



LandArt\_Infrastructure



“What can you find in Passaic that you can not find in Paris, London or Rome? ”

-Robert Smithson

Fig. #1: Robert Smithson's Mirror Span, Great Notch Quarry, Montclair, New Jersey" (1968).

# LAND ART INFRASTRUCTURE (New Jersey)

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## SEE THE MONUMENTS OF PASSAIC NEW JERSEY

*What can you find in Passaic that you can not find in Paris, London or Rome? Find out for yourself. Discover (if you dare) the breathtaking Passaic River and the eternal monuments on its enchanted banks. Ride in Rent-a-Car comfort to the land that time forgot. Only minutes from NYC. Robert Smithson will guide you through this fabled series of Sites . . . and don't forget your camera. Special maps will come with each tour. For more information visit Dwan Gallery 29 West 57<sup>th</sup> St.*

-ROBERT SMITHSON

*(This advertisement was written but never published)*

## Overview: Infrastructure + Land Art

We are simultaneously in the midst of a Land Art renaissance, and what appears to be a lengthening list of national infrastructure projects that never arrive. There are currently \$20 billion in stalled infrastructure projects across the state of New Jersey, among them, airport replacements terminals, bridge rehabilitation and demolition projects, miles of underground rail tunnel, a massive auto shipping/receiving port, and vast coastal dredging programs. This is just to name a few... Simultaneously, scattered across the United States, several staggeringly ambitious Land Art projects conceived during their heyday of the 1970's, and which at one time seemed impossible to realize because of scale and complexity, are finally nearing completion. The most notable examples of these include Michael Heizer's City in Nevada (1972-), and James Turrell's Roden Crater, an enormous installation housed inside an extinct volcano northeast of Flagstaff, Arizona (1979-). The majority of these projects, both art and infrastructure, will be built using the same construction techniques, structural & environmental engineers, labor force, materials, and codes, but will rarely if ever come in contact with one another...

It is not surprising that both Land Art and infrastructure receive increasing attention from the public eye given that their shared landscapes are the arena for which many of the most pressing ecological crises of our day are unfolding. The ongoing protest over infrastructural projects like the Dakota Access Pipeline is only one among a multitude of examples that remind us many of the most urgent political issues of our time are themselves rooted in environmental problems. Ecological concerns are increasingly at the forefront in architecture, too, as evidenced not just by the spread of terms like landscape urbanism and landform building in recent years, but by the fact that the role of landscape architects is expanding to include urban scale and infrastructural projects that in an earlier era would have been considered the purview of city planners or regional planning officials.

We welcome this merger of landscape and infrastructure within the discipline of architecture, but we also argue that in order to most fully and productively engage landscape as a means of addressing broader ecological concerns, architecture must recalibrate its relationship to landscape, nature, and large-scale built environment. The legacy of the picturesque runs strong in architecture, and encourages an idealized, image-based approach to the natural landscape—an approach that is all the more problematic given the accelerating pace of climate change and the increasingly precarious and disruptive state of the environment itself. Yet even as intellectuals both within and without the field have recently made efforts to reconceptualize nature to reflect this new reality—from philosopher Timothy Morton's Ecology Without Nature (2007) to architectural historian David Gissen's Subnature (2009)—mainstream design still operates under an idealized notion of a stable and predictable nature. As a result, most architectural responses to environmental concerns have remained on the level of representation,

broadcasting their concern for environmental responsibility through a set of all-too-familiar tropes—photovoltaics, elaborate louvers and frit patterns, the conspicuous placement of green walls and roofs, and the atoning use of recycled materials.

We believe that Land Art offers a richer model for designers seeking to rethink the relationship between landscape, architecture, infrastructure and the environment. Just as many Land Artists were decades ahead of their time in terms of environmental thinking (Robert Smithson's interest in entropy led him to address questions of waste and reuse, to name just one example) they were pioneers in moving away from form toward process, material, and civil scaled construction. Most fundamentally, they understood that landscape is not an image of nature but is fundamentally formless, in the sense articulated by the self-described "anti-philosopher" Georges Bataille. For Bataille, the formless was not a concept that could be defined but a process that could be deployed: in his famous description of the informe, he proposed that "a dictionary would begin as of the moment when it no longer provided the meanings of words but their tasks." Following Bataille, many Land Artists instrumentalized a wide range of ecological processes—decay, erosion, accumulation, settling, creeping—that have been excluded from architectural thought because they don't fit into our image of what the discipline should be, but that could prove to be extraordinarily productive for our field. Renewed attention from architects may be coming just in time for Land Art and infrastructure alike.

