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Appetite for Destruction: Public Iconography and the Artificial Ruins of SITE, Inc.

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Beginning in the early seventies, the artists and architects of SITE, Inc. staged a series of interventions into the everyday American practice of shopping that confronted some of the most crucial issues of public art. An increasingly contentious discourse in the late sixties and early seventies on the nature and role of public art, was triggered, in part, by various government initiatives to promote and fund public art projects, and focused on the gap between a consumption-driven mass culture and a modernist avant-garde defined in opposition to it. Central to the problem of defining an authentic form of public art was the question of what constituted authenticity in the face of commercialization and mass media. What aspects of contemporary culture were generated by the people, and what were merely debased forms of propaganda imposed by the culture industry? What was the relationship between the two? Did they operate purely in opposition to one another, or was it possible to imagine a more symbiotic negotiation at play, each appropriating, transforming, and providing new material for the other? The avant-garde had long held to the former position, and had argued that art should create a space of resistance to the commercialization of culture, although what form this resistance should take was continually debated. Complicating the issue was the fact that high art, despite its lofty goals and spiritual claims, was itself a commercial product, marketed to a wealthy elite who wished to distinguish themselves from the masses. Furthermore, the general public, for the most part, found little in this avant-garde vision to relate to, recognizing in the aesthetic of high modernism an unwillingness to address the everyday experiences that shaped public life. And while Pop Art addressed these issues with ferocious humor by appropriating the iconography of commercial culture to question the distinction between high art and commercial product, it did not challenge the assumption that the culture of the masses consisted of nothing more than the mindless pursuit of the latest brand-name product.

SITE's projects, like Pop Art, drew upon the iconography of commercial culture and the public ritual of shopping for inspiration, but SITE turned away from the insular world of high art to confront the sticky question of how art should engage the attention of a public audience saturated by commercial spectacle. Should public art strive for pleasurable entertainment or discomfiting challenge? Was it possible to achieve both at once, breaking up mundane routine in order to foster a more critical attitude towards the structures of contemporary life? The members of SITE argued that it was indeed possible to both entertain and challenge, and their work suggested that, in fact, these goals were not as contradictory as the custodians of high culture seemed to believe. Bringing popular culture, social critique, and commercial profit into play with one another, SITE spoke to the growing skepticism of the average American towards consumerism, modernist utopias, and official institutions—including the official institutions of public art and architecture. Yet despite SITE's success in engaging the public imagination—or rather because of it—SITE's projects continue to raise uncomfortable questions about the relationship between culture and consumption, and more specifically about the relationship between the general public and the artist as social critic.

SITE—an acronym for Sculpture in the Environment—was founded in 1970 by James Wines and Alison Sky. They were soon joined by Michelle Stone and Emilio Sousa to form the core of SITE, a group augmented over the years by a fluctuating number of temporary and permanent collaborators. Initially Sousa was the only licensed architect of the group. Wines, with a background in studio art and art history, had worked as a sculptor since 1955 before founding SITE. Stone and Sky also came from a fine-art background, Stone working in design, graphics, photography, and sociology, and Sky active as a poet and sculptor. SITE described itself in the mid-seventies as “a corporation organized to develop site-oriented art for the urban situation.”¹

Wines and Sky met in 1965 and began to convene regularly with a group of like-minded colleagues to discuss new possibilities for the role and form of public art. The group was frustrated by the fact that despite the increased funding for public art through the NEA and corporate sponsorship, the art that appeared in public spaces failed to meet the challenge of creating a new form of public communication. One of SITE's primary goals was to reconceptualize what constituted a public art form, and their primary target was architecture. The potential for architecture to communicate ideas relevant to the public sphere seemed vastly unrealized within the formalist/functionalist paradigm of modernism, which mandated the separation of sculpture and architecture in order to promote the autonomous purity of each. In response to this, Wines argued that “architecture itself should serve as the subject matter or raw material for art,”² resurrecting and reformulating the idea of the building as a vehicle for a symbolically-charged, socially-relevant sculpture program.

