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In this place with no names

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Rice University, 1992
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IN THIS PLACE WITH NO NAMES

by

DOUG HOFIUS

A THESIS SUBMITTED
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MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE

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In This Place With No Names    Doug Hofius

Abstract

This investigation begins and ends with conditions present in the city of Houston, which in many ways typify processes at work in other urban centers around the country and around the world. One senses, in the vast empty ring which surrounds downtown Houston, the infinity of the great plains, in the midst of a highly urbanized context. The complete lack of hierarchy or figure inherent in this landscape seems to be a fascinating architectural problem. How do we build in such an area, and how do we come to grips with this vast emptiness which surrounds it?

The research, investigating the aesthetics of silence, is seen as an initial groundwork, upon which the design was later to build. The two aspects the investigation read as parallel texts, both infusing and reinforcing one another, while their relationship is neither causal or determined.

The conditions of emptiness and dematerialization inherent in the territory led to an investigation of the aesthetics of silence, which appear periodically in American art and architecture. The notion of a silence in many ways seems to address the processes at work in the territory focussed upon in the design. Silence can be defined in three ways: first of all as a literal refusal to tell us anything. Secondly, as a condition of presence or immanence, and finally, as a condition of exhaustion, at the end of the line.

All three conditions appeared to be present in the territory bordering downtown Houston to the East. Literally, the process of erasure tells us nothing, for upon first glance, there is almost nothing out there to speak. As a result of this erasure, and lack of definition, each thing which remained took on a heightened significance through its sheer persistence, and through the lack of presence of anything else. Finally, the things which remained retained an uncanny muteness; they had number and measure, but no name.

The problem is a persistent one; how do we build in this place with no names?
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Introduction

This study begins with a concern for the the modern metropolis and its fate. While the city has constituted, until recently, a *topos* through which *logos* was made possible, the recent fraying of a formerly coherent urban fabric has been seen to engender a loss of meaning. The argument put forth will be that while the fixed, complete meanings, formerly made present in cities may be lost, the city as presently configured, allows for a multitude of possibilities formerly unavailable. This being the case, one of our jobs as architects is to seek out the spaces through which the city can be maintained as significant construct. The study here has been to discover, in the circumstantial, and often accidental processes at work in the city of Houston, a method whereby significant construction might take place.

Throughout the study, a series of references to language will be maintained. It is not my contention, however, that Architecture constitutes a language *per se*. It is merely as an analogous process that language is referenced. Ways of meaning intrinsic to linguistic processes are not to be seen as literally transferring to Architecture, but to be seen as processes parallel and roughly similar to those through which architecture presents itself.

Similarly, the call for silence put forth herein should not be taken too literally, either. The point has been made emphatic to bring about an acknowledgement of the contemporary movement toward a limit, or end condition in terms of signification. The contention is that at or near these limits, pure and simple signification ceases, and a world of possibility begins.
The site, a forgotten vacant lot, abutting on one side the skyscrapers of downtown, and on the other, the vast emptiness of their temenos, occupies a condition typical of Houston, neither here nor there, but somewhere unclassifiable, in-between.
The Language of the City

The reference point of Architecture has traditionally been the city. The city has served as the horizon against which and within which the "work" of architecture has been read. Within this framework, the traditional city constituted a complete language, of sorts, within which buildings, streets, plazas, and individual monuments constituted a meaningful totality.

It mattered not where or when we happened upon it, the classical city remained an understandable, readable text, whose spaces comprised a series of meaningful relationships. In this readability, the city served as a symbolic order, locating us in a world both physically and spiritually.

In recent years, much has been made of the breakdown of the urban fabric. As some have sought to erase all notions of the traditional city, others have sought to recapture symbolic order inherent in traditional city-making. The either/or dualism inherent in such propaganda does neither party much good, however. While radical moderns and radical anti-moderns argue, they share a belief in the power of the bulldozer and the psychic purge brought about by wholesale urban erasure. Beyond this amnesia, might there be processes at work here in the cities which surround us which might inform our decisions, and out of which an architecture can develop?

As architects, we must acknowledge, and somehow come to grips with the cities around us. This is not to say, however, that we must turn back, and recreate traditional cities. More to the point might be to ask the question of how we are to build, significantly, in the absence of such a traditionally held ground of meaning.
A similar position, perhaps more to the point, is outlined by Jaques Lacan in an essay entitled The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis. (See Ecrits, pg 31-107.)

Contemporary with the breakdown of the traditional city fabric, philosophers and literary critics have made much out of what they see as a breakdown of language. Writers like Roland Barthes argue that the formerly transparent relationship between signifier and signified no longer exist. Might this situation be analogous to the situation outlined above, between architecture, and the city as its referand? To take the analogy a bit further, to argue that the traditional city constituted a complete "language" would be to imply that the contemporary city is a place where completeness and fixity of meaning are no longer possible.

If the function of past architectures was to engage and participate in the complete "text" of the city, what then is the place of architecture, now that this text is disperse, to the point of emptiness?

Indeed, a drive through certain sections of Houston makes this problem self-evident. Here, an absolute absence of character, or definition pervades, covering entire districts of the city.

The focus of this study has been these very districts. Throughout the investigation, a certain line of questioning kept recurring: in the absence of any character, how do we build, and what might we reference, if anything at all?

