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Seeing/Site: A One-Week Project

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Position of Seeing/Site in the foundation year.

"Seeing/Site," is the first project given to freshman students in the Analysis Composition rotation of the Visual Literacy program taught at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. The program is interdisciplinary and is in its fifth year with enrollment close to 300 students and 8 faculty members instructing. Visual Literacy encompasses architecture, interior design, fine art, textiles/clothing design, and fashion merchandising. Seven-week units comprise the yearlong course: Drawing 1, Drawing 2, Color, and Analysis Composition. Analysis Composition focuses on issues of form, mass, surface, space, and the relationship between two dimensions (2D) and three dimensions (3D).

Introduction.

This paper will illustrate one project that deals with the act of removing one's self from the already known. I will also show that this process can cover the following topics: Site/Situation, Surface/Space, Scale, 2D versus 3D, Form, and Place. Seeing/Site deals with these topics, not as explanations but as products of analysis. In order to deal with so many topics and the act of the removal of self, this project begins with a notion of space.

Aristotle uses the word Topos (place) in Physics, while Plato defines the notion of Chora (space) in Timaeus and Critas. The specifics and subtleties of these notions are not in the scope of this paper. What is important is the distinction between them and the possibility of their classification to each other. Mark Cousins, in a lecture titled the Origins of Space, proposed that perhaps we could understand Plato and Aristotle better if we quantify them. As a result, the limit of a milk can was introduced. He proposed that Plato's Chora could be considered as the outside of the milk can and Aristotle's Topos the inside.[1] The existence of place and non-place. This attempt at quantification is what is at issue. Using the milk can as a metaphor implies that it is possible to place a line between Chora and Topos. This project seeks to dissolve the singular division presented by Cousins.

It is critical to not propose polar classifications to simplify the dilemma of space. Alberto Perez-Gomez writes on this same issue, but does not completely compartmentalize classifications of space. He states, "Chora is both cosmic place and abstract space, and it is also the substance of the human crafts...It is the 'region' for that which exists."[2] Perez-Gomez also reiterates Plato's observation about acquiring the knowledge of this spatial existence; "its (chora) presence and reality can be grasped only with great difficulty – obliquely, so to speak."[3] Seeing/Site, in four studio meetings takes the oblique quality out of the search for knowledge about space.

This project focuses on the in-between. While this is not an original position, I feel that as an approach to foundation education we suppress the understanding of "cosmic place and abstract space" for a set of skills imposed by curriculum and historical paradigms of education. The skills that are gained in this project are not prescribed but rather the goal is to offer an experience that exposes the "'region' for that which exists," using an ordinary place as a vehicle to understand design basics.

1.1 Site/Situation

The first act in design is the question of the site. This is true whether the site is real or imaginary. The site for this project is a vehicle to aid students in beginning to discuss and see space and surface in an elementary manner. For example, a stair is no longer a stair but rather changes in elevation. Grass and gravel are not named they are simply labeled rough or smooth, whichever definition fits with the observed measured surface. The goal for the selected site is not to see it in a remarkable way but, to uncover its' everydayness in a remarkable act.

The first notion presented to students is the notion of the site plan. This does not happen in a literal way but rather it exposes the misconceptions of a site plan. David Leatherbarrow proposes the following,

> In contemporary practice the site is generally known best and most productively in the form of a graphic two-dimensional scaled reduction, a "site plan." Knowledge of a given place as a site plan, however, does not support the designer's comprehension of the underlying reasons for its definition. Because of our dependence on site plans and other similar spatial abstractions as adequate symbols of the reality of place, we have largely missed the creative aspect of site definition and the architect's responsibility to "invent" the site of any design project.[4]

The ideas presented by Leatherbarrow, speak not only to practice, but also to the specific student body within the focus of this project. What is not clear in Leatherbarrow's discussion is the method in which an individual can gain the ability to "invent." Is there something in a site that is larger than the site itself? In addition, can this something lead to invention? In the project students find a method that challenges the trap of