SITE's interest in reintegrating sculpture and architecture was sparked by the increasingly prevalent and disappointing sight of the austere Miesian corporate high-rise embellished by equally austere formalist sculpture, plopped down outside the building in a barren plaza. The uninspiring result reflected, in Wines's view, not only an inability to integrate art and architecture, but, on a more general level, an inability to understand the "nature of publicness" itself:

Public art is generally based on the notion that works of private art, conceived for exhibition within four walls, can simply be placed or integrated into architectural contexts. The works are then related to buildings by the mere act of installation. The content of this integration therefore, is in the self-conscious decision to install art—which is to say, it has no content [. . .] But public art is not private art transplanted to a new setting.³

In one of a series of manifesto-like articles, "Notes from a Passing Car," published in *Architectural Forum* in 1973, Wines argued that the official cultural venues for art—presenting artworks as objects of leisurely contemplation—were becoming obsolete: "The relatively small percentage of ambulatory art lovers represents the prolongations of an outmoded ritual process. The real audience is locked in the traffic jam or speeding down the throughway."⁴ Public art, he pointed out, needs to be where the public is on a daily basis, and a work of art needs to be able to communicate its meaning to an audience whizzing by at 60 mph. Wines suggested that rather than removing art from the mundane practice of living, enshrining it in the museum-temple of high culture, artists should seek ways to create meaningful intersections between art and daily routine. Needless to say, such an intersection would not result from merely taking a work from a museum sculpture garden and installing it in a downtown plaza instead. That approach, argued Wines, only succeeded in making explicit the fact that modern art, especially the esoteric language of formalism, tended to be designed by the elite for the elite, and was therefore irrelevant to the public arena.

What most public art of this time lacked was a public iconography, which spoke to general social concerns. These concerns, as Wines identified them, included:

the tension between public and private sensibility, the pressures brought on by technological progress, the overstructuring of people's lives, the apocalypse-or-utopia scenarios of nuclear science, the climate of risk, the changing nature of personal relationships, the pervasiveness of consumer culture, and the neuroses generated by infinite choice.⁵

SITE's first large-scale attempt to create a public iconography to address these issues came with the commission to build a series of showrooms for Best Products, a mail-order company specializing in low-cost general goods for the average household. The owners of Best, Sydney and Francis Lewis, were well known in art-world circles as patrons and collectors, and, like the members of SITE, were interested in formulating a new kind of public art. At the time of the first Best commission in 1972, SITE had been experimenting with a number of possible directions in which to take designs for buildings, plazas, fountains, and other public constructions. While all of SITE's early designs offered an injection of unexpected whimsy into an otherwise generic space, they were eclectic to an extreme degree, lacking the critical focus SITE was to develop with the Best showrooms. The five final designs submitted for SITE's first Best showroom, located in Richmond, Virginia, reflected this initial uncertainty of self-defining direction; the design proposals included a mirrored awning, colorful stripes fusing the parking lot with the building, and a "floating" roof—all in all more decorative and carnivalesque than challenging or unsettling. The Lewises, in deciding upon the *Peeling Project* design, deserve a certain amount of credit for pointing SITE in the direction of the pleurably disturbing artificial ruins and fragmentations that so successfully captured the public's imagination.

The *Peeling Project* was simple in design but powerful in concept. Rather than burying the generic, boxy example of stripmall architecture under jazzy additions, SITE dramatized the disposable, shoddy qualities of such buildings with a brick facade, which, with the help of Sarabond adhesive mortar, appeared to be peeling away from the main structure like old wallpaper. On one level, the work seemed physically impossible, breaking all the rules of construction and materials. But on another level, it casually admitted what the general populace already suspected about modern commercial culture—that behind the dazzling facade of the new and improved was a jury-rigged, decaying, fly-by-night operation. Yet this element of honesty also provoked disbelief—would a commercial organization actually confess such a thing in the public and official context of a showroom? This is, of course, the sort of double-bluff that is common in advertising today, but at the time it addressed the growing cynicism of the public in a way that modern architecture, in its high-minded idealism, refused to do.

SITE continued its subversion of modernist optimism and technological triumph in the series of Best showrooms that followed the *Peeling Project*. The most well known of these, (generating a great deal of controversy and appearing regularly in textbooks) was the *Indeterminate Facade*, built in Houston, Texas, in 1975. [\[Fig 1\]](#) The *Indeterminate Facade* was designed to make the building appear to be, as Wines described it, "arrested somewhere between construction and demolition."⁶ The ragged, irregular top of its facade was embellished with cascading masonry, spilling down from a gap in the facade onto a pedestrian canopy. This canopy was

a flimsy-looking structure supported by a series of spindly columns, heightening both the absurdity of the spectacle, and the tension of entering the space. The arrangement gave the impression of precarious equilibrium after a disastrous collapse. This manufactured sense of danger—diametrically opposed to the image of solid security generated by traditional commercial buildings—echoed the cathartic thrill of the amusement-park ride with its pleasurable confrontation with fear and loss of control.

