sup>5</sup> Carol Bums makes the distinction between 'constructed sites' and 'cleared sites'. See Carol J. Bums, "On Site: Architectural Preoccupation's," *Drawing/Building/Text*, Andrea Kahn, ed. (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991): 146-167.
- <sup>6</sup> Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992):95-102.
- <sup>7</sup> See Marco Frascari, *Monsters of Architecture: Anthropomorphism in Architectural Theory* (Savage: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991):89-109. Also see George Hersey, *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988): 132.
- <sup>8</sup> For a further discussion of this studio, see Mark A. Hewitt, "Architecture for a Contingent Environment: Reflections on the Theory and Pedagogy of Design Intervention in Historical Contexts," *Journal of Architectural Education* (Vol. 4714, 1994): 197-209.