

TERRITORIES IN OBSOLESCENCE

Dominika Kopiarova

Abstract: The theory presented through Territories in Obsolescence revolves around the fascination with obsolescence as an inherent condition of industrial sites. What is argued is a shift away from thinking in terms of active industrial versus obsolete postindustrial. Instead, in understanding the cyclical capitalist patterns of production and abandonment of space, the industrial, the postindustrial, and the future postindustrial correspond to the processes of becoming obsolete, obsolescence, and projected obsolescence, respectively. Concepts and spatial concerns of artists who closely work with—or against—architecture are introduced to contemplate postindustrial sites in their present reality. It is further argued that the notion of proto-ruins renders future industrial and postindustrial interchangeable terms; ergo, to think of the future industrial territories requires us to speculate its postindustrial state already. From this, stems the need for architecture to expand to the notions of proto-architecture.

Keywords: obsolescence, territory, post-/ industrial landscape, entropy, nonsite, nonspace, proto-architecture

I ON CYCLES OF OBSOLESCENCE

The relevance of recognising territories in obsolescence rests on the misleading dependency of progress on the perpetual obsolescence of space. The mechanisms underlying the cycles of production or abandonment of postindustrial landscapes and the means to theorise these territories in their present reality are of interest here—obsolescence as a productive process that contests their spatial identity.

Joseph Schumpeter—its ardent defender—defined capitalism as the creative destruction with imminent obsolescence at its core. A fitting term for the process of continual industrial mutation necessary to successively revolutionise the economic structure from within—'Destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one.'¹ Schumpeter presented entrepreneurial innovation as the vital force behind the notion of progress and productive instability of capitalism, at once explaining the boom-and-bust cycles as much as the cycles of industrial construction and abandonment.

As David Harvey argued, macro-economists tend to have a weak grasp on how to handle the production of space in their theories and models. At least beyond partitioning it into geopolitical entities and industrial zones. Harvey—a proponent of the notion that capitalism annihilates space to ensure its success²—considered the production, reproduction, and reconfiguration of space as central to understanding the political economy of capitalism. Harvey introduced the concept of a 'spatial fix' that bridges the gap between the abstract notion of capitalist progress and the core of obsolescence as being inherently temporal and locally embedded.³

The system of capitalism is dependent on geographical expansion as much as technological innovation and self-fulfilling expansion through economic growth. The 'spatial fix' then describes the contradictory tendency of this mechanism 'to fix' economic infrastructure in a specific place and 'to fix' the crisis by liberating circulating capital from its local embeddedness. This results in an inherent tension between the demand to build an environment through which capital investments can circulate and the reflex to abandon it—along with a legacy of pollution and local economic recession—in a quest for increased profits.⁴ This is achieved by rapid relocation in search of a cheaper labour force, favourable terms of trade, new pools of resources and raw materials, or sites with weaker environmental regulations. Following this logic of the 'spatial fix', the cycles of obsolescence are defined by the 'deindustrialization here and reindustrialization there' mindset.⁵

The sole distinction between the industrial and the postindustrial becomes insufficient. In understanding the patterns of production, reproduction and abandonment of space, the need for the projected future state of the industrial

landscapes must be recognised. Ergo, the industrial, the postindustrial, and the future postindustrial can be described as the process of becoming obsolete, obsolescence, and projected obsolescence—that is not to suggest a hard border between the pertinent territorial conditions which generally tend to overlap and coexist.

II ON ENTROPY AND NONSPACE

Entropy—deriving its definition from classical thermodynamics—is the fundamental process indicative of the winding down of systems. Entropy measures uncertainty or randomness associated with the disorder, disintegration, and irreversibility. Unavoidably, it serves as a tool in interpreting landscapes transforming due to partial or complete abandonment of industrial activity.