Although the *Indeterminate Facade*, like the *Peeling Project*, spoke to a general and pervasive condition, and in large part functioned as a statement about the generic non-site of the American strip, it also referred more specifically to the urban conditions of Houston itself—in Wines' words, a "contrary reaction to the ongoing economic and construction boom within the state [. . .] there has been an obsession among local government agencies and planners with newness, sleekness, and outsized scale."⁷ Houston, an unzoned city of dramatically fluctuating fortunes, had undergone a major building boom in the late sixties and early seventies. In the years immediately preceding the building of the *Indeterminate Facade*, downtown Houston had been transformed by a legion of glossy corporate high-rises, standing in symbolic opposition to the city's disorganized urban sprawl. The city's rapid growth combined with its lack of planning attracted a certain amount of attention within the architectural profession as an interesting case study. In a special report in *Architectural Forum* in 1972 (an issue that also included one of Wines's manifestos), William Marlin began his article on Houston by quoting Yeats: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold." He went on to argue that, "*laissez-faire* land use has created commercial strips in disarray. Non-zoning, while permitting expediency, while maneuvering every parcel into its 'proper' use, has also permitted creation of an amorphous city [. . .]."⁸ Houston has always had destabilizing extremes of rich and poor, with an uneasy middle-class trying to establish its territory between the two, and by the mid 1970's, its inhabitants were increasingly concerned with the problems resulting from unchecked growth. The *Indeterminate Facade* made visible these concerns about the negative aspects of growth and progress. The artificial ruin created a pessimistic counter-statement to the optimism embodied by the new downtown high-rises and the other large-scale building projects vying to become symbolic anchors for the amorphous sprawl of the city.⁹ While the monumental high-rise typically seeks to dramatize a particular location by making it visible from miles away, the *Indeterminate Facade*, simultaneously unfinished and decaying, served as a monument to the city as an unfixed process rather than as a static fixture with a symbolically charged center. The fragmented appearance of the showroom encapsulated the disorienting cycle of destruction and construction to which Houstonians were being subjected. It also suggested the inevitable future destruction facing the new high-rises in the name of progress, despite their air of timelessness and technological triumph.

SITE's next showroom for Best, the *Notch Project*—built in Sacramento, California, in 1977—also confronted local anxieties as well as general ones. The building was opened by a wedge-shaped corner piece, fourteen feet high and weighing forty-five tons, sliding out from the main body of the building on a system of rails. When closed, the building appeared whole—except for an ominous fissure familiar to anyone who lives in earthquake country. The Notch Project interjected a note of black humor into the tension of living in sunny California under the threat of sudden disaster.

In the showrooms that followed, SITE continued to emphasize the fragility and ephemerality of buildings. The *Tilt Showroom* (built in 1978 in Towson, Maryland) was particularly humorous, featuring an entire front facade tipped up at an absurd angle. The large building was transformed visually into a child's toy, broken and discarded. The *Cutler Ridge Showroom* (1979, Miami, Florida) was reminiscent of a pop-up picture book; its facade, which appeared to be whole when viewed from the front, was actually pulled out from the building in a series of broken sections. The strong play of light and shadow created by the harsh sunlight of Miami emphasized the surreal quality of the pulled-apart structure.

One of SITE's most interesting projects for Best was the showroom built in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1984. For this showroom, called the *Inside/Outside Building*, the sides of the building were left unfinished, like a cutaway section in an architectural drawing, revealing the heating ducts and the frame of the building. A recessed thermal glass wall served as the actual enclosure, but the display of goods began outside this enclosure in a liminal space neither outside nor inside. The items displayed there were permanently affixed to their shelving and painted the same pale gray of the building, and were thus incorporated into the building design as a sculptural element. Some items straddled the threshold marked by the glass wall and were cut in two, the outside part a pale gray decorative device and the inside part, unpainted, a commodity item. The design subverted the most basic expectation about buildings: that they define an inside space as something distinct from the outside, protecting a separate territory as private property. This expectation is particularly strong with commercial buildings, which serve as vaults to control possession of commodities. In contrast, the *Inside/Outside Building* seemed shockingly vulnerable, as though violently torn open and waiting to be looted. This vulnerability recalls, on the one hand, the language of advertising, which typically presents a store's sale prices as a “steal” or a “sacrifice,” announcing, “everything must go.” But it also brings to mind the riot-torn inner cities from which suburban dwellers fled. At the same time the dust-colored paint used on the items outside the glass wall suggested another, more historical, reading by creating the appearance of an archaeological excavation and presenting the items as mysterious artifacts from a long-forgotten culture. From this perspective, the veil of glass became a curtain dividing past and future,

suggesting two different ways of considering the objects on display—as commodities in economic circulation, or as collected artifacts to be enshrined in a museum.