In his Inaugural Lecture at the College de France, Barthes notes that language is a game of power, and that upon entry to the world of language, the subject participates in a series of power relationships, both actively and passively. Language, as traditionally construed, conscribes a submissive subject, or in the terminology of Michel Foucault, a docile body. Could it be that the traditional city seeks the same?
New prospects for the city, engendering a greater freedom, might lie not in the return to the traditional city, but in the possibilities inherent in the emerging city of the twenty-first century. Indeed, recent thinkers, most notably Rem Koolhaas, have seen the traditional city as constituting a "voice of the father," and have embraced the sense of freedom inherent in this emerging metropolis.

The project of coming to grips with the fast-moving target of the contemporary city is by no means complete. Barthes states that in a world where absolute, fixed reference is no longer possible, what we must do is to seek out the "unclassified, atopic sites" of language, seeking not "truth or interpretation," but "explosions," and "vibrations." It is in these as of yet undefined spaces that we can begin to find a sense of freedom, of possibility. Certainly, to be quite literal in terms our analogy, the city of Houston provides an abundance of such unclassified, atopic "sites."

The project at hand is to investigate the forces at work in just such a literal "site," seeking not so much to emulate the methods prescribed by the French, but to deal with, in a very basic manner, the possibilities inherent in such a space.

A certain phenomenology of the limit cannot be avoided when discussing this territory. This is not to say that the territory lies "beyond" any limit, but that it seems to describe a certain edge condition, between the effable and the effable.
The limits of language are most cogently discussed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, wherein a rigorous, exacting logic is implemented to determine the precise limits of what can be stated meaningfully. Finally, at the end of his sometimes tiring discourse, Wittgenstein states,

> My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)
> He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

> Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

This point, at the limits of language, is where Lacan says we have arrived:

> Here we are then, at the foot of the wall, at the foot of the language barrier. Beyond this wall, there is nothing but outer darkness. Does this mean that we are entirely masters of the situation? Certainly not.

For if language as described by J. F. Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, is indeed merely a game of one-upmanship, the taking of trumps, certainly we can choose not to play, or at least to change the rules.

The strategy, outlined as one of silence, does not mean to imply that the work should have no meaning whatsoever. To argue for a silence in this case is merely to state the case for an architecture open to a myriad of possibilities instead of merely one or two.
For a brief overview, Susan Sontag's article "The Aesthetics of Silence" cannot be beaten. My purpose here is not to re-capitulate her arguments, but to put forth some of the points which may apply to this investigation.

Silence has been, time and again, the path chosen by artists and poets in the twentieth century. The propagation of silence has taken on a series of discrete meanings, each dependent upon context and (ironically, perhaps,) original intention.

In the research which follows, the word "silence" takes on a complex set of connotations and relates to a number of phenomena. The first of these, rhetorical silence, implies, literally, saying little. Secondly, there is a silence of vast empty space, which implies spatial and temporal infinitude, which can be perceived on many levels in the city which surrounds us. Thirdly, a historical tradition of silence which has continued for hundreds of years as an aspect of American culture. Lastly, a kind of spiritual silence can be spoken of, which relates to religious traditions wherein quietude implies an openness to presence.

A sense of paradox, or the absurd, must therefore be maintained, in order to propagate such a series of positions. For the silence here called for seeks not merely withdrawal, but ultimately, some point of reference, tenuous and slippery though it might be.

There is more to silence than mere retreat. The positions outlined below begin to elucidate a tradition of silence, forming ideas from which an architecture might grow. These categories are not clearcut--rather, the thoughts would best be seen as overlapping, and to some extent, reinforcing one another.
Silence and Rhetoric

In an essay entitled "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," Walter Benjamin asserts that "every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language." As an extension of human mental life, architecture might, therefore, classify as a kind of language. This reading of architecture has been taken up by a whole generation of architects and theoreticians, whose ideas have been in vogue as of late. To understand architecture, the argument goes, one needs first to understand the mechanisms of meaning inherent in language.

Benjamin’s thought differs drastically from that of the post-modernists, however, when the discussion turns to the substance of meaning and communication.

By focussing architecture upon communication, the post-modernists have brought a critical edge to a discipline whose arguments seemed worn out at the end of the 1960's.

Yet, in pressing the linguistic metaphor, they have perhaps missed the boat. An assumption they make is that architecture stands for, and in some way means something. While it is easy to think this, it is, perhaps, an oversimplification of matters.

What any language communicates, Benjamin asserts, is itself, in its own being. Meaning, as such, is not a fixed phenomenon, separate from and referred to by language, but resides in the substance of language itself. As such, a language does not supplement, or stand in for any meaning which exists over and above it, but comprises, in and of itself, meaning.
This might also be the case in architecture. The contention here will be that, rather than signifying something else, outside itself, architecture is, quite literally, the space in which we live. It is only on a secondary level that architecture communicates power, status, or whatever. Even then, architecture remains, in effect, the poor cousin of the neon sign or the television advertisement.

Paradoxically, then, the "language" of architecture remains silent. Space, light, proportion and geometry do not "speak", the way that neon signs, and billboards full of cheeseburgers do. The elements of architecture remain, witness to the actions and follies of mortals. Just as ruins of ancient machines remain today, architecture remains, passively, mute witness to all we do.