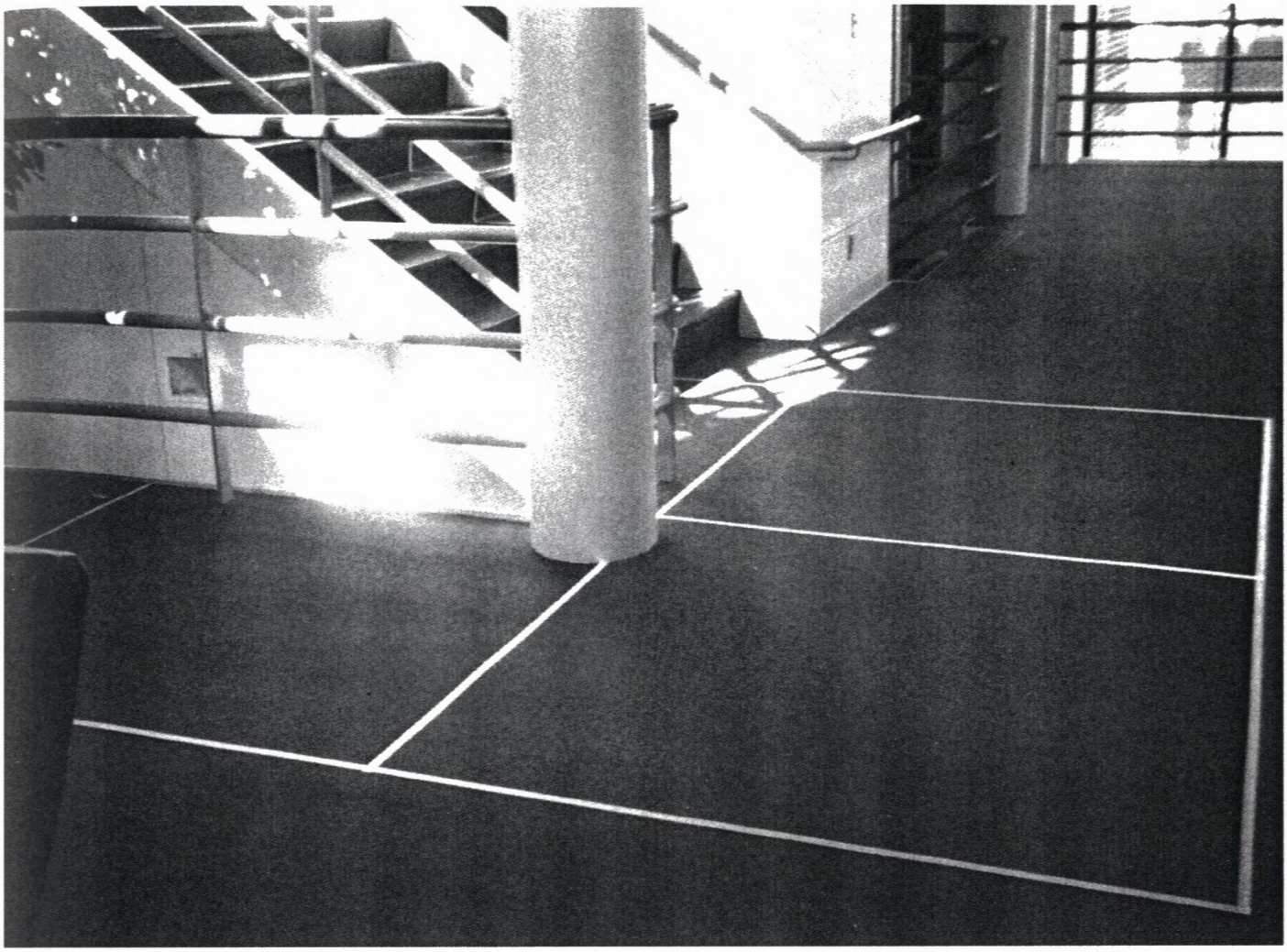


Fig. 1. Original Site-the 3D site plan.

the "adequate" symbol and gives the opportunity to develop a way to explore site definition and invention.

1.2 Site selection

Groups of four students are required to survey a ten-foot by ten-foot section of ground that is topographic, one that they believe they know well, and one that they travel through daily. Six lines are delineated; four that make up the perimeter of the ten-foot square and two that bisect these lines perpendicularly.

These lines, each representing a vertical section, are placed on the site using string or tape. Instantly, these lines establish the physical site as separate from its context and a site plan is created at a scale of one to one. Although we have talked about the "site plan" at no time do students draw one with the exception of the original ten-foot square site.