The impression of sudden disaster provided by these showrooms resonated with another theme common in SITE's work—that of nature consuming human artifice. This concept was first fully realized in the *Best Forest Building* (1980, Richmond, Virginia), which incorporated surrounding trees into the body of the structure. The strikingly beautiful effect of the forest invading and penetrating the showroom was achieved by separating the front section of the building from the main body, leaving an open aisle filled with trees and grasses. Shoppers crossed this aisle by means of a bridge. The effect was reminiscent of a Japanese tea garden, creating a mood of peaceful surrender to nature. The building consumed by nature became a common motif for SITE in the eighties, along with “unfinished” architecture, artificial ruins and archaeological excavations, and theatrical inversions, which defied conventional use-patterns and even, apparently, the laws of physics.

The Best showrooms, which served to define SITE's aesthetic and win them national attention, shared certain important features. All were located in suburban environments, and began with the generic, featureless box so ubiquitous to the commercial strip as a subject in its own right. The showrooms challenged the aesthetics of modern architecture, and at the same time challenged the viewer to reassess his or her relationship to the structure of modern life. Wines described the strategy embodied by the Best showrooms as “de-architecturization,” a process “contingent upon the *idea* of architecture existing as an unqualified hypothesis in the mind of the viewer [. . .] de-architecturization is a subversion or inversion of this routine dogma.”¹⁰ De-architecturization posited architecture as a metaphor or a language rather than a mere formal structure. By violating what the viewer expected from a commercial building, SITE revealed that such buildings function as vehicles for ideas, and are therefore socially coded for meaning.

SITE's interest in the socially-coded building was shared by a growing number of architects and artists. Spearheading this movement was Robert Venturi, whose book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York, 1966), provided much of the theoretical basis for SITE's approach, in particular, the idea that a building functions as an utterance in a dialogue with the society that surrounds it—not as the self-referential, monumental entity of the modernist ideal.

But despite his acknowledgment of Venturi's influence on SITE's ideas, Wines made an important departure from Venturi's theories. While Venturi and his partner, Denise Scott Brown, dismissed the monumental expressionism of “duck design theory”—that is, an approach “where the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic

form”—on the basis that it is “seldom relevant today,”¹¹ Wines argued that the “duck” building possessed great potential for relevant, meaningful and even subversive communication. Venturi and Scott Brown, it is important to note, did not direct their critique towards the actual Big Duck Store in Long Island, New York—first brought into the architectural discourse by Peter Blake's condemnation of urban chaos, *God's Own Junkyard* (New York, 1964)—but offered this kitschy, low-brow structure, shaped like the duck decoys sold from it, as the logical outcome of the form-follows-function dictates of high modernism. In his slightly facetious article, “The Case for the Big Duck,” published in *Architectural Forum* in 1972, Wines argued that there was an important difference between modernist functionalism and the amusing literalism of the Big Duck; the Big Duck challenged the most basic principle of the formalist aesthetic: that it should function self-referentially as pure connotation. Furthermore, the unexpectedness of the Big Duck introduced play and fantasy into the everyday urban experience, subverting the utilitarian “business-as-usual” aesthetic of expediency promoted by most American architecture: “The difference between Form-follows-function and the Duck Design Theory might be compared to the choice between sex exclusively for procreation or sex for enjoyment. Both can produce the same results; but only the latter makes life worth living.”¹²

