Seeing + (Re)presenting: Site Out of Mind

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Figure 1

Figure 2

Drawing on the work of artists, photographers, film-makers, landscape architects and others, a studio teaching pedagogy was developed to investigate the ways that different artistic disciplines see and represent leftover urban spaces. An important aspect of this approach was the simultaneous engagement of students with multiple venues for exploration both inside and outside the studio. A series of interrelated projects and events— architecture studio, symposium, exhibitions of relevant student and symposium participant design work, and film series—were conceived around the idea: *site out of mind* (figs.1-3). Through various modes, students encountered and investigated the unacknowledged sites that pervade North American cities, but are rarely recognized or tackled by designers: edges and gaps between one thing and another resulting from a collision between scales and uses, leftover spaces under, over and along
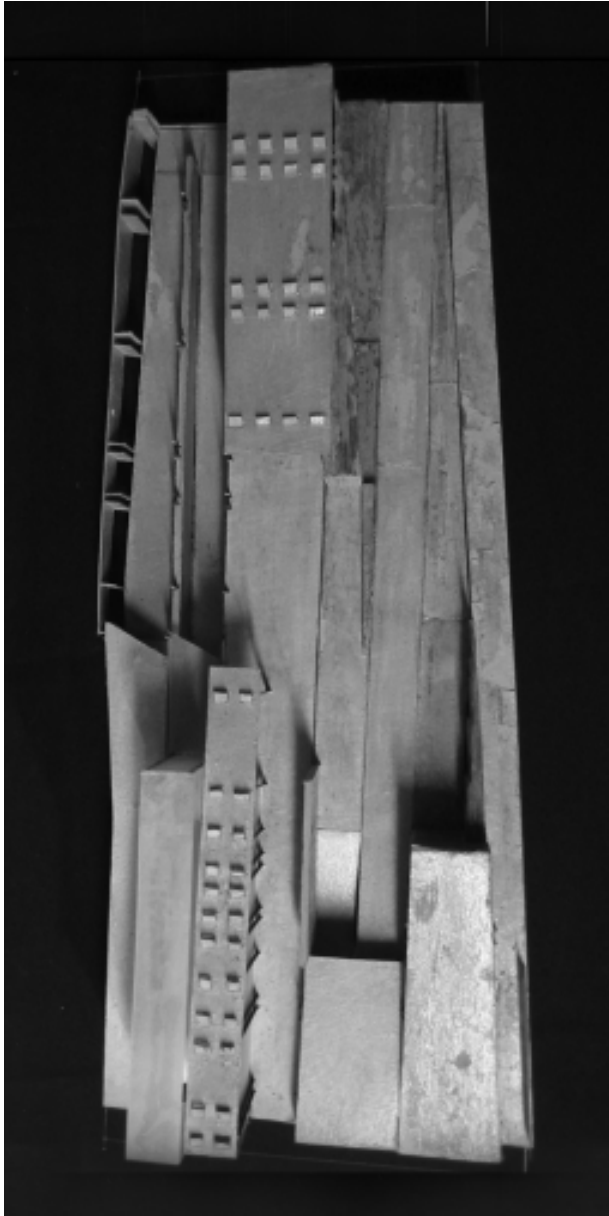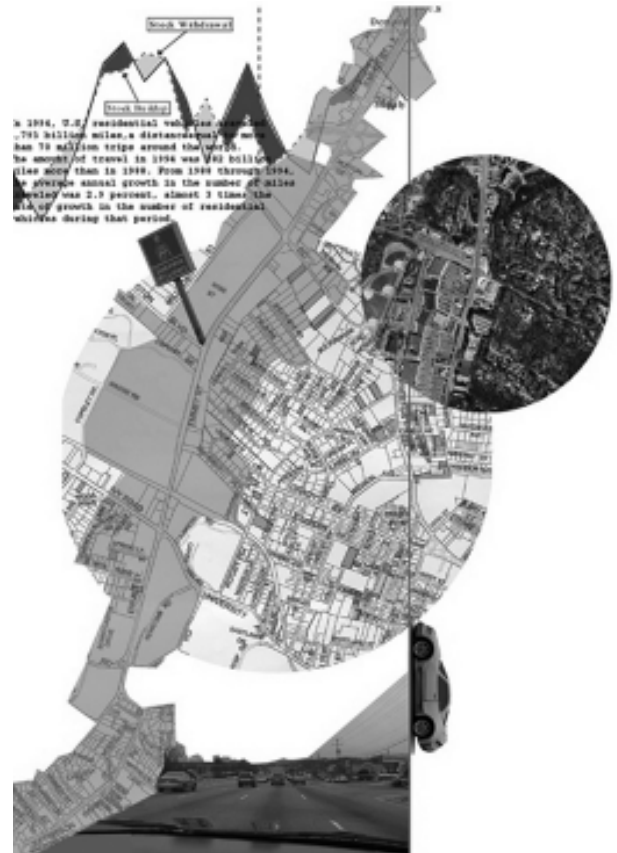
Figure 3

