Site and Still Life

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Mario Sironi, City Landscape, 1922-23 ca.
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Abstract

This thesis uses the still life as a medium for investigating architecture and the city. An analogy is established between what the thesis defines as still life and an urban composition (a site in East Cambridge). Through this analogy a specific understanding of architecture, site, and still life is explored. The analogy is used as a descriptive tool allowing the painting subject matter to be treated architecturally and architecture to be treated in a painterly manner. The site is analyzed as a still life to guide operational moves throughout the design exercise and to increase the experience of the site as both subject and object.

Thesis Supervisor: William Porter
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Defining Still Life:

def. still life n, : a picture of inanimate objects. ¹
a collection of objects chosen and arranged to remind the spectator of the transience and uncertainty of life; the objects portrayed have a significance beyond their individual appearance and one heightened by their association.²

This definition can be broken into two things: a picture and inanimate objects. By this definition, a landscape or portrait is not a still life because as subject matter, they are not inanimate, that is, they do not lack the qualities of living things. Both landscapes and portraiture are living subject matter while the objects of the still life are not.
Beyond the fact that the built urban environment is not a biological living organism, conditions intrinsic to the still life can be found in architecture and in cities. This does not refer to the attitude of some modern architects where architecture is a completely autonomous object, set apart from its surroundings to be viewed singularly, separately. Instead this thesis acknowledges that buildings are indeed objects but strives to look beyond formal similarities and delves into the signs of cultural value which the still life conveys. The intimacy of architecture as shelter and container of human life is a similar portrayal of society, value as is conveyed in the objects and portrayal of the still life. Both are linked to the everyday sustaining of human life. Both have materiality and iconology which transcends their function.

Associations beyond appearance are specific to each still life. Each holds its own degree of mystery which lies in any conscious ensemble. The strategy of the still life painter is one, the portrayal of specific objects together and two, their meaning read both individually and en masse. A transparent bottle beyond its depiction within a still life carries the unconscious fact that it is an empty container. As a container, the bottle served use and now remains as a relic. Questions may resonate regarding the container’s past contents and to the means which made it empty.
In the site under consideration in this thesis, the associations of the objects/buildings are multiple: empty factory buildings, former industry, worn-out functions, left-over concrete frames, railroad images, etc. For the architect, it is these nineteenth-century concrete frame structures which precurse the modernist aesthetic. Such factories, as Le Corbusier described in 1931, are the reassuring first fruits of the new age, guided simply by the necessities of an imperative demand. Within the regularity of these rational structures lies the spirit of early mass production and industrial organization. The train tracks bordering the site are too a source of inquiry. In America, the railroad once symbolized progress, the advance of technology, and speed. Today it is almost the opposite. With empty train stations, worn-out switch towers and abandoned plants lying along its wake, the railroad typifies decline and out-moded means.

Bearing this in mind this thesis analyzes a site overlooked by the city, an abandoned factory complex in East Cambridge which is its own inanimate composition. In a time when the excesses and waste of a consumerist post-industrial society have only begun to be addressed, it is in these liminal zones of the city that the potential lies for the production of new public space. Using the remaining structures, fragments of past places and activities, new programs and new pieces can reincorporate the site back to the city fabric.
The Still

Qualities of Still life are generalized to the domain of interior objects and their semantics: belongings, property, value, all read in terms of their capability to communicate. Bryson’s essays on the still life reveal the network of code and language of the still life. In a sort of critical x-ray, Bryson points out, behind the images there stands the culture of artifacts and generalizes all still life pointing into three cultural zones:

1. The still life of the table, of the household interior, of the basic creaturely acts of eating and drinking, of the artifacts which surround the subject in her or his domestic space, of the everyday world of routine and repetition, at a level of existence where events are not at all the large-scale, momentous events of History, but the small-scale, trivial, forgettable acts of bodily survival and self-maintenance; In the realm of the city, the routine and repetition as stated above are suggestive to the industry which support the city. Industrial production at any level may be viewed banal or trivial in the everyday existence of society but undeniably necessary to maintain life at certain levels. Its placement within the city structure is usually peripheral, located well away from the heart of the city, away from the downtown district. While located out of sight, all industry requires direct linkage to the city to maintain its supportive functioning. Deemed unworthy of notice in the reading of the urban appearance of the city, industry often signals the unpleasant reminders of the destructive forces of industry, the forces which inadvertently do connect to everyday life.
the domain of sign systems which code the life of the table and 'low plane reality' through discourses which relate it to other cultural concerns in other domains (for example those of ideology, sexuality, economics, class). Under Bryson's definition of 'low plane reality', those things excluded from higher discourses of culture, when expanded into city architecture could include those things such as factories and power plants. While familiar and recognizable, the image of industry as being vital is marred with association of low income, blue collar workers and sub-standard working conditions. This cultural zone of the still life may be comparative to the social implications of the built environment. Race and class translate themselves formally into economic and social proximics within the city. Utilization of built and historical resources varies from precinct to precinct. Issues of land-use, financing and programming in the development of the city become capitalist lures.

the technology of painting, as a material practice with its own specificities of method, its own developmental series, its own economic constraints and semiotic processes. Architecture is also a material practice with its own means. The specific technologies related to architecture are numerous ranging from air quality to material science. Technology in new architecture is always an indicator of the current conditions of mankind and its means. One example specific to the twentieth century is air conditioning, representing the values and needs of today's society. A specific method within architecture is construction. Construction can be recognized as a signal of economic power. Financial prosperity is reflected in the growth and development of the built environment.
Bryson's acknowledgement can too be said about the city, that, behind the artifact stands the image, the image of the city. Rossi defines the city in terms of the artifacts which make up the city. Rossi explains that buildings often live beyond the function in which they were built and by this default are open, flexible infrastructure which allow and may accommodate new functions. The collective life of the city may extend the life and function of an individual building. As the structure of the city evolves, certain geometries from the past become absorbed into the fabric even after a building or feature which created that geometry has been demolished. Pieces of the past can be “built-in” inherently or must be encouraged with new form or developed by memory and association.

Buildings, as three-dimensional artifacts, are encoded like any object of any society at any given time. To study their arrangement, presentation, and their connection to the city surfaces values which brought them to be, what is concealed, what is sacrificed in order to bring the artifact about. To some urban theorists that evolutionary process must be triggered with what is defined as a catalyst, in which the insertion of a new piece stimulates a cohesive effect on the surrounding environment. Perhaps the way Rossi describes the urban artifact as a work of art is not too different from the way Bryson exposes the messages beyond the common objects of the still life. Both imply a duration, a time specific and infinite, a time which can be looked upon as the structure of the city.

But while Bryson looks at the longevity of forms, reappearing within genre of the still life, Rossi looks at the artifact in dynamic response to the changing city. For Brson the timelessness of a form is rooted in its function as linked to a creaturely act. Rossi shows the example of whole pieces of European cities whose function is no longer the original one, functions independent of form. Conversely Rossi notes, it is precisely the form that impresses us. The original values which do remain in Rossi’s example are those which are spiritual and material.
In a preparatory exercise, Morandi's Natura Morta (right page) is modeled in relief, extracting three-dimensional information from the two-dimensional painting.
Mass and Surface

Painting and architecture both deploy material, texture, and hark the doctrine of Le Corbusier, mass and surface are the elements by which architecture manifests itself.⁹ "A mass is enveloped in its surface, a surface which is divided up according to the directing and generating lines of the mass; and this gives the mass its individuality." Morandi exemplifies the correspondence of sensual material qualities to their arrangement. Rather than only objects in themselves, the vases and bottles read as surfaces. The tight groupings create conditions of occlusion, flattening, layering and blending as the texture of a ceramic cup meets the surface of a glass bottle. Architecture is then on par with the still life holding true to depicting volumetric configuration and the shadow play on those volumes producing texture, color. Cultural value is conveyed through the skin of the object, through the building's skin. Slight changes in the frame and subtle insertion of a single new element allows for different readings. This description of Morandi's still life holds a similar urban condition: It is as if the object becomes its own shadow, and the shadow provided the relationship of light and shade to the objects. His still lifes are inhabited by objects and by ghosts of objects whose volumes disintegrate before our eyes.¹⁰ Morandi's still life disclose the same particulars of Rossi's urban artifact. Both incorporate an element of time which transcends the artifice. Both hold the observable phenomena of form overcoming material.
Frontality

Common to the still life and found within the architecture of the city is the nearness or depth of the containing space. This is a tactile space, at arm’s reach and whose depth is not much greater than the dimensions of the tabletop on which the objects rest. The tactile space of Morandi presents a terminus which guides the retina around. The objects are placed in the center, creating a composition within the overall composition that is impenetrable. The head-on quality, or frontality of the picture plane establishes tension with what is known about three-dimensional space. Tightness of the grouping contrasts with the openness of the surrounds.