Once the perimeter has been marked, measurements are gathered with regard to a datum line in order to record the surface of the site. The datum line is located three feet above the average ground level but permission is given for variations. The result of locating the datum line above the surface requires individuals to interpolate and discover the spatial limit of the site in a vertical dimension. These often increase or decrease depending on the condition that is found within the site.

Students do not use traditional surveying equipment. They are shown the concepts and techniques surveyors use but they must then invent their own measuring system. These systems have varied from, utilizing a nearby handrail to tying a string to a group member's belly-button ring. All of the measured points along the perimeter and interior are reduced to numbers stored on note cards. Thus, the first translation of the site from 3D to 2D (abstract data).

2. The Vertical Section

From this first act of data translation, the students draw sections. A sectional understanding (a slice) occurs because the lines of the site plan represent the location of section lines. Each section line is drawn with a consistent width of one half inch and are at a scale of _"=1'-0". They are re-presented in one drawing that measures five feet wide by the height of the site's understood limit; the height has ranged from two feet to twelve feet high.

On the second day of the first foundation studio, the section drawings are hung on the wall and different groups describe the other group's site. Inevitably, students and invited critics

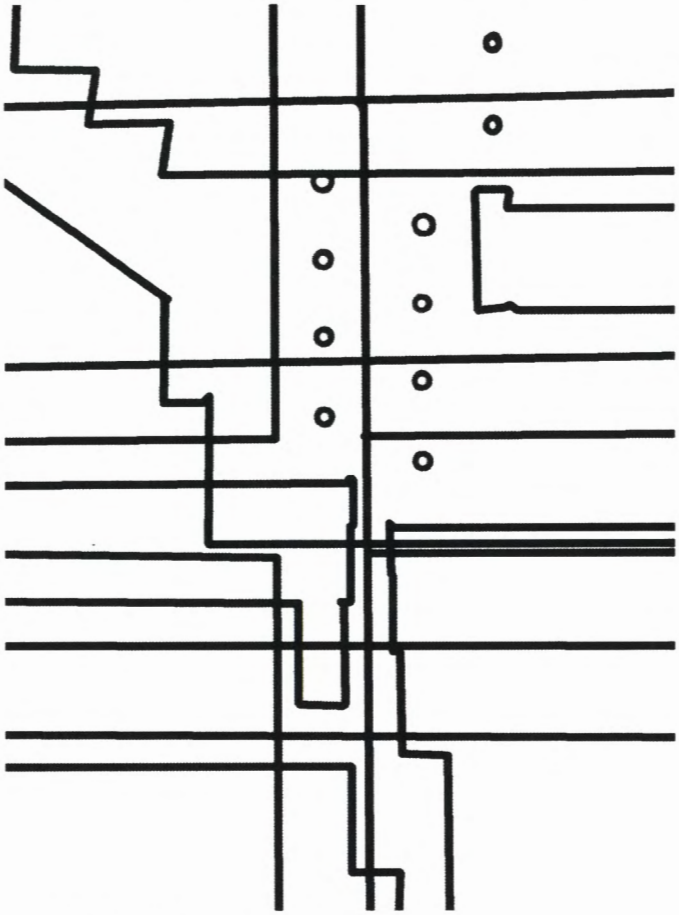


Fig. 2. Collapsed Section Drawing 5'x12'.

attempt to name elements that seem to exist in the drawing. However, no one is sure of the absolute existence of named objects. Only fundamental qualities of the site are evident. As stated earlier, a stair is not a stair it is merely a change in elevation and is just as significant as a flat plane or a "bumpy part" (as one student put it).

Students have now dissolved preconceptions of site plans, they have discovered the relationship between actual and measured space and matter, and they have begun to investigate abstract space. Furthermore, this is accomplished in two four-hour studio sessions within a banal site. Simultaneously, the act of collapsing a site down to lines of surface demonstrates the first chance for students to begin invention as a result of analysis.