Figures 4 & 5

elevated highways, railway lines and other immense infrastructural elements, or large urban voids and ruined places. They considered a range of scales from the city to the materials of which it is made—ranging from a 2,200-acre landfill to built interventions within the University of Virginia School of Architecture. In these locations, design is rarely attempted and architecture's normative language, methods and means of representation are not enough. This seemingly problematic condition ultimately provides an opportunity to create new types and scales of design. This paper examines the benefits of interdependent, diverse modes of investigation, and in greater depth, the pedagogy created for a fourth year undergraduate architecture studio.
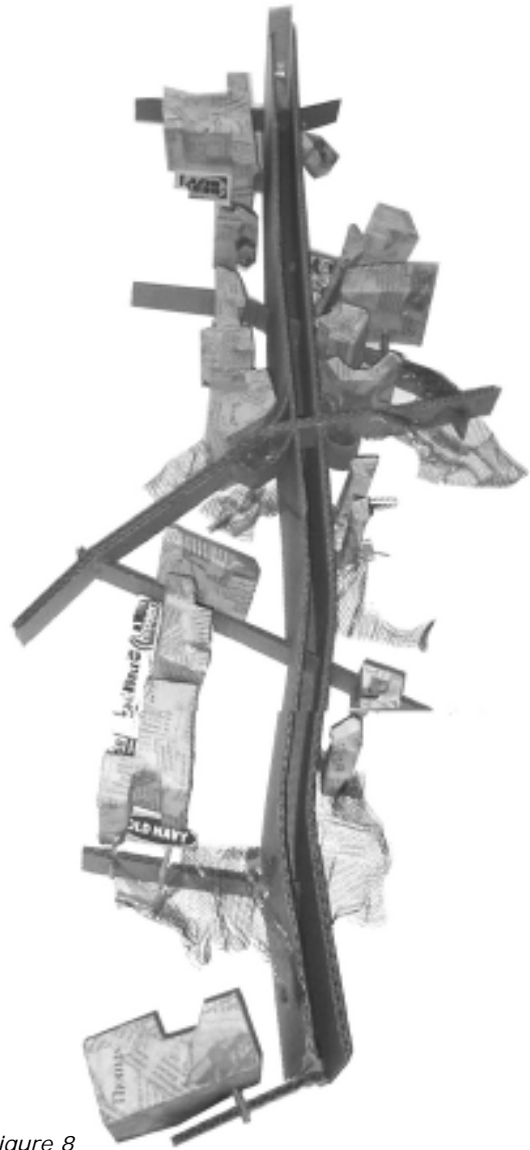
Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

SITE OUT OF MIND

The term "site out of mind" is intended to be read in multiple ways: as a specific site—s,i,t,e— in which things are explored and as a sight—s,i,g,h,t— or thing seen. Thus, a site out of mind is a condition or sight visible but not seen or minded. The noun **site** is defined by Webster's as "the spatial location of an actual or planned structure or set of structures" and "a space of ground occupied or to be occupied by a building." In both cases, the actual or planned presence of a building is crucial. The second definition omits the necessity for a
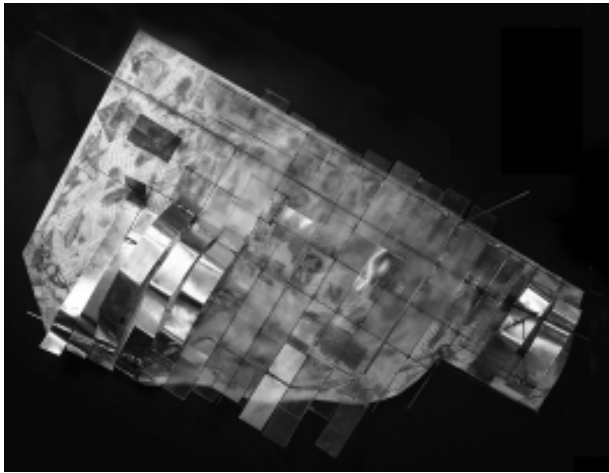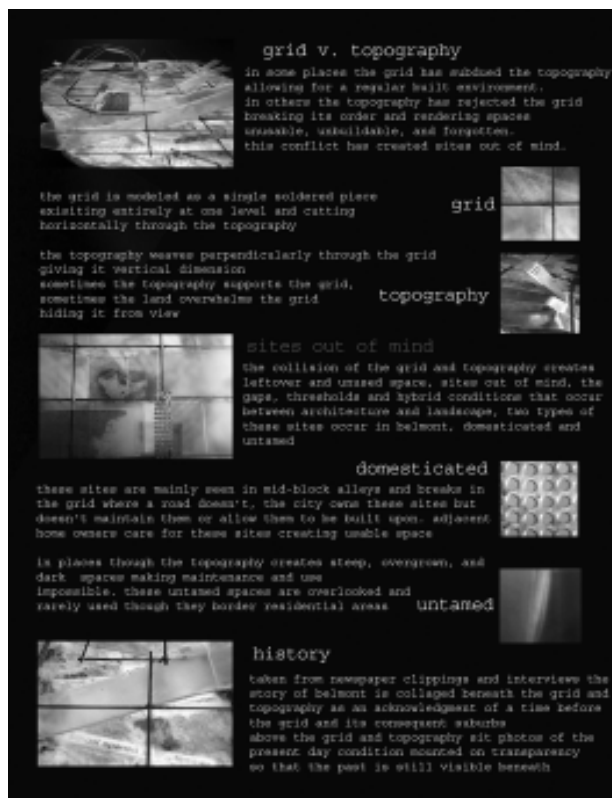
Figure 8