The Duck Design Theory (D.D.T., as Wines referred to it) presented daily life as a process, not a series of objectives. The unexpected and surrealistic quality of the Duck opened up daily routine to scrutiny, exposing expectations by overturning them. By encouraging people to question what seemed natural and given, the Duck subverted social structure as well as architecture, since the two were closely linked metonymically and metaphorically. By adopting such an approach, SITE sought to establish contact with the average viewer with all the clarity and immediate impact of a compelling advertising campaign. Following the Pop Art tradition, SITE spoke to its audience's secret fears and desires in a humorous and accessible way, using popular themes to address the forbidden wishes of the general public. The violated structures created by SITE catered to what Wines identified as a mass desire for “the purgative power of calamity and ruin,”¹³ a desire evidenced by the increasing popularity during the seventies for disaster films in which technology triggers cataclysm rather than saving the day. The longing for these sorts of spectacles did not rise only out of a morbid fascination with destruction, Wines argued, rather, that, “their fundamental attraction has been to provide a disillusioned generation, weary of political deception and technological folly with a means of vicarious revenge.”¹⁴ SITE responded to this popular desire with an aesthetic of destruction, decay, and incompleteness to counter the “fascism of the omniplan,” as Wines explained:

As a society we are being forced by energy shortages, the inequitable distribution of wealth, and the ethical bankruptcy of most institutions to

trade in our faith in final solutions for a condition of uncertainty and relativity. If there are any monuments left, they are monuments of entropy.¹⁵

By looking to popular films for reference, SITE linked the showrooms to the ephemeral whimsy of mass culture while other postmodern architects were exploring the signifying potential of ancient temple design and other architectural traditions. Yet SITE's work was imbued with historical tradition as well as contemporary relevance; the monuments to entropy that SITE created with the Best showrooms, for all the startling novelty of their presence, resurrected the European tradition of the artificial or anticipated ruin, popular in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although the showrooms have a powerful impact even if one does not know their genealogy, understanding the history of the ruin as a signifier adds to the complexity and philosophical depth of SITE's approach.

The ruin, as literary theorist Philippe Hamon argues, is "a kind of hyperbole of the building, and this despite the fact that it constitutes a sort of reduction." The fascination evoked by the ruin is linked to its incompleteness: "Like any other fragmented object, the ruin calls for acts of semantic completion [. . .]."¹⁶ The ruin functions as an overdetermined and ambiguous presence in the landscape, evoking a plurality of readings by its very nature. Transplanted to late twentieth-century America, the artificial ruin becomes an extreme example of the postmodern fascination with the fragment in all its undeterminable plurality and complexity. The ruin's past cultural significance, I argue, both intensifies its critical presence in postmodern America and adds to its humor.

With the idea of evolutionary progress and revolutionary transformation following the Enlightenment, came an awareness of cultural mortality and a sense of the present continually and irredeemably slipping away into the past. The ruin, in particular the anticipated ruin, represented the darker side of progress, a cultural *memento mori* evoking a meditation on the fall of empires.¹⁷ The ruin also linked human artifact with natural process, in accordance with the nineteenth-century deterministic view of history as an organic and inevitable process. Writing just after the turn of the twentieth century, Georg Simmel suggested that the appeal of the monumental ruin lies in the nature of architecture itself as a balance between "mechanical, inert matter which passively resists pressure, and informing spirituality which pushes upward."¹⁸ With the ruin, "the balance between nature and spirit, which the building manifested, shifts in favor of nature. This shift becomes a cosmic tragedy which, so we feel, makes every ruin an object fused with our nostalgia."¹⁹ Yet this tragedy is resolved by a deeper awareness that "these two world potencies—the striking upward and the sinking downward—are working serenely together as we envisage in their working a picture of purely natural existence."²⁰

Simmel's nineteenth-century attitude, which sought to find an equilibrium between spirit and matter, man and nature, the past and the present, stands in vivid contrast with the spirit of high modernism, with its heroic utopias and totalizing vision. The world represented by modernist architecture rejected the history lessons of the ruin and its melancholy aesthetic, turning away from the organic determinism suggested by the ruin in favor of a self-determined human history and a man-made environment, liberated from the past. The rigid, rational order and machine aesthetic of modernist architecture functioned symbolically to represent, in Venturi's words, "the brave new world of science and technology"²¹—decidedly a world without ruins.