3.1 The image

"And here we have the strange general tendency of our times: the trend to stress information at the expense of experience."[5] Kenneth Frampton uses these words to describe the state of architectural photography in 1976. While Frampton's writing is primarily concerned with the commitment of graphics in architectural publications, the words used here are not out of context. I feel that the notion of (superficial) information supplanting experience is relevant to the foundation student. If information/knowledge is gained only through thin suppositions then there can be no separation for what is already known. More precisely, students will never travel outside of what is learned by previous experience. If no new experience takes them away from the known, the result is that all things will be judged based on previously gained information. Design will suffer because it will not have the ability to benefit from students who have the skill to place themselves in a position of not knowing. Who can then inform themselves through a process of experience and discovery.

Within this project, students photograph the site. For the photographs to be considered they must include the site boundary.

The final stipulation is that only three images are used to illustrate an understanding of the site. These images are black and white and most are hand printed. By limiting each student to three images, the group, in the end, has between nine and twelve depictions of the site. The intention is that both broad and specific qualities will emerge. The site is now a surface with the implication of the third dimension.

The line between experience and information is still not evident. Information from a photograph can become an "experience" if the photograph can act as a tool for further exploration, an experience in itself. Photographs should not only be

Fig. 3. Detail of site with section line demarcation.

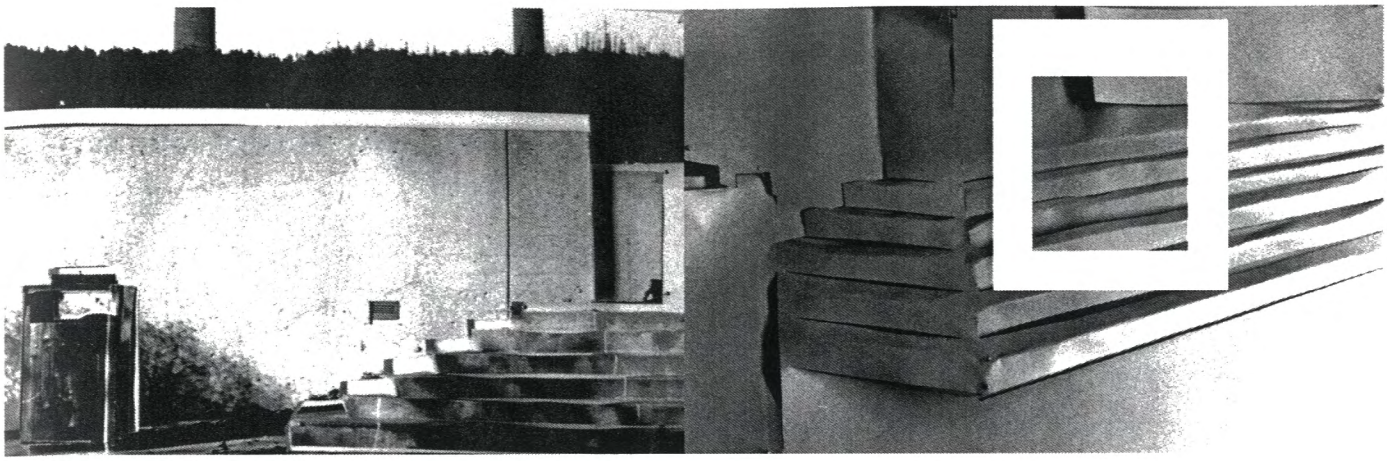


Fig. 4. The Image-construction- I " site selection

drawn from but also on and in. This stage of the investigation is intended to re-see the spatial conditions that exist in the site by way of altering the presence of implied space.

3.2 The image construction (new site).

After photocopying the photograph so that it is 8"x10" the students are asked to change the spatial implications that exist in the photograph. They slice, cut, and bend the image surface but they are required to keep the 2D surface intact as one sheet of paper.[6]

One strategy could be to push the distant objects further back into space while bringing the foreground closer. Other options are of course legitimate. Some students chose to obliterate the spatial implication offered in the image completely. The action in this phase of the project is one of mining, where the original (the image) is altered by way of careful selection of elements, such as, line, tone, form, and space.

When the construction is complete, it is pinned to a foam board and placed on the wall for discussion. It is evident that an "experience" greater than the image and understanding of the site has occurred. What is stifling is the existence of the image, where by, the new site construction is dependent on the implication of space within the image. This is where the mining begins. Students then remove the image with gray paint and the constructions are hung back on the wall. The result is a new landscape with an abstract connection to the original site.

