Notes on Emptiness
Gary Paige

[Image: richter_clouds.tif]

Horror Vacui
Prominent among the dualisms that shape current architectural discourse is the primacy of objects over space, fullness over emptiness, gesture and expression over atmosphere and phenomena. This notion can undoubtedly be traced back to Aristotle’s theory of *horror vacui*: nature abhors empty space.

Boundlessness
Kant offers another view in *The Critique of Judgment* (1790). He states that whereas “the Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries, the Sublime is to be found in a *formless object*, which consists in having no boundaries, so far as in it, or by occasion of it, boundlessness is represented.”

[Image: baltz.tif]

Terrain Vague
Recently, the Spanish architect and critic Ignasi de Solà-Morales adopted the term *terrain vague* from the French to describe an urban landscape that’s vacant, empty, unoccupied, and vague. He writes in an essay of the same title: “Unincorporated margins, interior islands void of activity, oversights, these areas are simply *un-inhabited, un-safe, un-productive*. In short, they are foreign to the urban system, mentally exterior in the physical interior of the city, its negative image, as much as a critique as a possible alternative.”

Today, sprawl, extension, and sidelong glances are familiar features of the built environment. Freeways and vast parking lots, corporate office complexes and industrial parks, big-box retail stores and shopping malls, subdivisions and gated communities are all spaces that inhabit the margins or periphery of architectural discourse, yet, in many respects constitute the defining or emergent “order” of the contemporary city. Space has been supplanted by distance and duration; form by formlessness.

[Image: ruscha_pk’g lot.tif]

Formlessness
Formlessness does not refer to an amorphous object or indeterminate urban pattern, nor is it the rejection or absence of form. Rather, formlessness is a
quality of suspension or buoyancy that gives presence to form’s silent other, emptiness. It indicates a shift in one’s focus of attention and habits of perception, from geometry and objects to the material and immaterial qualities of space, atmosphere and phenomena—shadows and reflections instead of objects and things. Aspiring to (or seeking) the void and immaterial in things, formless form works in reverse. Instead of starting with a conceptual nothing (blank sheet, *tabula rasa*, vacant lot) and adding something, formless form begins with something and moves toward nothing—emptiness.

[Image: malevich_blk sq.tif]

**Abstraction**

“As the physical deteriorates, the abstract proliferates, exchanging points of view.”

Michael Heizer

In painting abstraction is generally regarded as having two distinct meanings. The first suggests a distilling of the natural world’s essential elements, while the second one derives from “nonobjective” painting and exists as pure invention. The forms, shapes and colors do not relate to nature but instead are part of an internal logic that is non-referential, non-representational and devoid of illusion.

[Images: Irwin_wyatt_morning.tif; Irwin_wyatt_afternoon.tif]

**Erasure**

As an idea and operation erasure is fundamental to the concept of emptiness. It is, quite literally, an act of removal. Whereas sublimated form making often gives rise to the preeminence of objects in space, erasure dematerializes form and gives primacy to the space of an object. Absence and trace (arguably, another presence) is the residue of these actions. And, although erasure is subtractive by nature and can be perceived as a form of negation, it is not reductive. More often, it’s an affirmation, revealing or creating something previously unseen. Erasure is also a form of editing. Along with cropping and masking, erasure selectively obscures imagery or excises form in order to foreground empty space.

[Image: heizer dbl neg.tif]

**Void**

The advent of Michael Heizer’s “Double Negative” signaled a radical change in sculpture. 240,000 tons of earth was displaced to create space, a void instead of an object at the scale of the Empire State building; where once there was something—matter and stuff, now there was nothing, no-thing, emptiness. Yet,
further scrutiny brings to light a characteristic common to many voids: erasing or subtracting something frequently results in a new thing. Two negatives can make a positive.

Concomitantly, this sculpture offers a compelling if not obvious axiom for architecture: Emptiness is space, and, as a medium and idea, is intrinsic to its ontology. To imagine architecture is to materialize the idea and experience of space.

Recently, architectural theory has become preoccupied with geometry and technique as a subject and end in itself—a set of operations or manipulations that ostensibly result in a “complex” form. For Heizer, however, innovation was not the result of geometrical machinations or technological hyperbole. Quite the opposite, in fact, the figure that he adopted is perhaps the most elemental one, a line inscribed in the landscape, excavated to create a volume that spans a gorge. The technology that he used was surprisingly conventional, too: a bulldozer and dynamite.

[Image: ito_white u.tif]

**Void II**
In a well-known photograph of Toyo Ito’s “White U” residence in Tokyo we see several things: A curved white corridor with the shadow of two figures projected on the wall, a Mackintosh chair, and several light fixtures, two on the floor and one at the ceiling. Taken as a whole, they form an enigmatic and resonant image of architecture as a meditation on emptiness.