Robert Smithson—who associated entropy with economic and social systems as much the temporal—conceived of the industrial landscapes as sites that reveal the essentially entropic character of contemporary civilisation. For Smithson, strip mines, quarries, waste dumps, zones of deindustrialisation formed by shrinking towns and industrial rust belts, were precisely where ‘the vast forces of entropy, both natural and social, silently worked to dissolve the landscape, cancel the present, render experience as memory.’⁶

In ‘A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic’⁷, Smithson renders the processes of entropic disintegration acting on an industrial riverfront. He observes the aesthetics of the construction sites and documents the industrial artefacts—concrete abutments, holes, extinct machines, pumping derrick ‘monument in the middle of the river’⁸—with a fascination and care that would otherwise be solely given to such foreboding scenery. ‘An artificial crater that contained a pale limpid pond of water, and from the side of the crater protruded six large pipes that gushed the water of the pond into the river’⁹ is equated with a monumental fountain. For an unfamiliar reader, Smithson would be bordering on satire. He suggested distancing from the tendency to break away monumental artefacts from its landscape and instead contemplate the postindustrial as a whole in its essential continuity. The focus no longer lies on the modernist-admired factory architecture and the engineered concrete silhouettes of silos but on the territory modified for production—drained, excavated, polluted—and its infrastructure.

Following Tony Smith’s¹⁰ attitudes towards a new ‘subaesthetic’ terrain and a radical understanding of sculpture, Smithson too contemplated that a sculpture concerns itself with the absence of space, relying on the ‘voids that displace the solidity of space’ rather than objects to activate the space.¹¹ The ‘holes’ in the landscape represent the negativity of the obsolete—its temporal dimension and the continuity of its production.¹² Smithson emphasised those open spaces that assimilate in zones of abandonment and obsolescence. It is precisely this class of sites that would be called entropic voids in the landscape. Waste areas, quarries, and excavations where energy has been drawn out are considered sculptures in the landscape.

Smithson’s artistic activity did not necessarily consist of intervening in the landscape but creating a parallel landscape.¹³ If sculpture concerns itself with space as void, it deals with the space’s counterpart, the ‘nonspace’. ‘Nonspaces’ are the ‘immediate surroundings that fail to impinge themselves on modern consciousness.’¹⁴ They point away from themselves and toward their referents, effectively becoming signs or containers for someplace else. ‘Nonspace’ is then a subject of the ‘nonsite’—a three-dimensional logical picture, an abstract metaphor representing an actual site but not actually resembling it.¹⁵

Smithson recognised ‘nonspaces’ in strip mines. ‘What, after all, are strip mines but scalped mountains, voids testifying to the act of removing, negatives left after the positive ore has been scraped off?’¹⁶ However, to borrow from Smithson’s terminology could be to extrapolate the interpretations of ‘nonsites’ onto the continuous production and reproduction of obsolete landscapes. Obsolete landscapes are containers for the industrial function that is transferred onto them and remain in use for as long as they are referred to as the next industrial parallel landscapes.

In the cycle of obsolescence, the future industrial are simple referents—earthworks—of the precedent industrial sites. Territories in Obsolescence can also be acknowledged as ‘nonsites’ or earthworks now undergoing entropic forces, and postindustrial becomes a nonterm, always in reference to a function existing elsewhere.

Smithson criticised architects’ inability to cope with entropy and insisted that entropy was a fundamental rather than repressed condition of architecture. Entropy acts on industrial landscapes and functionless architecture.¹⁷ And architecture is an inherently negentropic act! If postindustrial is considered inherently entropic, it is inevitably moving away from architecture for as long as architecture chooses to force purpose onto obsolescence and fight entropy. Postindustrial becomes an artificial sculptural landscape not in opposition to nature but in opposition to architecture.

III ON NEGATIVITY AND FUNCTION

In 1975, anarchitect¹⁸ Gordon Matta-Clark carved a hole into an abandoned apartment house in Paris and consequently created a series of exemplary cuts into abandoned factories and obsolete buildings. The building cuts were experiential and not object-based in that the spectacle revolved around the absence of these fragments in the buildings themselves and not in the display of the extracted fragments.¹⁹

In *Splitting* (1974), *Conical Intersect* (1975), and *Days End* (1975), Matta-Clark explored the limits of the notion of function in architecture. He suggests a reading of architecture that ‘exposes the whole of the architectural process that otherwise remains hidden when architecture is understood as a functional object.’²⁰ A hole—a newly introduced void into a structure that is at the very moment of losing its function but still exists—questions the justification of architecture and the architects’ need for functionality.