The issue of the in-between now arises and there is a resolution of the "milk jug." That is to say that the line of division between place and space has the ability to be occupied. Where the object (the original site) has been flattened in both image and abstract section and then re-created to form new relationships and three-dimensional understanding. This suggests that the line between place and space is tenuous and not dependent on initial supposition of the site plan as the definer of place.

3.3 The role of the new construction.

The new 8"x10" gray site is used as a way to generate form. This act is not separate from the original ten-foot site, as this new construction derives from the original. It does have the ability to exist on its own. Perhaps, we could call it the first "invention" of the site. The difficulty at this point is what to do with this new form? This is where Sherlock Holmes comes in.

Due to the one week time constraint the subject of Sherlock Holmes is only superficially included in the project. The approach assumes that the majority of the students have some, if only vague, knowledge of Sherlock Holmes. The students select a passage from Sherlock Holmes, and high light words and phases that refer to the act of searching or finding. After individually reading aloud from their chosen selections, the group is immersed in the syntax and experience of searching. In one instance, a student read a passage about the striking of a match to illuminate a bloodied thumbprint on a white wall in a dark room. On initial reading, the connection to our project was not clear to her but as the student photographed her site in different light conditions, she made a direct relationship between seeing and showing. That is to say, as a designer, it is important to learn how to see but it is equally important to gain the confidence of presentation.

4. 3D Constructions.

With Mr. Holmes in mind, a one-inch white square hole acts as a site finder- a magnifying glass. Just as the original site was found and needed to be topographic, so too does this new site. Once a square of topography is found it is translated into a solid object. The one-inch square translates into a five-inch cube construction. This cube is a limit not a requirement for the translation.

Within this cube, an additional site is derived as a third derivative of the original. The thickness of the surface is questioned and students interpolate spatial information within the one-inch square as a means to find 3D form.

Students now talk about the new objects and not the original site. The final move from 2D to 3D is to produce another iteration of the cube that treats the five-inch cube as 3D surface that contains the possibility of hierarchical spatial conditions. The size of the last construction is a ten-inch cube, which further investigates surface and begins to explore the making of new contained space.

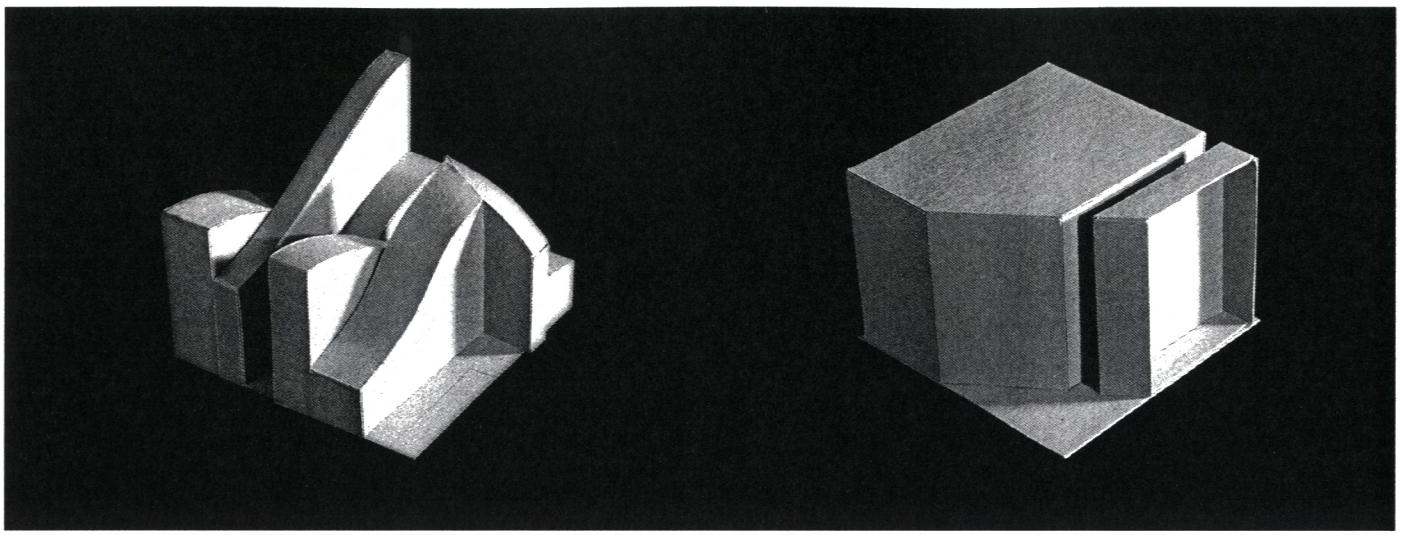


Fig. 5. 5" Cube re-presentation of 1" site.