Figure 9

structure, but still requires something to happen—"the place, scene, or point of something." If there is no "something," can we have a site? There are too many relevant references to discuss here, but it is important to note Andrea Kahn's reading of

gender inscribed conventional site analysis that she terms "overlooking," Robin Dripps' current research on multiples grounds and fields of actions, and Robert Smithson's non-sites. Some might argue that site is not the correct word choice, but its' widespread use requires acknowledgement. The noun **sight** is first defined as "something that is seen," while the second definition requires "a thing regarded as worth seeing," such as the sights of the city. The next definition goes one step further to recognize "something ludicrous or disorderly in appearance"—what a sight! All these meanings are intentionally referenced, since we will consider both a thing or space itself, and how we often do not see or sight that site. This is not merely wordplay, but a complex relationship between what we see and what we comprehend or recognize as worthy of our sight and design considerations.

RESEARCH SEMINAR: *(UN)COMMON SPACES*

During the Fall 2003 semester I worked with a group of graduate students in a research seminar that considered "(un)common spaces"—spaces that are common in their ubiquity, but uncommon in
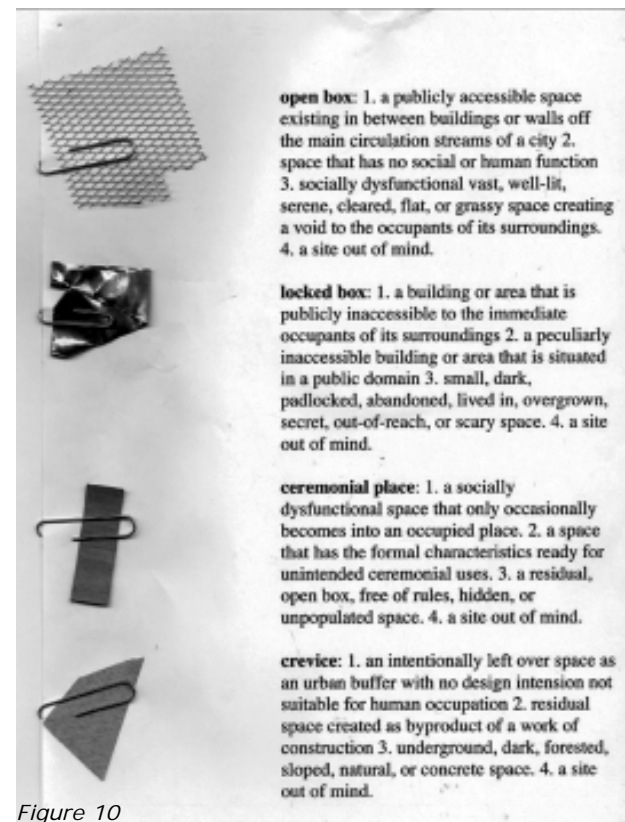

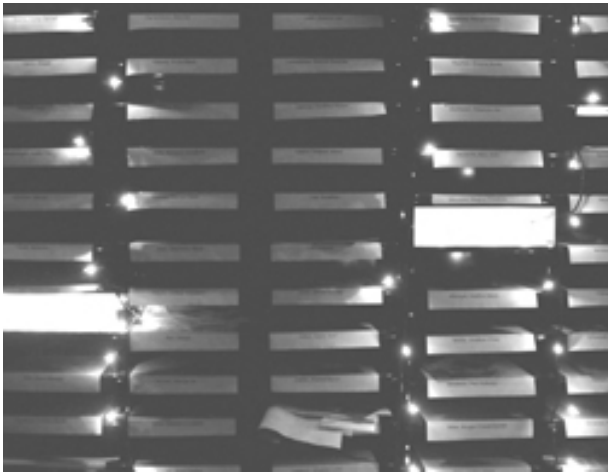*Figure 10*

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

their non-normative nature. At one point we attempted to generate a definition by making a taxonomy of conditions to establish limits—what is or isn't a site out of mind. Our conundrum recalled the conclusion to Carol Burns' essay, "On Site," where a lengthy consideration of site as a universal concept led her to acknowledge the particularity of each site, and call for "the need to qualify different kinds or types of sites." She concluded with the realization that "The site, like the human condition, is open. This is the surplus of site, its indefinable excess." Abandoning definitions, students researched their ideas through design—ranging from NYC Highline Competition entries to a proposal for the transformation of pervasive highway median strips into linear farms.