The work of Louis Kahn, above all others, is infused with a quality of silence. As a result, discussing his work in anything but descriptive terminology becomes increasingly difficult.

Kahn speaks of silence, or the unmeasureable, as a force, which guides his work:

A great building must begin with the unmeasureable, must go through measureable means when it is being designed, and in the end must in the end be unmeasureable. The only way you can build, the only way you can get the building into being, is through the measureable. You must follow the laws of nature and use quantities of brick, methods of construction, and engineering. But in the end, when the building becomes part of living, it evokes unmeasureable qualities, and the spirit of its existence takes over.
One begins to sense the immeasurable in some of Kahn's late work, where light becomes the living presence of the unmeasurable, or silence. This is the case at the Yale Center for British Art, where light, entering from above, illuminates a space stripped of all ornament. Here, at the hierarchical center of the building we have a place of unabashed silence, made present through a sense of space and light. Instead of the statue of the deity, nothingness resides in this precinct.

In our own time, the Japanese architect Tadao Ando deals with these same issues in bringing about an architecture of supreme refinement and simplicity. Ando alludes to an attitude of silence in his own words:

Man enters a never-ending cycle and becomes dominated by his own excessive desires. What really enriches an individual's life in an age such as ours? It is important to discover what is essential to human life and to consider what abundance truly means. An architectural space stripped of all excess and composed simply from bare necessities is true and convincing because it is appropriate and satisfying. Simplification through the elimination of all surface decorations, the employment of minimal, symmetrical compositions, and limited materials constitutes a challenge to contemporary civilization.

I do not believe that architecture should speak too much. It should remain silent and let nature in the guise of sunlight and wind speak.

In a space like the townhouse in Kujo, the simplicity, directness, and purity of expression combine to create an architecture which (paradoxically) speaks in architectural terms precisely because of its silence.

Embracing this silence, Architecture would concentrate on aspects of space, light, enclosure, concealment; the poetics inherent in and only in architecture.
This is not to say that language has no place in the world and that reasonable thought is to be discarded altogether, it merely implies that language has limits in terms of its ability to participate in the world which surrounds, and, to some extent, defines it.

Tony Tanner brings up an important point in noting that in speaking, we speak not ourselves, but instead speak language, which is really not ourselves, and in some sense enslaves us: ...I speak where I am not; therefore I am, where I speak not, for much of the real self may be found in the gaps, spaces and silences when it is, for intermittent periods, not a slave to language.

In architecture, a recognition of silence would be to overturn recent architectural theory and inquiry. It could be argued that recent investigations of the grammar, syntax and rhetoric of architecture, are diversions; intriguing trips down side roads into forgotten, but not altogether relevant territory.

A primary source for these developments has been the architecture and urbanism of commercial strip development. Here architecture serves as neutral backdrop for signs, which are pasted up front, advertising goods for sale. Architectural theory has of late concentrated upon the sign, as conveyer of meaning, and forgotten about the neutral backdrop which supports it, and hence, the "meaning" to which it may be linked.

While the billboard sign has been seen as an architectural paradigm for our age, a re-consideration of the physical fact of the billboard itself, sans sign, might bear fruit.

The blank billboard is completely neutral. In its neutrality, it refuses to speak. This silence is a positive phenomenon. The unused billboard remains open to any kind of reading, and meaning which can be pasted onto it.
America, land of the fast buck, the fast car, and fast food, has often been seen as the locus of just such a silence, despite the speed at which images and sounds proliferate.

Due to the ceaseless cacophany, the overwhelming blitz of images and sounds which surrounds us every day, silence has been seen as retreat from the deliberate noise of commercial culture.

The billboard can also be read as a wall, with a dialectic between revelation and concealment built into it. On one side, we read the sign, on the other, we are left with blank silence: columns, bracing, and plywood.

In one of his earliest commissions, Charles Edouard Jeanneret takes of the notion of architecture as signifying system by deliberately imposing a huge blank wall over the entrance to the house. This bizarre and enigmatic gesture is, in the words of Colin Rowe, both a "disturbance and a delight." The silence and blankness of this panel refuses to engage in the neo-classical conventionality and rhetoric prevalent elsewhere in the villa.

Rowe continues:
Since this motif, which is so curiously reminiscent of a cinema screen, was presumably intended to shock, its success is complete. For it imbues the facade with all the polemical qualities of a manifesto...Distinct and deliberate, it draws attention to itself; and yet, without apparent content, it at once distributes attention over the rest of the house.
As incisive as it may be, the analysis of Rowe in no way explains the intentions behind this mysterious wall. While it would be silly to presume a thorough understanding of the architect's intentions, nearly one hundred years later, it is nevertheless fascinating to speculate about this architectural enigma.

What the blank panel does is to force the issue of the architectural sign. This is done quite paradoxically, for the panel signifies nothing. To this extent, therefore, it signifies the impossibility of architectural signification.

In literature, Samuel Beckett reaches a linguistic end of the line similar to that described above. His writings act out the absurdity of the human condition in a time when absolute reference has been lost altogether.