This frontality is also present within the city and within the site. In a dense urban condition, perspective is denied and flatness, folding, and juxtapositioning dominate the foreground. Vista is never truly achieved within itself and the tactile space is encompassed within the city block. With this orientation the urban experience is less that of classical perspective and more similar to that of theatrical back-drop.
Juan Gris, Guitare et compotier, 1921.

Pan Sketch of the bathroom in the Maison Guilette. Le Corbusier, 1926.

Purism

Le Corbusier, Nature Morte. verres, carafe, guitar, 1922.

An example of direct interrelations between architecture and still life can be seen in the purists paintings and the villas designed in the 1920s by Le Corbusier. In response to the fragmented imagery of Cubism, the goal of the Purists was to rescue such objets-types from pictorial misrepresentation by accentuating their inherent architectonic qualities. Purist still life painting are thus loaded with architectural references. Plan, Section and Elevation served a more straightforward depiction illuminating the concealed structures of presumably ordinary objects. These objects were not the flowers and fruit of nineteenth century still life paintings but practical utensils, mass-produced and machined-shaped. Hard geometries and superimposed views explained the extruded nature of simple forms. The recognizability of the objects allowed for their abstraction.

Like the Cubist' tilted tabletop, on which the still life is presented, the picture plane of the purist composition is tilted to the point of the architectural axonometric. The required distance to view the purist still life became equal to the distance between the architect and his drawing board. The invisible volumes of the purist still life and the invisible architectural wire frames share the same frontal abstraction of a completely flattened foreground.

In Kurt Forster's article, "Antiquity and Modernity in the La Roche-Jeanneret Houses of 1923", comparison is made between the plastic objects in the pictorial work of the Purists and the curvilinear enclosures in the villa plans of the 1920s. Comparison is made on two levels, the actual geometries and what the geometries are representing. The first is described as the experiential play between the conceptualized space of the rational volume and the curvilinear elements. The simplified curves and bends of guitars, cups, saucers, bottles camouflage all sensual, sexual, figural references. The volumes representing the bodily presence, housing bathrooms, circular stairs, etc. in the floor plans of Le Corbusier consciously function as those figural elements or a figural presence (guitar, wine bottle) in the purist composition. All hold a utility and banality closely associated with the human body and a bodies' needs. The distinction between the gridded, rationalized structure and the presence of organic form is an experience of three-dimensional still life.
The complex is the original site of Boston Woven Hose & Rubber Company, established in 1880. Acquired later by American Biltrite Rubber Company the plant manufactured industrial rubber, plastic products and footwear products up until 1981 when the plant closed and moved its functionings south as a result of “outmoded condition and layout of the multi-story facility”\(^{14}\) The major buildings were built from 1886 to 1915. Among the earliest examples of reinforced concrete in Massachusetts, it is the last such intact complex in Cambridge.\(^ {15}\) The growth of the factory complex reflects changes in industry and mill-style construction of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.\(^ {16}\) The building adjacencies are a result of the processes involved in the manufacturing of rubber. Fireproof concrete frame buildings housed specialty manufacturing; while steel frame and brick buildings housed huge generators and boilers.

East Cambridge circa 1940.
While located well within the Cambridge city fabric, this 12-acre block acts like an island, circumscribed by the roads of access. From 1880 to 1920 the complex occupied a parcel of land bordered by Broadway, Hampshire and Portland Streets, Binney Street, the Boston & Maine Railroad and the Broad Canal. This canal began at the Charles River, stretched along what used to be a dense manufacturing corridor and terminated at the brick boiler house. From the curving avenue of Binney Street which runs almost parallel to the train tracks, the view existing today is unique to the last twenty five years. Having razed acres of industrial buildings sometime in the 70’s what now stands is a section never intended for public view, never intended as facades into the city, but today are indeed just that.
Renamed One Kendall Square in the early eighties, the site was redeveloped for mixed use. In attempts to maintain as many of the existing historical structures as possible, the buildings were renovated and remodeled. Towers and gables were added to make the buildings more commercially appealing and more accepted in the new market of rental space. With these superficial additions giving a strange misreading of the factory complex's history, the site is now occupied with restaurants, retail, office and community services such as Cambridge Community Access Television.

