

Chapter 5

Explorations...

It's really a park with emptiness below. There's nothing like it.

It brings the atmosphere down beneath the Earth.

Nancy Holt, New York City artist, referring to the McMillan site (Leccese, 56)

Carl Andre's metal floor pieces began to seem to me powerful metaphors for gardens: all flat ground plane and almost no third dimension, yet completely controlling the character and nature of the "empty" space above.

Peter Walker (Levy and Walker 1997, 21)

If the terrace is essentially a level, limited, and dry deck, the subsoil is, by contrast, unlimited and wet, or at least, moist. This recognizes a vertical antinomy between what is dry above and wet below the level of constructed topography, an antinomy that has had great force and amplitude in the history of ideas about the nature of built sites.

David Leatherbarrow (Leatherbarrow, 172)

After the initial visit to the site, the author returned several times during the following months. Just as Olmsted did nearly a century before, he would stand at the northern end and look south, across the vast filter bed plain, neatly punctured with its grid of manholes, guarded by its two rows of towering sentinels. During these visits, the author came to realize that, yes, he was looking at an essentially flat twenty-five acre landscape but he was also looking at the roof of a twenty-five acre building, an abandoned twenty-five acres of industrial machinery. Recalling the filter cells beneath the surface, the site became like a sardine can, whereby peeling the lid back revealed its contents. Once exposed, the underground cells, their columns, the manholes, the cell walls, together with the sand bin towers and service courts would provide clues for developing new design strategies.

During a quiet solo visit to the site in the spring, the author stood at the very center of the site, on the roof of the "building," above the now long dormant "machine." The traffic noises so encroaching at the site's edges were no longer audible. The vastness of the site was apparent. A wind was blowing, the silence only disturbed by the squeaking hinges of a broken filter cell door in one of the service courts.

You stand there at night, you don't see anything.

The sound comes to you and there's a beautiful story in it.

Foxhunter listening to the sound of the dogs, New Jersey Pinelands
(Hufford 1996) (from Potteiger and Purlington)

The story of the place, the layers of history, did come: The men who toiled in the cells below for much of a century. The remarkable feat of the engineers and workers who constructed the reservoir and sand filtration facility, an early use of both non-reinforced and reinforced concrete. The farmers who developed the land before the boundaries of a new District of Columbia even reached it. The Native Americans who roamed the area and the early settlers who followed them. Even the prehistoric animals about which one regular participant in the 2000 community meetings often spoke.



5.1 Carl Andre: 48 Roaring Forties, 1988



5.2 Carl Andre: Installation View, 1990



5.3 The Site: a sardine can