The house is unique because like “Double Negative” it signals a shift in the way that we think about and imagine space. The diagram of the house can be read as the combination of two figures, a traditional one, a courtyard, and a contemporary one, a bent tube or “U” (topologically, it could be classified as a punctured torus). From the interior, the curved white walls and sloping ceiling operate as a passage inflecting the occupants towards a destination or center that cannot readily be apprehended. Sporadically, portions of the courtyard volume are revealed through carefully placed apertures yet one is unable to grasp it in its spatial entirety. In fact, the house defies being viewed as an object or seen as a whole. Only upon entering the courtyard do another set of relationships become apparent—that of ground and sky.

The double play or reciprocity between the interiority of the “U” and the courtyard garden give the project its enigmatic quality. In this case, the void is not an excavation or displacement of mass or earth but a result of the “U” topology and the solid, concrete walls. The tube-cum-passage works in conjunction with the courtyard, doubling and affirming emptiness as a passage and vacant center. Finally, the exterior of the building consists of a curved reinforced-concrete wall
and little more—a blank façade to the street and a mute sign for the emptiness that it conceals within.

Blankness
“Blankness is an important quality that is completely ignored, especially by architects. It creates a kind of horror at its emptiness, but it is a very important thing to allow and come to terms with. Our profession is indoctrinated to never allow something to remain empty, or undecided, or undetermined. That goes from the large scale to the small scale.”

Rem Koolhaas
*Conversations with Students*

Contemplating blankness and emptiness might seem counterintuitive or antithetical to any theory of form. However, blankness holds an important role for architecture. Amongst the din and cacophony of the city, blankness is a pause or interval that gives rise to a particular form of lucidity in a landscape otherwise populated with messages, stuff, and “content.”

In this sense, empty space is a blank canvas or receptacle for desire and the possibility of expectation. Like a musical phrase where the intervals or rests are as important as the notes, blankness poses a question about the primacy of form and matter over space: Is form the result of a spatial concept, or, conversely, is space the by-product of a formal proposition?

Incompleteness
Another form of emptiness is incompleteness. Kenya Hara, writing in *Designing Design* describes the advertising concept he proposed for MUJI as “emptiness”. However, the emptiness he’s referring to is not devoid of content or meaning but rather a communicating vessel that becomes meaningful when “viewers freely deposit into it their ideas and wishes.” The same holds true for cinema. Should an ending always resolve and complete the plot or leave some things open and unanswered? Antonioni’s “L'avventura”: What happened to Anna? Incompleteness or openness is both a promise and mode of communication that invites the user to complete it.

Monochrome: Shades of Gray
Gray, grayness, and gray space have been invoked by persons as disparate as the Zen tea master Sen no Rikyu and the painter Gerhard Richter for its capacity...
to be everything and nothing. Gray is either the mixture of black and white or the combination of all other colors—each canceling the other to create the color of no color. For Sen no Rikyu—Rikyu gray as it has become to be called, it was the subtle fusion of four primary and opposing colors: red, blue, yellow and white, resulting in a shade of dark gray-green or gray with a green tint. The historian Masayoshi Nishida writing about Rikyu gray in *Nihon no bi*: “The non-sensual aesthetic sense finds expression in that colourless color of numerous hues which completely cancel each other out—Rikyu gray.”

As a hue and idea, gray is complex: warm, cool, neutral, ambivalent, indifferent, negation, the coexistence of differences. Gerhard Richter has spoken of its neutralizing function and ability to evoke emptiness: “Gray. It makes no statement whatever; it evokes neither feelings nor associations… It has the capacity that no other color has, to make ‘nothing’ visible. To me gray is the welcome and only possible equivalent for indifference, non-commitment, absence of opinion, absence of shape.”

[Image: hopper.tif]

**Immaterial Materiality**

Immaterial materiality is an apparent contradiction in terms. Like a Zen koan, it poses a dilemma or seemingly unanswerable question: How can something be material and immaterial; empty and full? Yet, architecture (and life) is replete with these sorts of contradictions. When an object transcends its material conditions, it can be said to be immaterial. That is to say that the perception of form gives way to that of ephemeral phenomena and space.

**Illustration and Photograph Credits**

Gerhard Richter, “Clouds.”

Lewis Baltz, “South Corner, Parking Area, 23831 El Toro Road, El Toro.”

Edward Ruscha, “Century City, 1800 Avenue of the Stars.”


Michael Heizer, “Double Negative, Construction view, excavation of southwest cut viewed from northeast cut.”
Photograph by: Michael Heizer

Robert Irwin, Installation “One Wall Removed” Morning.
Robert Irwin, Installation “One Wall Removed” Afternoon.
Photographs by: Peter Lake

Hiroshi Sugimoto, “Los Altos Drive-In, Lakewood, 1993.”
From: Kerry Brougher and David Elliot (2005): *Hiroshi Sugimoto*.

Toyo Ito, White U, Nakano-ku, Tokyo; “View of the interior.”
Photograph by: Tomio Ohashi


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