The buildings studied in this thesis have remained untouched from renewal. This is probably due to their difficult location within the heart of the complex. Seen from different angles, these buildings can appear as monolithic or composite. From a car driving down Binney Street, the frame building closest to the train tracks acts like a screen, blending into the frame of the building behind it. Here is where the forms begin to suggest the reading of the complex as layers: frame, void, frame and void. As one follows the curve of the road, the screen building becomes solid and separate, playing with the pyramidal roof structure of the remodeled adjacent building.
their motionlessness is the mark of human absence... the objects take on a value that is nothing to do with their role as nourishment... what replaces their interest as sustenance is their interest as sphere, ellipse, cube organizing pictorial composition in its own sake. 17

Site as Still Life

The site's previous life of factory reflect the everyday functioning, routine and repetition which support industry and in turn supports the city. Like the commonplace articles of the still life, the site's empty frame structures carry in their abandonment an overlooked nature, underutilized quality. Past industry, past building programs having outgrown their usefulness, are now marginalized by the city.

It is the scale and structure of these deserted buildings which make them such a powerful symbol of that time or era which is bygone. In their material construction of brick and concrete, their pronounced cornices, the anthropomorphic suggestion of their tripartite elevation, record their making and reveals them as relics and belonging to past culture. This specific site, its configuration, contains the same objective solidity; buildings become opaque with moods, taking on body and seriousness. Age and neglect convey animisms of decay, life, manufacture and ruin. Its totality is tied to a specific place, event, time and form within the city. Now in peaceful stasis, void of human occupation, the site in this manner is an existing still life.
City as Still Life

The cityscape of Boston at dusk as seen from Cambridge holds the same potential for "still life-like" viewing. Removed by distance, the city is reduced to a solid ensemble of objects, a motionless composition. Light distributes itself evenly, consistently. From this privileged vantage, buildings have the possibility to blend and stick out. Skyscrapers flatten. Towers assert their individuality and merge into their adjacency.

The domes of the skyline play the same role of the pitchers of the still life, both pregnant containers, a figural and perhaps maternal presence. In contrast to their rectangular counterparts and the sky in which they are read against, these convex objects in contrast evoke what Le Corbusier might consider "plastic emotions."

Occupation from this distance is only visual. The human dimension and human functioning must be read into the circumstance. The units of visible measure within the still life which Bryson considers to make the space tactile, are in the view of the city, the window sizes and floor spacings displaying units of body action.

Bryson also describes a characteristic of the still life as being void of direct human presence. In the city, when one considers the daily functioning of a non-residential building, one may conclude habitation occurs the majority of the time. In that small percentage of hours when all the occupants have gone home and the buildings are abandoned, the city takes on a motionless quality. As if asleep, the city has a quiet still life-like property. The paintings of Hopper exploit this condition within the city. Hopper depicts the city as light play on volumes. This produces a gravity which occurs only in the absence of others. Hopper's paintings portray the city as a still setting, a monumentalization of a silent event.
After having studied the site compositionally and metaphorically as an urban still life, the design task becomes a strategy of re-invention. A new reading of the site is necessary to recompose the existing buildings back into the city block and into the urban fabric. This design attitude has two priorities: one, to assemble a new whole out of these remaining parts and two, to express each single part and its new function distinctly.
Ground Floor Plan
Mezzanine Level Plan/Second Floor Plan of Restaurant Building
The ground level is for vehicles: a car drop-off point for the station and theater, a turnaround point and access to parking.
The first priority treats the site as a collective form. The solids and voids of the site, both existing and new, must unify as a total composition. Pragmatically, the empty buildings need to be serviced and accessed. Given the conditions of the site, this is a challenge. Superimposed circulation systems introduce a coherent new order upon the site. Pedestrian bridges and retail "fingers" rake the site binding the four vacant buildings to One Kendall Square and on the other side to a field of open, green space. Vehicles feed into the side, allowing for drop-off, parking and turning around.
The pedestrian level begins at the tilted garden plane and continues through to the already-developed One Kendall Square.