The writings of Beckett, describe a paradoxical silence wherein utterance continues; but only a kind of post-Hiroshima utterance, stripped of all pretentions to meaning. The kind of "ground zero" writing undertaken by Beckett seems to beg the basic questions facing writers today; what is there to say, what can be said?
In a text like Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*, we encounter a world in which action, characterization, plot, and development are completely eliminated, all we are left with is mute objects, and the hollow echo of words:

Enough. Quicker. Quick see how all in keeping with the chair. Minimally less. No more. Well on the way to inexistence. As to zero the infinite. Quick say. And of her? As much. Quick find her again. In that black heart. That mock brain.

The subject here is ostensibly a woman in a cabin, sometimes sitting in a chair. But then again the subject is not the woman, it is really the words themselves, and to another degree, language.

Paradoxically, the "subject" of the passage does not exist. Language, having lost reference, merely exists. Words hang emptily in space, in an ambiguous, dematerialized state of purgatory.

While Eidlitz is addressing circumstances specific to Chicago after 1893, his argument has here been appropriated for use in an argument which is wider in focus. (Quoted in Judd, *Architektur*, p.113.)

In architecture, the problem of the sign is stated uniquely and concisely by Leopold Eidlitz, who asserts that "American architecture is the art of covering one thing with another thing to imitate the third thing, which, if genuine, would not be desirable."

Certainly architecture in the post-modern era has approached this point, embracing this kind of sign-making. The task of this project is to question this use of signs in architecture, and to propose an alternative approach.

The problem with trying to read architecture like a text is that we assume that we can walk away from a building with some idea or meaning, which is literal or verbal, and therefore separate from the built thing itself.
I realize I'm beginning to sound like Heidegger, and even Louis Kahn. I'm sure they have both "infected" my thinking, but I haven't traced the exact lineage of that infection. Obviously *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* has been an influence.

The argument here proposes that the "meaning," or "language" of architecture consists in and of the space, the materials, and the presence of the built work itself. Words have little to do with this kind of meaning or language. It is a language whose "words" are silent; consisting of light, time, and the presence of a-world. We make this world, continually, in our daily encounter with architecture. It is through this interaction that architecture becomes the world in which we dwell.

The task of the designer becomes, in such an architecture, the task of imagining a world within which we can enter, not merely the sign of another sign, which refers ultimately to some third, undesirable world.
Space City

Upon first arriving in Houston, the visitor is astonished to discover the immense distance travelled, from airport to downtown, from downtown to suburb, from suburb to shopping mall, all the while remaining within the city limits. The sense of limitless horizontal expanse inherent in the Gulf Coast landscape engenders thoughts of infinity, and the silence with which we must face it.

This sense, originally encountered by early settlers of the continent, is still present in the space which surrounds us, and can be seen most readily in the deserts which begin a few hours to the west of town.

The freeways, with their constant flow of goods and information, never stop. There is a restlessness to the city which continually unseats the concept of fixed place. This restlessness is borne of the experience of the desert, and denies interpretation, or singularity of meaning.

Similarly, the neutral grid, laid out over the hundreds of square miles we now call Houston, is a perfect reflection of the vast prairies and rice fields which once existed here. The grid, by denying hierarchy and implying infinite extension, seems the perfect vehicle to perpetuate the sense of endless prairie and rice paddy, and give them presence in the city.

Like the lay of the lands west of Appalachia under Jefferson, the grid of Houston's streets is a pattern whose only meaning lies in the use to which it is put. Eschewing rhetoric or pomposity, the grid remains open to any number of meanings, which attach themselves to a framework, which is, in and of itself, silent, meaningless.
This sense of space has existed throughout American history, as George Santayana observed at the turn of the century:

Consider now the great emptiness of America: not merely the primitive physical emptiness, surviving in some regions, and the continental spacing of the chief natural features, but also the moral emptiness of a settlement...Great empty spaces bring a sort of freedom to both soul and body.

The question arises, therefore, in regards to what it is that architecture can do to address this kind of space. Santayana is happy to discuss the fact that the freedom brought about by this kind of expansive space allows the American to build where and what he or she chooses:

You may pitch your tent where you will; or if ever you decide to build anything, it can be in a style of your own devising. You have room, fresh materials, few models, and no critics...Your life and mind will become dry and direct, with few decorative flourishes.

The limitless expanse of the horizon has been remarked upon profusely, and any attempt to add to this scholarship in the present, brief study would no doubt pale in comparison. The purpose of this study is not to create a definitive historical document, but merely to explore some of the ideas and forces which have shaped the world we now live in.

The skyscrapers of Houston, despite their representation on the evening news as symbols of the city, actually communicate very little. In this sense, their reflectivity; and the neutral gridding of their surfaces recalls, on a vertical plane, the horizontal gridding of the empty space which surrounds them.
Similarly, the interiors of these buildings does little to determine the eventual disposition of space within them. Their blank floor plans allow them to be laid out in any conceivable manner. These buildings are seen as empty vessels, containing so many square feet of leaseable space. Nothing is there to predetermine the nature or quality of that space.

The infinity, and lack of articulation implied in these spaces returns us to the problem of representation. In the face of this infinity, what can meaningfully be said? This problem seems borne out even in Houston's smaller buildings, where a deadness, or neutrality of expression echoes the inarticulated spaces next to them.

The muteness of these buildings places them outside the whirl of communication, placing them in a sphere where they can only be seen in light of the physical presence they embody.