A few of the projects and institutions whose overlaps we will visit and consider:

- The Passaic River
- Great Pipes Monument (and others), 1967.
- Non-site, Palisades-Edgewater, N.J., 1968.
- Mirror Span, Great Notch Quarry, Montclair, New Jersey, 1968.
- New Jersey Division of Land Use Regulation
- Roebling Bridge Museum, Princeton New Jersey
- Franklin Mines, New Jersey
- Smithson Barge (Produced by Minetta Brook and Nancy Holt), 2005.

### **Program and Sites:**

The studio brief will require students to investigate what we consider to be a critical architectural overlap between Land Art and Infrastructure. Our site will effectively be the entire state of New Jersey, but it will focus on the development of large scale infrastructure projects filtered through the lens of Land Art. Infrastructural programs may include, but are not limited to:

- Stadiums
- Ports
- Bridges
- Highways/Parkways
- Dredging Barriers
- Airports
- Tunnels

Working through these different programs will force students to confront a range of fundamental architectural problems (particularly scale, site/master plan & land-use rights) and above all to consider a range of different relationships between building, infrastructure and landscape. The students will have the freedom to select one of the major infrastructure typologies to work with and their own site - which may be existing, in-construction, or previously undeveloped. Students will not only seek to articulate a new relationship between architecture, landscape, and infrastructure, but to rigorously address the problems of labor, transportation, preservation & ecology. Successful projects will use architecture to address the mundane—parking or plumbing—and the sublime—monumental landscapes, roadways, and ecologies.

### **Representational Experiments (Big Models):**

Studio production will focus on the combination of and feedback between experimental representational techniques. In particular, we will be constructing large-scale models to engage both the experiential and material dimensions of each project and the infrastructural/architectural project's final design.

### **As Found:**

A formless approach must be rooted in existing material and environmental conditions, so the initial phase will include research into site, process, and typology, exploring both the history and production of land art sites, their current use and cultural impact, and ongoing issues in their development and preservation.

### **Operational Experiments:**

We will undertake a series of experiments to explore the interactions between matter, structure, site, and process. This is not a form-finding exercise but instead a way of finding the formless—of identifying the key processes that students wish to engage and of emphasizing iteration over the production of a single design configuration. The emphasis here will be on physical rather than digital simulation, designing exercises that allow us to exploit the embodied intelligence of materials themselves. Even the most advanced digital simulations today are unable to effectively address the scale and complexity of landscape; when collaborated with a material physicist on our design for the million-pound pile of sand in our project Tent Pile, he told us that his lab could not digitally simulate the behavior of much more than a teaspoon of sand and that we would have to rely on physical simulation for our modeling. The students in our studio will follow a similar method, performing and documenting a series of material experiments that will form the basis for their approach to design.

### **Discourse and Design:**

Throughout the studio, there will also be an emphasis on research and dialogue, not as the starting point or foundation for design but as an integral part of the design process. Over the course of the semester, we will hold several informal seminar-style conversations with experts, ranging from ecologists to land artists to art historians to environmental engineers. Each student will be expected to articulate a clear argument not just about their project but with their project—just as the notion of a formless ecology suggests that there

### **Schedule:**

Studio will meet Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, May 31-August from 2:00pm-6:00pm.

Wednesday, May 30, 2:00pm-6:00pm / Studio Lottery

Thursday, May 31, 2:00pm-6:00pm / First Day of Studio

Monday, June 4, 2:00pm-6:00pm / Site & Program Selection

Wed/Turs, June 6 or 7, Time (TBD) / NJ Field Trip

Wednesday, June 20, 2:00pm-6:00pm / 1<sup>st</sup> Big (Study) Model Pin-Up

Tuesday, July 3, 9:00am-1:00pm / Midterm Review

Wednesday, July 4 – No Class (Independence Day)

Thursday, July 19, 2:00pm-6:00pm / 2<sup>nd</sup> Big (Final Draft) Model Pin-Up

Wednesday, August 1, 9:00am-1:00pm / Final Review