Design Studio: 3 projects

Through a series of three interrelated design projects during the spring 2004 semester, the studio tested the previous proposition. Each project

Figure 14

Figure 15

Figure 16

Figure 17

began with site—a site out of mind. Within this concern for site, however, the making of architecture was the ultimate objective. Students considered diverse scales from within and around buildings to the range of sites out of mind commonly found in the American city: buffer zones, edges, and undesirable lots. The interrelationship of spatial enclosure, movement sequence, structure, materiality and the needs and desires of human inhabitants were investigated at each scale of experience. Project 1 investigated ways that others "see" and represent sites out of mind. Project 2 addressed the most basic and direct interaction of individual and site by making installations within the Architecture School. Project 3 worked within the specifics of a Boston site out of mind to design an Institute for Unseen Sites. Each of these projects required a critical consideration of the way we—
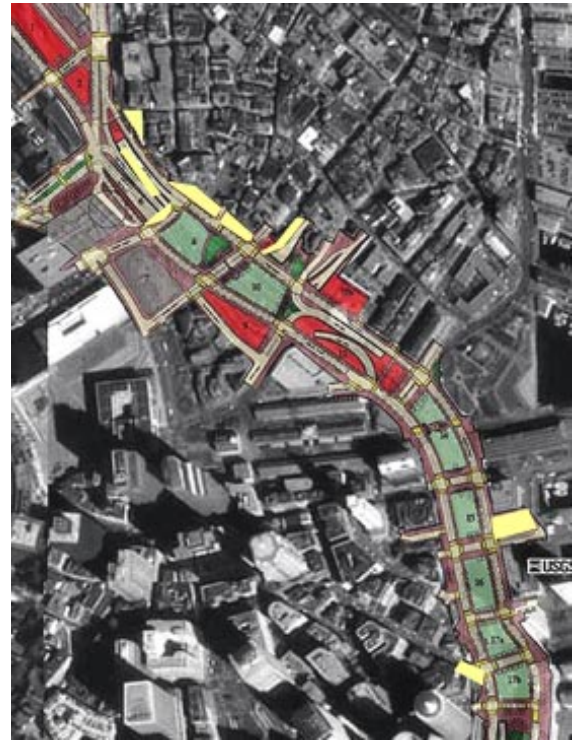
and others—see and represent sites out of mind.

Students developed a theoretical foundation by reading and discussing essays drawn from diverse disciplines, including art, landscape architecture, geography, architecture, and urban theory. They wrote project statements as a means of conceptual clarification and communication, and after each review composed a concise response with specific next steps for the project. These two devices, statement and response, promoted an awareness and improvement of the design process and project intentions. During this last studio in the Bachelor of Science in Architectural Studies (BSAS) program,

Figure 18

Figure 19

Figure 20

each student was challenged to critique and refine the design process and representational skills developed over the past three and a half years, rather than conform to a predetermined format or technique. The nature and timing of projects allowed ample room for individual exploration into ways of thinking and doing. The second part of this paper will examine the studio pedagogy and projects in greater depth.

INTERTWINED INVESTIGATIONS

A weekly *site out of mind* film series, organized by students from the fall seminar and open to the entire school, contributed directly to the studio exploration as students analyzed films such as Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*, Andrei Tarkovski's *Stalker,* and Doug Hawes-Davis' *This is Nowhere.* The two-day symposium brought together a compelling group of participants—artists and designers engaged in a critical practice—thinking, writing and making. Each has worked, in their
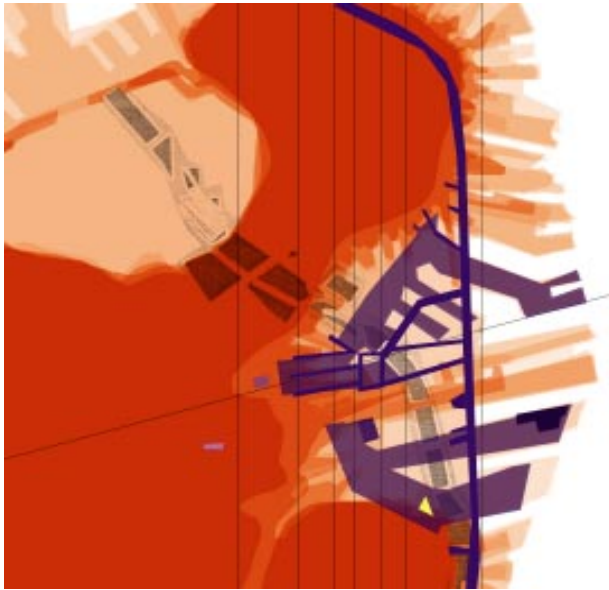
Figure 21