Heidegger speaks of such a presence in relationship to the Greek Temple:

A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft valley. The building encloses the figure of the god, and in this concealment lets it stand out into the holy precinct through the open portico. By means of the temple, the god is present in the temple.

Christian Norberg-Schulz echoes this point when he states, The work of art does not represent, it presents; it brings into presence

The presentness spoken of here does not imply that all architecture embodies some deity. In presence however, buildings take on characteristics of a "thou" in its relationship to the viewer/participant. Rarely, however, is this presence taken seriously.


"Heidegger's Thinking on Architecture," Perspecta 20, pg. 2.
With the advent of minimal art in the 1960's the relationship and interdependence of art work and viewer in real space became a serious consideration for artists. A prevalent example of this kind of work can be seen at Marfa, Texas. In the words of Donald Judd, "There is an objectivity to the obdurate identity of a material."

This thought is expanded upon by Michael Fried:
Like the shape of the object, the materials do not represent, signify, or allude to anything; they are what they are and nothing more. And what they are is not, strictly speaking, something that is grasped or intuited or recognized or even seen once and for all.

Fried makes the connection between the art of the minimalists and spirituality when he states, "presentness is grace"

This sense of presence brings about an idea of temporality, dealing with a further aspect of present, which is to say, being, in the present tense.


The connection between space and presence is described by Robert Morris, when he states, "In percieving architectural space, one's own space is not separate, but coexistent with what is percieved." This coexistence he defines as presentness, the condition sought by minimalist sculptors and artists. Presentness is a condition with a long history, and it is a history tied to a notion of the limit of language.

Time is called upon by Robert Morris in discussion of the contemporary scene in sculpture:
Now images, the past tense of reality, begin to give way to duration, the present tense of immediate spatial experience. Time is in this newer work in a way that it never was in past sculpture...while the art in question gives up none of its knowledgableity or sophistication, it nevertheless opens more than other recent art to a surprising directness of experience. This experience is embedded in the very nature of spatial perception.
Indeed the concepts of presence in space and the present, as a temporal condition cannot be divorced from one another.

But time is present in the work of architecture in other ways as well. To understand and know a space, we must walk within it, and open ourselves to the qualities of light, and darkness, to the sequence of spaces and the transitions between them. This cannot be done immediately. A work of architecture is known only with and through the passage of time.

This temporal aspect is unavoidable in architecture. It is inherent from the very beginning of the act of construction, which takes place over time. The experience of architecture is also one dependent upon time. Never is the object known in its totality, it is ever changing, both through its occupants and through the changing scenery of the city which surrounds it. The changing seasons ans the passing of sun and stars over the site bring about profound change within the architectural object itself.

The most important aspect of time in its relationship to the built work is the ceaseless play of light upon the passive surfaces of the work itself.

Certainly, the Pantheon would be an example of space, in its magnificence, becoming known over time. This time includes both the physical act of circumambulation, the act of gauging the actual space of the building, as well as the temporal path of the sun's rays, in their passage around the structure, through the course of the day.
This passage of time in light is made manifest in the work of Tadao Ando, Louis Kahn, Le Corbusier and others. For an architect to address the passage of time as light is not an easy task, it requires a highly developed sensitivity to materials, forms, and their relationship to the passing of the sun and moon. A good example of such an awareness can be seen in a series of photographs of the studio in Oyodo, Osaka, by Ando.

Similarly, an almost sublime example of such a sensitivity can be seen in the series of concrete sculptures executed by Donald Judd in Marfa.

The boxes at Marfa lie unobtrusively in groups of three or four, each group slightly different from the others in number, orientation, and grouping. Seen from a great distance, they seem dull, grey, boring. But upon further examination, these boxes come alive in the slow, subtle play of light. The shadow lines cast by the sun are in constant movement across the neutral gray surface of the concrete. This play of light, and its movement over time completes the work of art.

It is not in itself that the work of art is complete, but in the play of light, and its shifting patterns over time, the work is made whole. The work itself is stripped to the point of near nothingness. As mute recepticle of space, time and vision, the works of Judd make a world uniquely present.

The same is true in architecture, which achieves its fullness in time, through successive occupations, passing seasons, and the daily passage of the sun. Architecture, like the boxes at Marfa, is not the some bearer of meaning which lies outside it, but is a neutral, background; the setting within which lives are lived. It is in relationship to life, lived over time, that architecture gains its "meaning."
The city around us is such a device. While its form communicates little in and of itself, the city takes on meaning nonetheless, as the setting within which the drama of our life gets played out.
The New World

A longstanding strain in American culture, both literary and visual, has always contained an aspect of reticence, from the times of the early settlers to the present. Something about the New World required and necessitated new modes of representation, and these modes appeared. With the architecture of the North American continent, we find a simple, orderly presence, stripped of the narrative or rhetoric we find in, for example, an Italian cathedral.

The emptiness ascribed to certain spaces in Houston seems to describe an aspect fundamental to the experience of the American city in general. Indeed, a silence of space, presence and light, has been an inheritance of the American scene. To argue for an architecture which acknowledges these things is not to ask for something new, but to ask for an awareness of what has always been.