An intervention of cutting a hole through the building is not about destruction but rather questions the forces of urban destruction driven by obsolescence. ‘A hole is what makes the object non-identical with itself and resists attempts for its closure. It shows those architectural qualities that persist after the building is stripped of its functionality. It exposes the entropic tendency of any architectural object and thus discloses the lack of foundation beneath the monumental project. [...] a hole is not a negation of architecture but an exposure of its negativity.’²¹ If ‘negativity’ stands for what comes ‘before and after’ what is commonly understood as architecture—a functioning period of an architectural object—then to consider ‘negativity’ as intrinsic to architecture is to question the existing distribution of the architectural sensible.²²

Obsolescence does not solely refer to the void in the production, the lymbo.²³ Instead, obsolescence—the loss of functionality defined by architecture—allows for a new and expanded reading of architecture. Perhaps the most evident is what suggests the productive agency of obsolescence in relation to Matta-Clark’s interventions. The projects were undeniably a result of—or, at the very least, solely enabled by—the obsolescence of the built environment in question, which inevitably frames the foundation of Matta-Clark’s oeuvre. The buildings were only usable as sites and available because of their planned destruction.

Matta-Clark’s engagement with obsolescence is readable in *Walls Paper* (1972). These photo-silkscreen images were printed in pairs of colours on newsprint and were abstracted from the artist’s photographs of the cracking, crumbling interior walls of New York buildings that mirrored Soho’s own deterioration, as a former manufacturing neighbourhood slated for demolition at the time of display. ‘The starting point of *Walls Paper* is the imagery of failing walls, but the end result is that of phantom rectangles arranged linearly, some interfacing with each other, some reduced to line, some acting as foreground and some as background. It is a splotchy abstraction that offers up the shadowy remains of an architectural structure in flux and becomes an eerie palimpsest of buildings that exist, or existed, elsewhere.’²⁴

IV ON PROTO-ARCHITECTURE

A fundamental consequence of certain entropic processes lies in their irreversibility—the impossibility to violate the conservation of energy expressed in the iron laws of thermodynamics. Entropy change predicts the direction of spontaneous processes and determines whether they are irreversible or impossible—resulting in entropy being defined as a state of unidirectional disintegration—connected only with what comes after.

Robert Smithson expanded the entropic notion to the time that precedes—to the architecture's 'proto-state'. 'Proto-architecture' refers to the phase between the breaking ground at construction and the beginning of industrial activity—when the territory is in use. 'The Monuments of Passaic' are described as 'ruins in reverse' in reference to the structures that would eventually be built. Here, the ruins oppose any conception of romanticised ruins because 'they don't fall into ruins after they are built but rise into ruins before they are built.'²⁵

From when to consider the site as 'proto-ruins' can be stretched to the very early planning phases. In 'Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site' (1967), Smithson argues the importance of soil sampling and core borings: 'The "boring" if seen as a discrete step in the development of the whole site has an aesthetic value. It is an invisible hole and could be defined by Carl Andre's motto—"A thing is a hole in a thing it is not".'²⁶ Hence, the future postindustrial—meaning the site planned for industrial activity—can equally be considered to possess those entropic qualities.

In Vladimir Nabokov's statement—'The Future is but obsolete in reverse',²⁷—Robert Smithson saw a confirmation of entropic forces. When Smithson contemplated that 'new monuments' are 'not built for ages but instead built against ages',²⁸ he suggested that artists become involved in 'systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, in that both past and future are placed into an objective present.'²⁹ In 'proto-ruins', the projection of obsolescence materialises for landscapes of industrialisation. The notion that ruinous qualities can be seen in everything that is or will be constructed could also be projected onto conceptions of the future territories in obsolescence.

