INCIDENTAL PLACE: the architecture of claiming space

| an architectural thesis by Steve Cook |
This investigation could not have been realized without the continuous support of my thesis committee. Together, Andrea Swartz (studio professor), Ana de Brea (advisor), and Wes Janz (advisor) maintained a rigorous energy level while encouraging me to embrace each of my countless seemingly unrelated tangents. For their dedication to my interest in architecture, I owe them a great deal of gratitude.
"This architectural thesis is an investigation that does not attempt to invent, redefine, nor discover "the new"—it is rather an inquiry into what is already present; the dynamic forces that people respond to, the events that people create, and the places that contain them. This study simply attempts to add clarity to the phenomena of place by looking at a process in which the incidental events can begin to be identified; recognizing the forces to which architects could effectively react."

Steve Cook, architecture student

proc-eess* (n.)
1. (a) progress, advance; (b) something going on
2. (a) (1): a natural phenomenon marked by gradual changes that lead toward a particular result; (2): a natural continuing activity or function; (b) a series of actions or operations conducing to an end; especially a continuous operation or treatment especially in manufacture
3. (a) the whole course of in a legal action; (b) the summons, mandate, or writ used by a court to compel the appearance of the defendant in a legal action or compliance with its orders
4. a prominent or projecting part of an organism or organic structure

e-vent* (n.)
1. (a) outcome (b) the final outcome or determination of a legal action (c) a postulated outcome, condition, or eventuality
2. (a) something that happens, occurrence (b) a noteworthy happening (c) a social occasion or activity
3. any of the contests in a program of sports
4. the fundamental entity of observed physical reality represented by a point designated by three coordinates of place and one of time in the space-time continuum postulated by the theory of relativity
5. a subset of the possible outcomes of an experiment

phe-nom-e-non* (n.)
1. an observable fact or event
2. (a) an object or aspect known through the senses rather than by thought or intuition (b) a temporal or spatio-temporal object of sensory experience as distinguished from a noumenon (c) a fact or event of scientific interest susceptible of scientific description and explanation
3. (a) a rare or significant fac or event (b) an exceptional, unusual, or abnormal person, thing, or occurrence

in-cid-en-tal* (adj.)
1. being likely to ensue as a chance or minor consequence
2. occurring merely by chance or without intention or calculation

place* (n.)
1. (a) physical environment space (b) a way for admission or transit (c) physical surroundings; atmosphere
2. (a) an indefinite region or expanse (b) a building or locality used for a special purpose
3. (a) a particular region, center of population, or location (b) a building, part of a building, or area occupied as a home
4. (a) particular part of a surface or body; spot
5. (a) a proper or designated niche (b) an appropriate moment or point
6. (a) an available seat or accommodation (b) an empty or vacated position

*selected definitions from Merriam-Webster's Dictionary
"Architecture's best kept secret is that it is not only knowledge of form, but also a form of knowledge."

Bernard Tschumi, architect

The thought of studying anything incidental almost negates any investigation dealing with such phenomena because any observation would seem to eliminate the minor or accidental qualities that distinguishes them as incidental. Is this the reason why the phenomena of Incidental place has been avoided by architects and urban designers even though they themselves have identified that the character of cities is not entirely defined by its architecture?

"Most of the sense or feeling about a city comes from incidental things that just happen—seemingly without intention, but with far more impact than most of the architecture to which these things are incidental."

Stuart Pertz, architect
"In the living city all are important. The triviality of lighting a cigarette, or the hard fact of moving two million commuters a day are both facets of the shared experience of the city. So far, no other form of environment has been devised that produces the same quality of experience shared by so many minds and interests."

Archigram, architects & writers

"Place is not a ground, keeping faith with certain images; nor is it the strength of the topography or of archeological memory. Place is, rather, a conjectural foundation, a ritual of and in time, capable of fixing a point of particular intensity in the universal chaos of our metropolitan civilization."

Ignasi de Sola-Morales, architectural critic

The everyday event is somehow capable of capturing a character and able to locate it in not only a geographic location, but also in time. The desire of many architectural projects, to build something of importance, or to design a place where you feel as if you have arrived somewhere, is thrown off course because Place is not necessarily found in the historic ordering systems, rational forms, or local materials that many designers rely upon. Place is essentially anywhere, but once found, it is no longer anywhere at all—it is right here.
“Mapping is a fantastic cultural project, creating and building the world as much as measuring and describing it.”

James Corner, landscape architect

Cartography dates back prior to the Ancient Greek Civilizations; mappings of the gods, stars, oceans, and lands were charted time and time again, attempting to uncover relationships that had gone unseen or unimagined. Yet the majority of modern maps are confident in their data, focusing only on what can be quantified.

“Mapping unfolds potential; it remakes territory over and over again, each time with new and diverse consequences. Not all maps accomplish this, however, some simply reproduce what is already known. These are more ‘tracings’ than maps, delineating patterns but revealing nothing new.”