A good example of such an architecture which starts at such a juncture can be seen in the simple, austere buildings of the Shakers. Here form is stripped of all ornament, and abstracted to a point of near platonic purity.

This abstraction was a way of allowing for the divine to enter. Images, icons and ornament were seen as stops, as impingements upon the participation of the individual in the divine.
On the interior, the Shaker building, almost completely white, embodies a silence, as well. The complete whiteness and simplicity confers immense importance upon even the slightest objects or movements. This purity echoes the silence sought by shakers and their quaker brethren. This spiritual silence, which was echoed by the sparseness of the interior, is described by many a quaker author:

I found myself one of a small company of silent worshipers, who were content to sit down together without words, that each one might feel after and draw near to the divine Presence, unhindered at least, if not helped, by any human utterance. Utterance I knew was free, should the words be given; and before the meeting was over, a sentence or two were uttered in great simplicity by and an old and apparently untaught man, rising in this place amongst the rest of us. I did not pay much attention to the words he spoke, and I have no recollection of their purport. My whole soul was filled with the unutterable peace of the undisturbed opportunity for communion with God, with the sense that at last I had found a place where I might, without the faintest suspicion of insincerity, join with others in simply seeking his presence. To sit down in silence could at the least pledge me to nothing; it might open to me (as it did that morning) the very gate of heaven.

At the scale of the American landscape, and the American city, this silence can be seen, but it is often made most visible through representations of the city and the landscape other than those found in architecture. While the architecture and planning of America often takes on neutral characteristics, depictions of America, in painting and literature, often make this silence more explicit.

The roots of this American aesthetic are deep, and tie them to conditions which transcend the time and place we call late twentieth century Houston.
The traces of this aesthetic can be found in a multiplicity of sources, from old speeches and descriptions, to the post-modern short story. In particular, however, this way of thinking is evidenced in the visual arts. Though it is not the only visual heritage to which Americans can point, it has to some extent been neglected by architects, and could bear fruit, architecturally, should we give it the recognition I believe it deserves.

See, for instance, J. A. Ward, American Silences.

With a basis in simple, direct expression, certain artists and writers have sought to deal with the silence engendered by the vast space described above. The relationship has been evinced most prevalently in a predilection for the landscape genre. This silence is not to be mistaken for nihilism or any kind of sinister view of the world. Silence reveals a world which exists in its fullness, and whose substance is primarily beyond the scope of language.

An early example of this aesthetic can be seen in the winter landscapes of John Twachtman. A mystic, who dabbled in buddhism, transcendentalism, and unitarianism, Twachtman sought a purity of expression in his landscapes similar to that he so admired in the Japanese Zen paintings he collected. His winter landscapes make this evident with their vast expanses of white, which almost seem to prefigure the work of some of minimalist painters, like Agnes Martin, and Robert Ryman.
An investigation into the American scene could lead to a conclusion based upon the cacophony of sounds and images which assault us every day. Underlying the babble, however, lies a numbness which is stultifying. The paintings and silk-screens of Warhol, despite their color and their fanfare, remain the products of an icily cold distance. After repeated viewings, one is not enthralled by glamour and glitz, but one is made painfully aware of the emptiness and mortality which lie just beneath their surface.

The most supreme chronicler of American silence, was Edward Hopper. In his work, all sense of significant gesture or action has been eliminated.

In Hopper's work, we become aware of a chasm in the normally transparent relationship between vision and desire. Desire, so often objectified by the process of vision, is explicitly denied in Hopper's work. Often, this is brought about through the difficult relationship between viewer and viewed.

The interior, so often depicted as the locus of significant human action, is seen as blank, mute, unable to provide the psychic respite asked of it. In Sun in an Empty Room, for example, which furniture, figures, drapery, any kind of form or value has now disappeared. All we see are the walls, the window, some highly abstracted trees outside, and sunlight. As viewers, we are left with nothing, or next to nothing. All we have is the silent pattern of light, reflecting off surfaces.

In Hopper's world, an increasing abstraction of forms pulls the world to the limits of signification. Buildings, figures, and objects are depicted in a wash of light, simplifying and stultifying them. The poignancy of his paintings lies not in their abstract qualities, but in their realism. This is the world in which we live, Hopper seems to say, and all we have is the play of light.
Ghosts

In perpetuating an emptiness of the mind and soul, the Quakers speak of a silence through which the divine is made present: The Lord of Heaven and earth we found to be near at hand, and, as we waited upon him in pure silence, our minds out of all things, his heavenly presence appeared in our assemblies, when there was no language, tongue nor speech from any creature.

This silence, rarely dealt with architecturally, can be seen as the territory of the monastery. The monastery grew out of the experience of the desert. The desert experience, often described as an encounter with the holy has many parallels in the American experience, not the least of which has been the encounter with the literal desert of the American Southwest.

Indeed, the American city in general has often been likened to the desert.

The silence and vastness of the desert gave rise to the monastery, just as the silence and vastness of the New World gave rise to cities like Salt Lake City, Las Vegas, and Hollywood.

While it is the tomb and the monument which best express the absolute silence which we all have to face at some time, it is in the monastery that silence, as method is made manifest. In this case silence is not seen as a last ditch, but as a kind of cleansing, and stripping of the ego; in order to draw forth a fullness in the presence of the holy spirit.