Figure 22

own ways, on "unseen" sites that promote new types and scales of design. The symposium was structured by idea into three sessions—Margins, Presence, and Systems— created open scaffolding rather than rigid categories. The Margins session brought together a diverse set of people thinking about margins in rich and insightful ways. In-between spaces, edges, and temporal thresholds were possible session titles, but margins was selected for its multiple meanings: a border, a page margin, a margin of error...marginal, marginalized. The session brought together interests in boundary, ground, framing, placelessness, the temporal and poetic. The second session, Presence, considered sites and things present but not easily seen, such as culture, history, and the thickened ground. Through examples of projects and processes, the presenters discussed ways of drawing attention, negotiating terrains, and revealing the presence of absence. The third session considered complex and often unseen "natural" and made systems through work that rethinks architecture as process rather than object, and considers ecological systems and dynamic natural forces as a model for design action. Similarities and differences in theoretical positions and design strategies were analyzed and students came away from the event with more than a recounting of what has been done, but with specific ideas and even proposals about where to go from here. Students in the associated
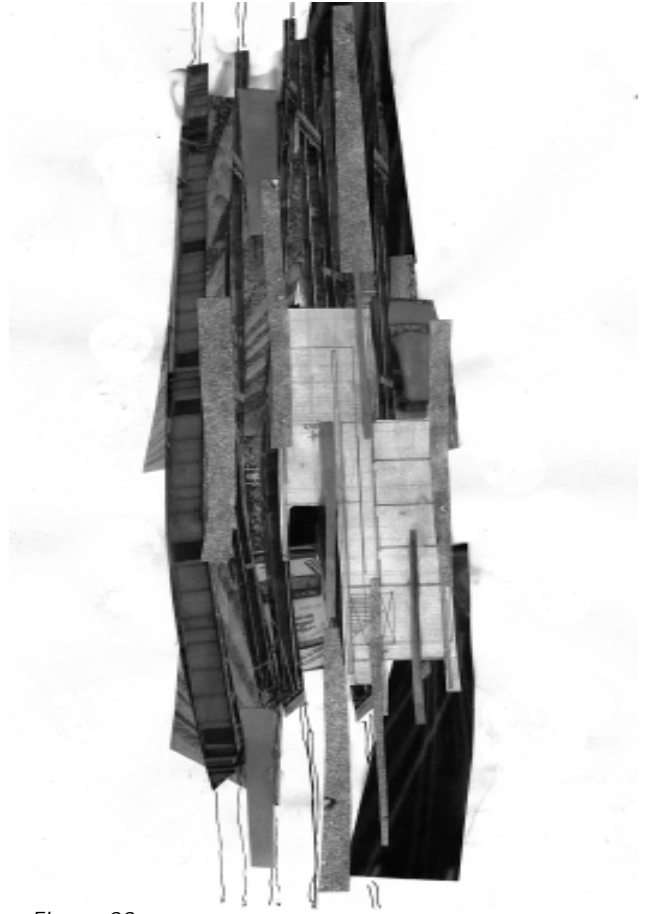
studio discussed the symposium proceedings in direct relationship to their ongoing work. The next section of this paper will examine the studio pedagogy in detail.