In the two cube constructions the problem of reconciliation between spatial classifications is over- come by re-tracing the steps of how this project fluctuates between 3D and 2D and the relationships that emerge as a result of the constant switching of scale and orientation. Students learn these concepts and shifts by doing and making where design is a result of the analysis of the original site.

5. The physical aspect of the site.

Within each site, there exists specific qualities that allow the thing, as place, to be understood. Rachael Whiteread, in her work, has brought about the importance of the subtleties of surfaces and the material quality of things. The absence of a thing can be more telling than the thing itself. Whiteread states,

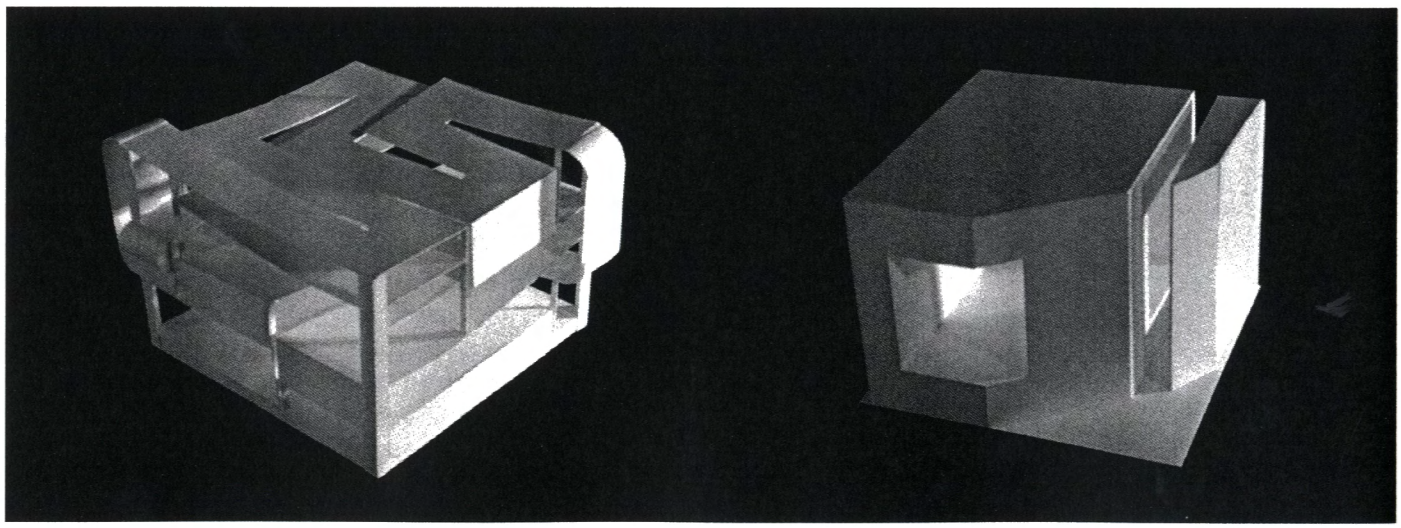
> I really have no sense of what it was until I relocated it in the studio. By looking at the light switch, I had suddenly realized what I had done. I had made the viewer become the wall...somebody asked me why I had blocked up the keyhole in the door-way. I had to, otherwise I'd have ended up having to cast the next room, and then the street...there had to be a point at which things stopped. So I think this is when I first began to think about proportion and space and composition.[7]

Students, from the first day consider the specifics of texture. They are required to capture an artifact from the site. These artifacts are at a scale of one to one. A casting, constructed from clay, supplants the actual removal of private property. The casting is successful when it acknowledges the existence of three dimensions by capturing not just two surfaces but the point at which three surfaces/spaces meet. Creating a casting in this way reveals objects in space but also allows us to see their simple surface qualities. In this section of the project, as Whiteread suggests, we become the stair, the railing, the wall, or the floor. Within the realm of invention, the observer becomes the site.