In the spaces of silence, chief among them the monastery, it is not a plethora of meaning and symbols which prevails, but life, which gains a fullness, in itself. It is as if to say, life begins where the compromised world of language and symbols ends.
Early Christians, in their desert years, experienced little in terms of sensory stimulation to distract them from their goal, which was knowledge of God. The desert served as perfect venue for their trials and tribulations. The cities we have built are deserts in their own right, if we only knew it, and recognized them as such.

Writers and thinkers of the early twelfth century faced a "crisis of representation" similar to our own, as they faced a mature monastic culture rich in religious imagery and material wealth.

What some monks, chief among them the Cistercians, sought was a return to the ascetic ideals of the early monks of the deserts. Seeking out the harshest woodlands and bogs, far from the distractions of the towns, the Cistercians sought God in these, their own deserts.

The most ardent apologist for a new, more austere aesthetic was the mystic Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. An ascetic abbot and one of the most influential men of his century, Bernard wrote passionately about his cause:

We who have turned aside from society, relinquishing for Christ's sake all the precious and beautiful things in the world, its wondrous light and colour, its sweet sounds and odours, the pleasures of taste and touch, for us all bodily delights are nothing but dung...

Certainly this position seems extreme. Bernard and his followers would turn away in silence from worldly entrapments. The refined monastic life in the richer Benedictine abbeys was seen by the Cistercians as a turning away from the path of poverty and care prescribed in the rule of St. Benedict.
The simplicity and poverty of Cistercian life would eventually find its way into the architecture of the literally hundreds of monasteries they built in the twelfth century. Umberto Eco describes their intentions:

When the medieval mystic turned away from earthly beauty he took refuge in the scriptures and in the contemplative enjoyment of the inner rhythms of a soul in the state of grace.

Some of the best examples of Cistercian architecture can be seen in southern France, in particular, that at Le Thoronet. In these monasteries, we find a deliberate stepping back and stripping down. The building was not to be seen as representational symbol, but as pure presence, brought about through proportion, space, and the loving regard for materials.

At Le Thoronet, space itself becomes the vehicle through which the divine is made uniquely present. By eschewing figurative qualities, walls columns and space become the means by which the divine is made manifest.

In Cistercian architecture, according to Otto von Simson, "the disappearance of the representational arts seems to have cleared the way for an unexcelled purity and perfection of construction and architectural proportion." Proportion, indeed, was the one of the few tools allowed the Cistercian builder. One notices in numerous church plans, the repeated appearance of the 2:1 ratio, for instance.

Von Simson continues, describing the ratios in another abbey, that at Fontenot:

The octave ratio determines the ground plan. Moreover, the bays of the side aisles are of equal length and width, and the same dimension is marked off vertically by a stringcourse. We thus obtain a spatial "cube" in each bay, an aesthetic impression that recalls the "geometrical harmony" of Boethius. The same "cubic" tendency appears in the central nave.
The music of space here described was spoken of most poetically by Louis Kahn:

Space has tonality, and I imagine myself composing a space lofty, vaulted, or under a dome, attributing to it a sound character alternating with the tones of space, narrow and high, with graduating silver, light to darkness.


In preparation for the design of the monastery of Sainte-Marie de La Tourette, Father Couturier sent Le Corbusier to Le Thoronet. Situated on a hillside, the now ruined monastery can be seen as a conscious model for La Tourette. While the formal similarities have been pointed out frequently, a genealogical approach to the forms at La Tourette remains unsatisfactory. Instead, the more general concept of modelling, and transformation, based upon an established series of conventions, seems to have been Le Corbusier's method.

Forty years after the Villa Schwob, another blank wall appears in the work of Le Corbusier. Once again Rowe comments, and his formal analysis is brilliant, however, we never approach an understanding of the intent behind the creation of this obviously very highly considered element.

In describing the project at La Tourette, Le Corbusier explicitly states that silence was a goal of his:

I tried to make a place of meditation, research and prayer for the preaching brothers. The human resonances of this problem guided our work...The brief was to house monks while trying to give them what people of today need more than anything: silence and peace. Monks, in silence, find a place for God. This monastery of rough concrete is a labour of love. You don't talk about it.
The silence alluded to by Le Corbusier, the main purpose of the monastery, is prefigured by the huge blank wall which greets us, upon our first view. Certainly the highly textured concrete of La Tourette can be compared to the limestone of Le Thoronet, but the ends to which it has been put, also recall the Cistercian model. The silent blankness of the West wall recalls a similar muteness, in terms of exterior treatment, at Le Thoronet. Once again, the words of Le Corbusier give us a glimpse of his intentions:

"You don’t talk about it. It is the interior which lives. The essential goes on in the interior.

Once inside the monastery, an awareness of light pervades our experience of the sequence of spaces surrounding the courtyard. The rippling effect of the "ondulatoires" create a rhythm in the space which corresponds to the rhythms of our passage through it.

Once inside the chapel, light once again becomes primary. Here, however, we are not awash in it, as we were in the courtyard, but we find ourselves in a relatively dark space, dramatically lit by a few strategically placed slits in the wall and roof. The chapel at Le Thoronet, once again serves as an interesting comparison, with its incredibly sparse interior, enlivened only by a few small openings.