STUDIO PROJECT 1: SEEING + (RE)PRESENTING

1.1: how others see

Students began the semester by studying work from diverse artistic disciplines that brings an unseen condition distinctly to mind, such as photographers Camilo Jose Vergara, Alex McLean and Andreas Gursky; artists Martha Rosler and Edward Ruscha; filmmakers Jim Jarmusch and Andrei Tarkovsky; and Landscape Architect James Corner. Students manifested their research in physical form by working in the manner of their chosen artist. For instance, Adri Navarro studied the multimedia landscape representations created by Land-
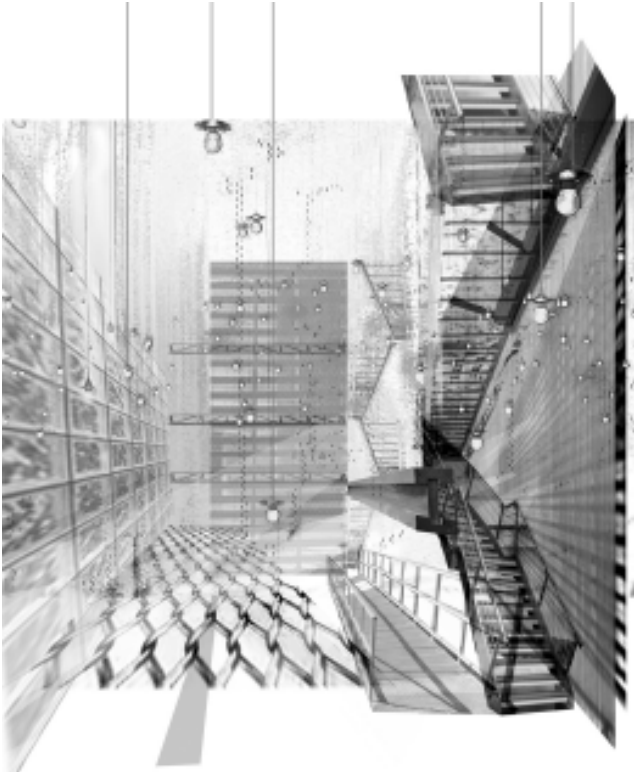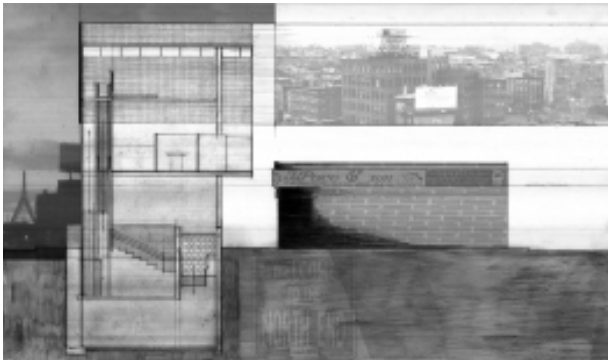
Figure 23

Figure 24

scape Architect James Corner. Collaging statistical information, photographs and drawings, she developed her own reading of Charlottesville's Route 29 retail strip (fig.4). After examining work of the Italian artist/architect group Stalker, Saud Sharaf created a Situationist inspired map of the University of Virginia campus. Everything that was "out of mind" was obscured by blue, thereby producing

what was essentially an experientially generated circulatory mapping of the campus (fig.5). The study of how others see and represent unseen urban conditions enabled the students to develop representational strategies that they would not have otherwise.

1.2: taxonomy of sites out of mind

While conceptualizing the studio, seminar, exhibitions and symposium, various approaches to understanding sites of out mind were examined: by physical condition, by nature of the intervention, by group affiliation, and by idea. The seminar and studio started with the type of condition and created a critical inventory of leftover spaces. This process required that the following questions were considered: What is a site out of mind's necessary qualities—that it be everywhere, undesirable, not permanently inhabited, and lacking intention? Must it be physical? What size and scale? Working collaboratively, students created a taxonomy of Charlottesville's leftover spaces. Drawing on Grady Clay's argument that words = things and generic place names = known places, they identified and made visible by naming and classifying sites in a place they know well. All seven teams built three-dimensional representations to the same scale and assembled them into an "exquisite corpse" model of Charlottesville (fig.6). The assembled model and its' constituent parts manifest significant aspects of the site out of mind design research, such as scale, movement, visibility and human occupation.

scale

The fragmentary studio model reveals that parts of the city were not studied, since they were not "seen" by the students. These unseen areas are essentially sites out of mind operating at the urban scale. By overlaying the model on a city map, one may observe the large, primarily residential neighborhoods not modeled (fig.7). This representational strategy could be compared with Kevin Lynch's cognitive mapping techniques and theory of urban legibility, however, this analysis did not set out to "make sense" of the city in its entirety, as Lynch's studies did. At a smaller scale, the district models work in much the same way. "Invisible" spaces and aspects are omitted, while "seen" conditions are magnified.

movement

Areas not modeled are typically not traversed by major roads and hence rarely visited by most city residents. Whether analyzing a district structured by a regular grid or singular arterial, all the models indicate that movement plays an important role in how we experience and map the city. Movement was examined in relation to both visibility and topography.

visibility

Two students studied Route 29, Charlottesville's primary retail strip, in relation to various speeds of movement and visibility. They created a series of artifacts combining form, material and text. The collage of adjectives and leftover materials abstractly embodies their site reading (fig.1), while the model represents the apparently infinite strip/spine and associated big boxes (fig.8). They identified two categories of sites out of mind: "Seeking to remain ghosts in the contemporary forest of sprawl, some are 'content invisibles'. Others strive to be noticed yet are unsuccessful in their struggle and become 'ignored attempts'." Content Invisibles include: above things (rooftops), subsurface things (sewers), concealed toxic spaces (dumpsters), *inaccessibles* (fenced off areas), service spaces (back alleys), and *unnoticeables* (parking lots). Ignored attempts include: 'hush-hush' street (the strip itself), buffering voids (medians), neglected attempts (out of place symbols, such as a rustic gazebo in a parking lot), and undistinguished architecture (decorated sheds). By examining intended and actual visibility, the students were able to make sense of these sites.