Conclusion

As I continue to ask questions, it is clear to me that, any student can become connected. By participating in this project, students realize that meaningful connections can occur because of disconnection; removal of self and removal of the

Fig. 6. 10" cube re-presentation of 5" site



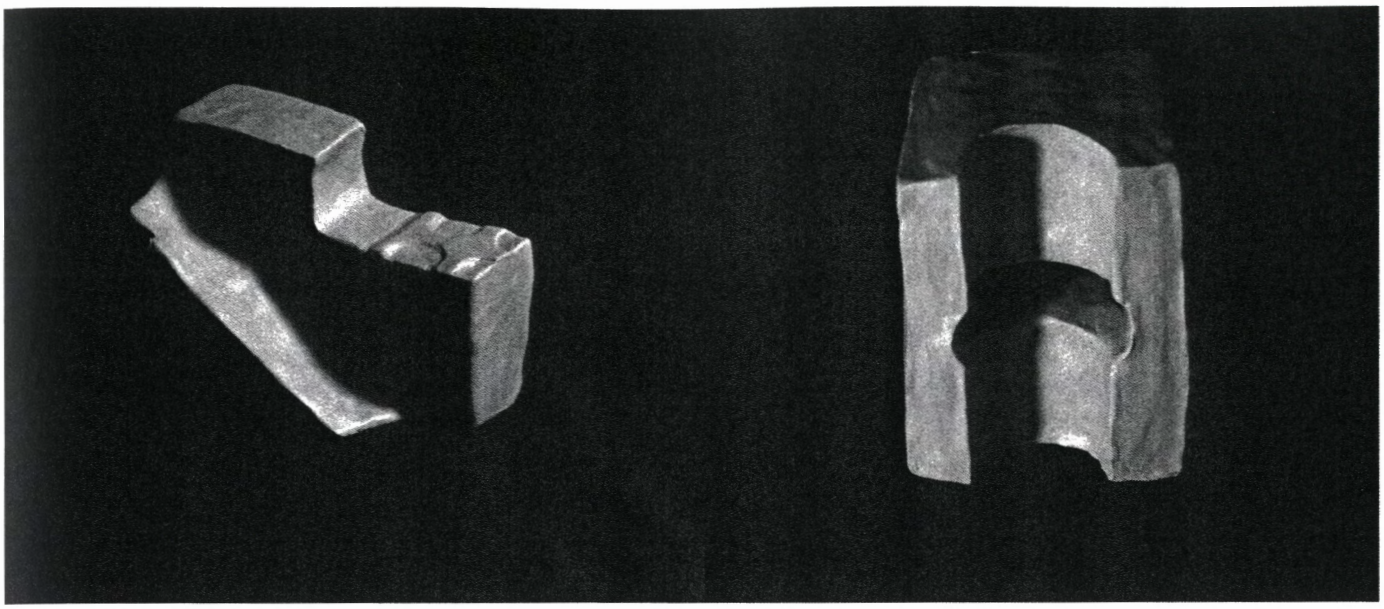


Fig. 7. Castings from the site - artifacts.

history of experience. Polar classifications and definitions about design do not heighten experience. Only experience can change experience. What is critical is the position we assume within the context of looking.

Notes

1. Mark Cousins presented this idea to students at the Architectural Association in October 1998. The lecture series is titled The Origins of Space.
2. Alberto Perez-Gomez, "Chora: The Space of Architectural representation," in Chora 1: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture (McGill-Queens University Press, 1994) pp. 9.
3. Ibid. pp. 9.
4. David Leatherbarrow, The Roots of Architectural Invention (Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp. 7.
5. Kenneth Frampton, "A note on Photography and its Influence on Architecture," in Perspecta 1986, no. 22, pp. 41.
6. I owe the initial idea for this portion of the project to Brian T. Rex whom I taught with my first semester. The change in this portion from that time is that the image is not from an external source.
7. Rachael Whiteread, "Working Notes," in Looking Up Rachael Whiteread's Water Tower. Louise Neri ed. (Zurich, Scalo, 1999) pp. 139.