Furthermore, the light cannons in the side chapel, and the light guns in the sacristy increase the sense of a silent architectural drama of light unfolding over time.

This idea of the model is most apparent in the courtyard, where the cloister is not a cloister in the normal sense of the word, but is a glimpse of nature itself, which exists as a continuous condition both inside and outside the institution.
The courtyard retains the sense of path and enclosure, and nature is brought in, but it is not an idealized nature. Furthermore, we do not occupy this space we merely pass over, or through it. Here types have been transformed into brilliant meditations upon the existential condition of man in the world. This is made most emphatic at the lower levels of the courtyard, in the way in which the building and its walkways are raised above the ground. This strategy, minimizing impact, reinforces a sense of the chasm between man and nature, the gap between words and deeds.

Finally, on the roof, one is allowed the freedom to bask in the light of the sun, and the dance of the primary forms takes on a kind of heroics. Here one begins to see crystallized the kind of absolute, Heideggerian play between Earth, Gods, and Man.

The greatest architects of silence are those whose names we do not know, and it is to them that Kahn defers:

A work is made in the urging sounds of industry, and, when the dust settles, the pyramid, echoing Silence, gives the sun its shadow.

Kahn, quoted by Lobell, in *Silence and Light*, pg.47
The Task at Hand

The question left us then becomes one regarding the means, the vehicle for such an architecture. A territory was originally outlined, from which a long soliloquy on the nature of architecture then digressed.

See, for example some of the studies, following pages.

In that digression a framework became established, providing us with tools with which to foster ideas about architecture in general. More to the point, however, might be to engage the specific issues inherent in a particular site and program. From these specific starting points, a vision of the city can then be formulated.

The vacant lot on the west side of Austin Street, between Dallas and Polk seems to occupy a number of edge conditions. Simply put, the site occupies a position between the skyscrapers of downtown Houston, to its West, and the sea of parking lots lying to the East. More specifically, the glitz of the brassy Four Seasons Hotel, which rises to the North, can be contrasted with the banality of the flopshouse hotels abutting Root Square Park, on the South.

Without words, names, figures or hierarchies to guide the investigation, the analysis, leading up to the design, began as a kind of archaeology, scientifically seeking out the processes at work in the city as it exists.

Because the initial question posed a problem, which dealt with the difficulty of engaging the qualities of this vast, empty territory, the methodology began with a long process of cataloguing, and categorizing the processes inherent on the site, and in the area surrounding it.
Maps were made, reflecting the arrangement of buildings, walls, and fences, and numerous photographs revealed the conditions that brought about a sense of vacancy in the area.

This cataloguing took place on a number of scales and orientations. The program, reflecting this process, and the city, the original focus of the investigation, is a historical museum and library.

The processes of erasure became most apparent in two ways. The first of these was a kind of surface, in which open ended traces remain, in an immensely thin two dimensional plane, either horizontal or vertical, defining space above, or beside it. These spaces remain, in themselves, surprisingly empty. The second process at work was seen as a kind of dematerialized definition of space, through which the thinnest, most transparent members act to define a vast expanse of space. Both of these phenomena retained a vague, indistinct character; a character without name, but which retained number and measure.

It was these qualities that the design sought to engage. The vacant lot, with the back walls of the existing buildings, now exists as a non-site. The desire was to create a space which was occupiable, yet retained an open-ness to the city around it, and made these processes conscious.
This is done by the creation of a large, scaleless wall on the east side of the site. This wall provides spatial definition to the site itself and to the street and the parking lots to the east. It makes the blankness of the parking lots apparent by turning their horizontal orientation upward, and making it conscious.

This wall becomes thickened into an occupiable territory, which becomes the building, which houses the library. To the west, an open, dematerialized frame houses the museum, in which articles of urban life and urban history are suspended. From the courtyard thus created these objects are seen against the backdrop of the wall, and from the library, they are viewed against the backdrop of the downtown skyscrapers.

Similarly, on the ground plane, scores and marks are made, giving a series of open ended traces to the now blank space. The ordering of the project, both in terms of plan and section, is based upon a process of overlapping patterns and rhythms, similar to those evident in the territory abutting the site.
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Ward, J.A.

The reviewers present for the Oral Defense were Mark Linder, Mark Wamble, James Williamson, Judith Wolin, Alan Balfour, Peter Waldman, and the Thesis Committee, William Sherman, Elysabeth Yates-Burns McKee, and Anderson Todd.

Criticism of the project began with a consideration of the density of material on the site, especially on the ground plane. Judith Wolin thought there might be too much stuff, while Peter Waldman wanted more stuff gathered on the site.

Another question dealt with the changing nature of the exhibit space. If the site is always under construction, with the comings and goings of exhibits, how does the architecture change over time? Professor Waldman thought the models and drawings should reflect the constructional process, as a way to make the temporal dimension more apparent in the presentation of the design. James Williamson noted that a more intense investigation of the changing nature of the materials displayed might accomplish this.

Peter Waldman, echoing Louis Kahn's dictum that the creation of Architecture begins with the making of a room, stated that a more intense investigation of the library, and the scale of the individual, as opposed to the museum, which exists at the scale of the city, would be an important thing to consider.

Anderson Todd noted that, with the right balance between more stuff and less stuff being achieved, the necessity of the original wall became less prominent. It could even come down altogether.