topography vs. grid

Within the largely residential district of Belmont, sites out of mind are created by the conflict between grid and natural topography. A normative built environment is possible when the grid subdues the topography, but when topography rejects the grid and breaks its order, two types of unusable, unbuildable and forgotten spaces result: the domesticated and the untamed (figs.9-10). The role of "nature" and geography became central to the analysis, rather than the purely constructed issues of the retail strip.

human occupation

In their study of the University of Virginia campus,

another student team discovered and articulated four types of leftover space: open box, locked box, ceremonial space, and crevice. Their definitions for each classification are listed on figure 11. All four types rely on human occupation and bodily senses as the measure. They argue that unoccupied spaces cannot be truly known, which rejects our cultural predilection for the visual. This first project quickly raised the range of issues that they continued to grapple with in their analytical and design work during the semester.

STUDIO PROJECT 2: INSTALLATIONS

In the second project, students employed findings from their previous studies to a site and scale with which they were even more familiar—the Architecture School and the individual human body. They began by finding a site in or outside the Architecture School that does not figure in the individual or collective consciousness of its inhabitants, such as a custodial closet, projection booth, rooftop, basement, mechanical space, faculty office, and even the nearly hidden Architecture School building itself within the mind of the larger university. They considered how a potentially inhabitable installation might frame, reveal, or bring to mind a site. For example, one student discovered an unlabeled door leading to an unknown space and after a few days of observation discovered that it was a custodian's closet. She became interested in larger political and spatial issues of "servant" spaces, such as who is seen and unseen. After meeting with the custodian who was enthusiastic about participating, the student filmed the custodian entering, working within and departing from the unseen space. By precisely projecting this film onto the closed door, its flush surface became strangely animated...opening, revealing, and closing in an endless cycle (fig.12). By omitting sound from the installation, the silent and repetitious movements became even more powerful. Another student took on the issue of sound in her study of the elevator and its unseen and antiquated switching equipment. By installing a microphone in the inaccessible basement machine room, she amplified the mysterious and unsettling switching sounds into the cab itself—making an auditory connection to a crucial place we have not seen and cannot inhabit. Students carefully considered which senses to engage or censor in their installations.

Another student investigated the School's visible but rarely used student mailbox alcove. Because nearly all university to student communication is now sent via email, the once prominent mailboxes have become dark, vacant and underutilized—a kind of miniature postindustrial landscape within the school. The student's installation combined light, sound and text to entice passersby into the alcove to experience the space and receive the critical messages inserted into the mailboxes themselves (fig.13). Like the previous campus taxonomy study, human occupation becomes a primary consideration in sites out of mind.

Others focused on literal invisibility, such as the team who revealed mechanical spaces through a series of discrete, site-specific installations. Because the access doors into a mechanical shaft could not remain open without violating code restrictions, the space was 'revealed' and experienced vicariously via a full-scale, black and white photograph of its contents suspended in front of the space itself (fig.14). The (re)presentation of its banal contents produced a simultaneously aestheticizing and documentary effect. A similar photographic strategy was used to address the physical and social disconnection between first and second floor classroom and administration spaces, and third and fourth floor studios (fig.15). Although studios are definitely the life of the School, they are essentially hidden from public view and physical access for most school visitors. This project documented studio desks, assembled photographic fragments into a series of full-scale images, and suspended these within the first floor public corridor—thereby revealing an unseen place two floors above. This photographic installation worked in conjunction with a composite film that documented the life of twelve studio desks over a two-week period. These selected projects reveal a few of the issues tackled in the installations. The insertion of this full-scale built project into the studio pedagogy completely shifted the students thinking about seeing and (re)presenting, and also spatially inhabiting, sites out of mind.

STUDIO PROJECT 3: INSTITUTE FOR UNSEEN SITES

3.1: site: past / present / future

In the final project, students identified unseen sites above and along the linear swath cut through Boston by the Central Artery and created two-dimensional collages or abstract three-dimensional models of the "site" (figs.16-17). Their Project 1 research supported this analytic and speculative work. They considered the questions: What are the boundaries of the site? Does the Central Artery divide or connect? What is the relationship of the area to the rest of the city? What changes have occurred in urban infrastructure, block structure, edges and boundaries, figural spaces and objects, figure/field texture, and use? As part of this investigation we read essays that proposed useful and opposing positions: Stan Allen's "Infrastructural Urbanism," Sebastien Marot's *Sub-urbanism and the Art of Memory,* and Alberto Perez-Gomez' critical examination of *Spaces In-between.*

Critical of the cut made during the Central Artery's construction, this model (fig.18) depicts the ineffective attempts of the new Greenway to bandage the wound left behind. A few simple moves communicate a clear, relatively abstract reading of the site. Working with photographs taken at eye level, this photomontage (fig.19) uses experiential means to critically depict the void formed by the Central Artery. Another student layered newspaper articles about racial segregation and the Boston Busing Crisis to communicate the important 1960's history of the site and draws comparisons between physical, racial and social divisions (fig.20). Figure 21 maps the complex topographical history through multiple layers over time. This analytical palimpsest prioritizes the changes in geographical site conditions. In all cases, the site was explored and understood as a complex, constructed and meaning-laden condition that precluded a tabula rasa approach. This representational work formed a strong basis for each student's subsequent architectural design work.