James Corner, landscape architect
"The more detailed and life-like the map strives to be, the more redundant or unnecessary it becomes."
James Corner, landscape architect

Jorge Luis Borges tells of a full scale map, one that is exquisitely detailed and is placed over the land in which it represents. This map eventually begins to show signs of age and tears, revealing the ground beneath. Although a masterpiece of detail, the map is inferior to that which already exists. The role of mapping then becomes the process of finding what is already there; discovering relationships that may seem arbitrary, but because they have been experienced, the newly uncovered relationships are not arbitrary at all. In fact, they are just as relevant as any reading of wind speed or elevation change.

"Surely it is the supreme illusion to defer to architects, urbanists, or planners as being experts or ultimate authorities in matters relation to space."
Henri Lefebvre, philosopher
"It isn't just the corporate environs but all the cracks, sidewalk bumps, simple curbs, abandoned shopping carts, bent signposts to grind up and over, the handrails and handicapped ramps that lead up to them. The developed world is a vast man-made skatepark waiting for a worldwide population of astute urban surveyors."

Jocko Weyland, writer, photographer, & skateboarder

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Skateboarding's relationship with the city begins to embody the concepts of Place through a mapping experience. Skateboarders constantly search the city for potentials; mapping existing terrain with seemingly unrelated forces, such as security, weather conditions, hours of operation, and vehicular traffic, in order to exploit the city on their own terms—claiming these potentials as their own Places. Through skateboarding, new and distinctive relationships, beyond the originals, become apparent and allow something as unique as skateboarding to occur.
"Through surf-related moves, skaters recombine body, board, and terrain, simultaneously copying one activity (surfing) while initiating a second (skateboarding). The modernist space of suburbia was found, adapted, and reconceived as another kind of space, as a concrete wave."

Iain Borden, architect

Skateboarding never seems to be concerned with its own history, almost to the point that when the next step is taken, skaters are immediately looking to the next step that follows. This attitude fosters and drives the quest for finding and unfolding opportunities within their environment. Their reappropriation of space rivals some of the most ambitious architectural projects—simply by riding a skateboard. The skateboarder-architect has thousands of unknown materials, relationships, and opportunities to uncover—there is so much out there that has to be seen.

"Everything is Architecture"

Le Corbusier
“Architecture is an activist endeavor.”

Dan Pitera, architect
When a missed opportunity is discovered, it is up to the architect to reconnect people with the lost piece of their environment.
The floatation device danced with the movement of the fountain's water, tempting those around to touch the metal plate, feel the water's temperature, or at least look at the fountain.
"When its raining on Oxford Street, the architecture is no more important than the rain, in fact the weather has probably more to do with the pulsation of the living city at a moment in time."

Archigram, architects & writers
The shortcut to Walnut Street in Muncie, Indiana, is not "just an alley." The inconsistent brickwork, hap-hazard wiring, rigged safety lighting, protruding exhaust fans/vents, bolted delivery doors, cleaned off and newly applied graffiti; all come a little closer to the pedestrian in this narrow place. The shoveled and salted path pushes the elements onto the pedestrian even further by encouraging them to walk a slightly different path—to see the real city.
The obstacle explores the patterns of usage for the alley shortcut; attempting to take the path away; to alter the pedestrians' perception of this place. Cautious, accommodated, disregarded—never obeyed. It was even borrowed by the local contractor and returned for its "intended" purpose—an obstacle to some and a tool to others.
The shoveled and salted path was returned to in order to explore the interaction between (1) pedestrian and pedestrian and (2) pedestrian and building user—revealing patterns and opportunities.
“Over 4,000 pictures of the same place; the corner of 3rd street and 7th avenue at eight o’clock in the morning; 4,000 straight days in all kinds of weather... it’s just one little part of the world, but things take place there too. Just like everywhere else—it’s a record of my little spot... You’ve got your bright mornings and dark mornings, you’ve got your summer light and your autumn light, you’ve got your weekdays and your weekends, you’ve got your people in overcoats and goulashes and you’ve got your people in t-shirts and shorts. Sometimes the same people, and sometimes different ones; sometimes the different ones become the same, and the same ones disappear... slow down now, that’s what I recommend.”

Paul Auster, writer
Zoom Study 2003
Drawings: Author

UNFOLD RELATIONSHIPS: Texture, Pattern, Boundary, Enclosure...
UNFOLD RELATIONSHIPS: Approach, Terrain, View, Sound...
UNFOLD RELATIONSHIPS: Texture, Pattern, Boundary, Enclosure...
UNFOLD RELATIONSHIPS: Texture, Color, Composition, Form...
The everyday shipping pallet has beautiful architectonic qualities: the mass and stability of concrete and the transparency and variety of crystal. "Borrowing" 77 pallets from a nearby grocery store requires 6 trips in a '93 Oldsmobile Bravada and a '99 Toyota Tacoma.
REVEAL RELATIONSHIPS: sound, light, texture, balance...
REVEAL RELATIONSHIPS: sound, opacity, path, view...
REVEAL RELATIONSHIPS: enclosure, use, path, sound...
"If you look back in history at all these attempts to produce works of art, of architecture, of literature, it's always a struggle with the physical givens of our 'condition humaine', a struggle to transcend them, to reach something else, and ultimately to understand the world, to understand who and what we are. Architecture is as much about immaterials as about materials—it deals with the paradox of our physical world.

Jacques Herzog, architect