What is argued here is a paradigm shift from thinking in terms of industrial and postindustrial dichotomy as active versus obsolete landscape and instead to recognise the patterns of production of the landscapes that warp the time into itself. 'All Passaic is obsolete; it is a present already past, already used up.'³⁰ As such, all future industrial territory is already postindustrial—it is obsolete.

NOTES

- 1 J.A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1976 [1942]), p. 83.
- 2 D. Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
- 3 D. Harvey, 'Globalization and the "Spatial Fix" ', in *Geographische revue*, 2/2001, pp. 23-30.
- 4 D. Harvey, 'Globalization and the "Spatial Fix" ', in *Geographische revue*, 2/2001, pp. 23-30.
- 5 D. Harvey, 'Globalization and the "Spatial Fix" ', in *Geographische revue*, 2/2001, p. 24.
- 6 J. Dickinson, 'Journey into Space: Interpretations of Landscape in Contemporary Art' in *Technologies of landscape: from reaping to recycling*, ed. D.E. Nye (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1999), p. 56.
- 7 R. Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,' in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. J. Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press 1996 [1967]), pp. 68-74.
- 8 R. Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,' in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. J. Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press 1996 [1967]), p. 71.
- 9 R. Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,' in *Robert*

Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. J. Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press 1996 [1967]), p. 71.

10 Anthony Smith was a pioneering figure in American Minimalist sculpture and—similarly to Smithson—a noted theorist on art. Hobbs (1981) cites Smith as influential on Smithson's thinking about space, form and sculpture. R. Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 19-30.

11 R. Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 24.

12 M. Krivý, 'Industrial architecture and negativity: the aesthetics of architecture in the works of Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson and Bernd and Hilla Becher,' in *The Journal of Architecture*, 15/2010, pp. 827-852.

13 J. Dickinson, 'Journey into Space: Interpretations of Landscape in Contemporary Art,' in *Technologies of landscape: from reaping to recycling*, ed. D.E. Nye (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1999).

14 R. Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 25.

15 R. Smithson, 'A Provisional Theory of Nonsites,' in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. J. Flam (California: University of California Press, 1996).

16 R. Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 25.

17 W. Davidts, 'Operative Entropy. Robert Smithson at Hotel Palenque (1969-72),' in *Triple Bond. Essays on Art, Architecture and Museums* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2007).

18 In reference to Matta-Clark's 1974 collaborative project Anarchitecture.

19 S. Zalman, 'Re:Viewing Walls Paper,' In *Focus: Walls Paper 1972 by Gordon Matta-Clark* (Tate Research Publication [online], 2017), Available at <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/walls-paper/re-viewing-walls-paper> (accessed on 1 January 2022).

20 M. Krivý, 'Industrial architecture and negativity: the aesthetics of architecture in the works of Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson and Bernd and Hilla Becher,' in *The Journal of Architecture*, 15/2010, p. 838.

21 M. Krivý, 'Industrial architecture and negativity: the aesthetics of architecture in the works of Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson and Bernd and Hilla Becher,' in *The Journal of Architecture*, 15/2010, pp. 838-839.

22 M. Krivý, 'Industrial architecture and negativity: the aesthetics of architecture in the works of Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson and Bernd and Hilla Becher,' in *The Journal of Architecture*, 15/2010, p. 834.

23 'Lymbo', a waiting place, is a Late Middle English spelling of 'limbo' that became obsolete with the Chancery standardisation of written English, c. 1500.

24 S. Zalman, 'Re:Viewing Walls Paper', In *Focus: Walls Paper 1972 by Gordon Matta-Clark*, In Tate Research Publication [online], Available at <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/walls-paper/re-viewing-walls-paper> (accessed on 1 January 2022).

25 R. Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey' in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. J. Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996 [1967]), pp. 68-74.

26 R. Smithson, 'Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site' in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. J. Flam (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996 [1967]), p. 56.

27 R. Smithson, 'Entropy and The New Monuments' in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. J. Flam (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996 [1966]), p. 11.

28 R. Smithson, 'Entropy and The New Monuments' in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. J. Flam (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996 [1966]), p. 11.

29 R. Smithson, 'Entropy and The New Monuments' in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. J. Flam (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996 [1966]), p. 11.

30 R. Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 29.