1. Section A - A. Partial Section through Retail Mezzanine
2. Section B - B. Longitudinal Section through Theater, Lobby/ Public Corridor, Office Building with Retail Mezzanine
3. Section C - C. Longitudinal Section through Restaurant Building showing vehicle drop-off point and pedestrian bridge to train platform
4. Section F-F
5. Composite Elevations

The site is also recognized as an ensemble of different objects. The object/building's individual properties of screen, frame or passage is acknowledge and augmented. Edges break away. Ends blend into each other, erasing and opening, revealing their own inherent nature. Interior facades and parti walls form new elevations to interior rooms. Using remainders, existing geometries and structures cue to new functions. Programs are independent but umbilically connected. The objects of the site are brought together and rendered in a way which presents their richness, flexibility, and contribution to urban appearance. Individual buildings become thresholds into the overall site and the city beyond. Through an up-dated narrative, the site presents itself from kinetic and stationary points.
The unsuspected presence and action of theater is placed amidst the features of the site. Small programmatic pieces such as the theater ticket counter act as a filter through the public corridor.
A new mezzanine level connects to the theater lobby level and via pedestrian bridge to the new train platform and to the garden atop of the underground parking.
The public corridor is open, lofty, sharing its space with the theater lobby at the mezzanine and upper levels.

Section D- D. Transverse Section through New T-step, Pedestrian Bridge, Theater, Existing Plaza
The buildings are joined at specific instances. Physical links maintain the building's removed character.
Section A - A. Partial Section through Retail Mezzanine
Section E - E. Transverse Section showing Underground Parking Garage, Pedestrian Bridge from Garden to Restaurant, Bridge to Office/Retail
The look of objects, the skin of things, was replaced by the look of the points, which uniformly and abundantly imposed and dictated their law, favorable to a world of fragments, of scraps and hints. In the recesses and overfolds of the points, the race and imprint of things branch out into ventures, trial runs, in which the acknowledged and unacknowledged communicate, overlap, superimpose, in which the slightest track, the least equivocation in the strokes, in the lines, was stalked and followed out. The forms outline things, lacerate them, fold them over, so that different geometries and equations of the imagination, matched to other realms, may be brought to light.
Restaurant Plan at Mezzanine Level

Restaurant Elevation

Restaurant Section C - C showing new cores

Longitudinal Section through Restaurant Building showing vehicle drop-off point and pedestrian bridge to train platform
Model of night view showing restaurant building as a screen
Composition as described by Bryson is that which invites the eye into a picture by establishing a path of entry, nearby objects and leading to others that recede. Unique moments of greatest shadow, horizon and composure appear within the design. A new formal insertion indicates the gesture of what is beyond the solid and void, responding to the entirely of the site. At all times, viewing and variety of conditions unfold into the whole marking a conscious passing through the site.
Epilogue: The Still Life Exercise

Some of the wine bottles have been gessoed white, others maintain their green translucence. A green shallow bowl is placed on a white tablecloth. The fruits are selected: apples, pears and oranges. The table on which the fruit bowl and wine bottles are placed is located in a corner of white walls. Northern light enters from the side. The wine bottles are positioned to maximize their verticality, the fruit bowl positioned for contrast. The fruit is paired and distributed across the tabletop according to color. The overall arrangement is to appear circumstantial, naturalistic.

Having placed the objects, the next step is to find a composition within the arrangement. A view-finder proportionate to the dimensions of the canvas to be painted on is tried from several different points of view around the still-life. Determining factors are horizon to vertical, foreground to back ground, curved to linear and the distribution of color. Group to isolation, pairing to group,…

Minimizing and restricting color forces a focus on interpretation and abstraction. Color relationships are limited to that of the fruit and its reflections on the white walls, bottles and tablecloth. In the process of representation, color is localized. A specific color is isolated in a specific location. The primary constructs are defined (yellow to red, for example) and the paints are mixed on a white palette. Decisions are made rapidly, sequentially so that form is defined by the aggregation of color and its adjacencies.
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