3.2: institute for unseen sites

The final nine weeks of the semester focused on the design of architecture and landscape to accommodate the Institute for Unseen Sites: a nonprofit educational organization that collects and disseminates visual images and documentation of sites out of mind for educational purposes. The building(s) primarily contained exhibition space,

archive, research library, classroom, offices and dwelling for three scholars in residence. Students developed a compelling urban and localized site strategy, strong conceptual and spatial architectural ideas, and a high level of tectonic and material resolution—with comprehensiveness as the objective. Although this paper does not focus on the final project, a few examples of student work will be analyzed from a representational standpoint. Studio research and experimentation in the first seven weeks continued into the more tectonically focused, final designs. For example, hybrid drawings such as this site/floor plan collage (fig.22) emphasized linear movement with alternating bands of landscape and architecture, while the same student's sectional perspective combined spatial, constructional and experiential information (fig.23). This student's semester-long representational investigation directly informed her spatial and compositional architecture strategy. In another case, the initial mapping of social history (fig.20) carried through into the building design and drawn artifacts (fig.24). All the drawings use existing photographs and historical images to site the work, whether in plan, section or elevation. The physical results for each studio phase indicates that students were challenged and provoked by investigating the ways that diverse artistic disciplines see and represent leftover urban spaces.

SIGNIFICANCE

Certainly the recent and intense interest in the leftover spaces of the city, from various directions, underscores the timely and significant nature of this topic. For instance, the popular concept of Terrain Vague has been articulated by Ignasi de Solà-Morales as "the relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy, is fundamental...void, then, as absence, and yet also as promise, as encounter, as the space of the possible, expectation." Designers advocating terrain vague—as a positive condition to be retained—are faced with the problem that nearly any action threatens the exquisite found state that they admire. This position may quickly fall into reveries of memory and nostalgia. The conception of "site out of mind," the studio and symposium examined a diversity of conditions and responses, rather than a tightly limited scope.

The frequent appropriation of unacknowledged sites as architecture and landscape design studio sites and artistic subjects reflects the importance of the topic. The student exhibition contained work taking on abandoned public housing, highway medians, capped landfills, space beneath bridges, along floodwalls and even the edges of the campus. The examination of such sites requires a holistic consideration that disciplinary-bound thinking cannot achieve. Across the country we see sites out of mind proliferating for numerous reasons: socially, aesthetically and culturally undervalued land, the dominance of a supposed "efficiency-based" planning mode, and a minimal public investment in infrastructure. Why are these spaces so compelling for artists and designers? Over the past twenty years, there have been many compelling proposals for the sites and conditions that the studio, symposium and associated events considered. By developing a studio pedagogy grounded in questions of seeing and representing informed by diverse artistic disciplines, the studio was better able to creatively and effectively investigate sites out of mind, and perhaps any site for that matter.

In addition to more formal and academic categories and distinctions that often frame the discussion of art, science, and architecture, this conference hopes to engage a broader discussion that includes: non-Western viewpoints and histories; political issues that help to frame these categories; the idea that globalization and resource shortage are profoundly affecting how we now view these disciplinary distinctions; and a discussion of new technologies and media that expand and delimit our ways of making, thinking, and seeing architecture.

FIGURES

1 Katie Wood and Adri Navarro, assemblage

2 *In_site: student work exhibition,* University of Virginia, March 2004

3 Adri Navarro, Project 3 model

4 Adri Navarro, Rt. 29 analytical photomontage

5 Saud Sharaf, University of Virginia mapping

6+7 Collaborative studio model, Charlottesville Taxonomy of Sites out of Mind

8 Katie Wood and Adri Navarro, Rt. 29 strip model

9 Shelby Doyle and Kate Thatcher, Belmont model

10 Shelby Doyle and Kate Thatcher, Belmont text

11 Elizabeth Beecherl and Saud Sharaf, UVA campus type

12 Katie Wood, Custodial Closet Projection

13 Alex Walker, Mailbox Installation

14 Kevin Hanlon and Jon Evans, Mechanical Space Installation photograph

15 Elizabeth Baird, Studio desks installation

16 Studio Central Artery Project locator plan

17 Central Artery partially dismantled

18 Elizabeth Baird, 3d site representation

19 Katie Wood, photomontage

20 Jon Evans, site history model

21 Nancy Putnam, site layer diagram

22 Shelby Doyle, site plan/collage

23 Shelby Doyle, section/perspective montage

24 Jon Evans, section/elevation montage