

Bemis = Art landscape

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The certainty of the absolute garden will never be achieved again. Robert Smithson



PROJECT

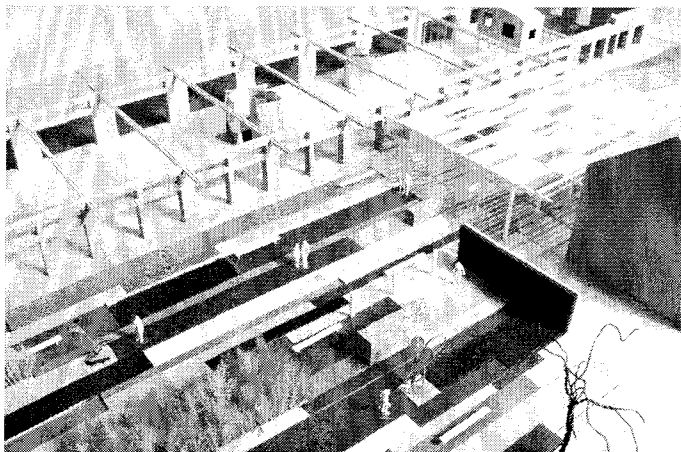
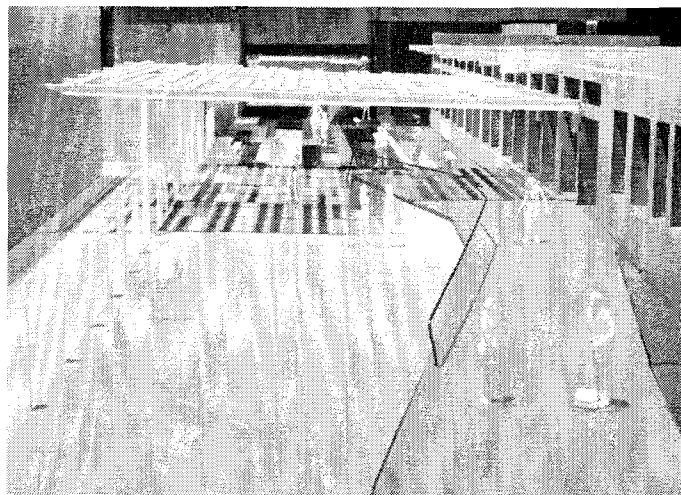
A collaboration between an architectural practice (MIN/DAY) and a student-staffed design-construct lab (*FACT*), Bemis = Art Landscape is the result of a commission to design a master plan and specific projects for the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, Nebraska.¹ The range of individual projects involves landscape design, new construction, interior architecture, graphics, and in-depth event programming.

CLIENT

Established in Omaha the early 1980s, the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts is one of the country's premier artist residency programs. While the Bemis' primary mission is to provide time and space for artistic practice to flourish, the Center supplements this duty with a commitment to supporting public educational programs and a series of innovative contemporary art exhibitions.

PROPOSAL

Our approach imagines the Bemis not as a static container for art, but as a dynamic, transmutable landscape within which art occurs. This conception of landscape does not distinguish between natural topographies and built structures, nor does it allow organic or inorganic materials to occupy privileged positions within the milieu of the art landscape. Concepts adapted from landscape ecology (patches, corridors, boundaries,



and mosaics)² and from mereotopology³ provide a theoretical framework for a design process that uses landscape as a model for architecture and programming. This model, inspired by the "Jeffersonian" grid of the Great Plains landscape, allowed us to create a forgiving infrastructure for a project that will be actualized over time and is subject to constant forces of change and indeterminacy. The project begins with an analysis of existing uses, functions, desires, and material assets and proceeds to construct a new organizational framework that can accommodate these known conditions and the ultimately unknowable future of the Bemis Center.

The notion of the art landscape encompasses not only the mutable field of the sculpture garden but also the interior space of the existing McCord-Brady and Okada buildings. A hierarchic infrastructure of regulating lines (distinguished by both crisp and indeterminate boundaries) derived from existing structures bounds the "mosaic" of surface "patches" that organize and contain spaces for art making, art display, and residence. These diverse spaces for art (which we call the "art fog") are tied together by the "art hall" or "orange ribbon." An extension of the existing central hall of the McCord-Brady building, the art hall is a continuous corridor-like space that extends from a pavilion on the roof of the McCord-Brady building to a kiln in a proposed new building to the east of the Okada. Around this spine we have organized all of the existing and new spaces and programs of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art.

We envision the Bemis an invigorating environment created out of the energies of artists and the raw materials they find around themselves (be they physical or virtual.) For the expansion we propose utilizing a vast array of materials reclaimed from demolition sites (crushed brick, auto glass, etc) along with products created out of recycled waste (plastic wood, strawboard, high fly-ash concrete.) The arrangement of these materials in the field is limited only by the bounds of the surface alone, not by an a priori compositional order laid down

by the architectural team. Additionally, the sculpture garden will be planted with species native to the Great Plains, yet organized in a pattern more familiar in agricultural cultivation. The McCord-Brady roof will have a planted surface to control run-off and provide grounds for cultivating produce. Wind generators will augment the power needs of the Bemis while providing a visible demonstration of a new paradigm for urban energy production and consumption.

As a framework for the long-term expansion goals of the Bemis Center, *Bemis = Art Landscape* is a "non-teleological" master plan, one with discrete points of reference but no finite end. It is a collection of independent projects within a field that, like the grid of the Great Plains, is constantly changing yet always retains a certain organizational rigor. Specific projects such as the new loading dock for the McCord-Brady building, the ramp/performance space for the Okada building, the sculpture garden, the new Ceramics/Sculpture studio, and the third, fourth, and fifth floor interiors will be realized over time, but not necessarily in the projected order. Despite the inherent uncertainties of such an approach, the "art landscape" will always be the ultimate operative condition of the Bemis Center.

NOTES

¹ This was produced by a large team of students and other collaborators, all under the direction of the author. The work was funded by the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, the Union Pacific Foundation, the Pepsi Foundation, and the College of Architecture at the University of Nebraska.

² Richard T.T. Forman and M. Gordon. *Landscape Ecology*, John Wiley, New York, 1986

³ A sub-field of formal ontology, mereotopology provides the formal bases for describing parts and boundaries. The field is an alternative to set theory and is an elision of mereology (the theory of parts and wholes) and topology (the theory of boundaries and connection). See Barry Smith, "Mereotopology: A Theory of Parts and Boundaries," *Data and Knowledge Engineering*, 20 (1996), 287-303.