While the optimistic attitude represented by the monumental high-rise—the embodiment of economic expansion and technological triumph—found its resonance in the mood of the general public in the fifties and sixties, it was increasingly out of sync with the public attitude of the seventies. The seventies were a time of second thoughts about progress, technology, and Western values, triggered by Vietnam, the generation gap, Watergate, the energy crisis, and the recession. It was a timely moment for SITE to reintroduce the ruin as a symbol of the dark side of progress and the inescapable forces of nature. It was time for art to become, "both a product and a description of entropy," Wines announced, arguing that, "by insisting that a building stand for conditions of determinacy, structure, and order—a translation of corporate America's values of investment, stability, and profits—twentieth-century architecture has consistently presented a false vision of the contemporary world."²² SITE's projects answered the optimism and phallic glory of the modernist high-rise with the passive and violated body of the ruin, the totality of modernism replaced by fragmentation. The modernist metaphor of the building as an entity that grew logically from inner purposes to outward appearances was appropriated and subverted by SITE's building as a dismembered body, returning to nature through decay—a sight which informed the viewer on an intensely visceral level that modernism was dead.

The pessimistic and somewhat apocalyptic message suggested by SITE's ruins combined with their humor and absurdity to open the work up to a multiplicity of readings. One reviewer observed that, "though the American press has mostly treated the Houston building as a joke, European critics are taking it seriously—too seriously, reading it as a symbol of cultural ruin"²³—a comment that I would argue sets up too much of an opposition between the tragic and the comic aspects of SITE's work. Understanding the past significance of the ruin as a testament to former glory and inevitable decay actually makes SITE's buildings more amusing, and their sardonic critique of modern culture even sharper.

For a ruin to have resonance as a monument, to evoke a sense of tragic drama, it

must bear traces of the lofty ambitions and cultural glory of the society that built it. Hamon points out that in the *Encyclopédie* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “the term *ruin* can only be used to designate ‘palaces, sumptuous tombs, or public monuments.’”²⁴ SITE, however, created anticipated ruins which presented the most banal aspect of everyday life as though it were already viewed nostalgically as part of a glorious Golden Age. The most generic of utilitarian commercial buildings was granted the same historical and symbolic significance as the ruins of an ancient palace, staging an unlikely encounter between poetic melancholy and the expediencies of strip architecture. SITE’s ruins also addressed the issue of location; if, as Charles Moore suggested, the monument “is an object whose function is to mark a *place*, either at that place’s boundary or at its heart,”²⁵ the location of the Best showrooms on the non-place of the strip inverted that aspect of the monumental ruin as well. As the term “urban sprawl” describes, the strip is a zone with neither center nor boundaries, always in a state of flux. Despite this fluid quality, the strip and its surrounding suburbs seem either reliably peaceful or numbingly boring; either way they appear strikingly uneventful. Within this placid environment, SITE’s buildings appeared to testify to some cataclysmic event, evoking a sudden historical awareness of before and after to subvert the soothing, timeless order of the suburban lifestyle.

Like the disaster movies to which Wines compared SITE’s work, the showrooms presented the tragic aspects of monuments in a comic light; the showrooms’ blatant artifice and absurd hyperbole, contrasted with their mundane surroundings, satirized the heroics of modern architecture, revealing the uninspiring ruins they would one day leave behind. SITE’s strategic use of ruins also owed much to Venturi’s observation that the modernist building, with its obsession with the new and its purist representation of timeless order, cannot cope with changes brought about by time and use. SITE’s “ruined” commercial buildings on the one hand provided an unexpected and startling sight—the aged modern building still in use—and on the other hand made visible a basic fact about the modernist aesthetic—its self-induced obsolescence and resulting vulnerability to the passage of time. This message was particularly vivid in the *Indeterminate Facade*, apparently ruined before even achieving completion, and thus denied even its brief moment of static perfection on the threshold of completion and use.

Whether or not SITE’s audience considered these various ways in which the firm’s buildings could be read, the showrooms were a huge success, both as attention-grabbing spectacles and as commercial endeavors. Best Products’ profits increased forty percent with their new showrooms: “These fantasy buildings quickly became places of pilgrimage and business flourished,” *Architectural Review* reported in 1978.²⁶ Nancy Foote, writing for *Artforum*, observed:

SITE’s designs have generally been well received by the public.

According to Ronald Feldman (who hung around one store chatting with customers), even those who don't like the buildings find them a curiosity and bring friends to see them. Those who do like them exhibit considerable civic pride, comparing their store to the other cities' (photos of all projects are displayed in each store) and awarding their own the prize. People gather at the *Notch* showroom in Sacramento each morning and evening to watch the ragged corner chunk open and close.[27](#)

Wines reported that three years after its construction, the *Indeterminate Facade* attracted "more controversy, more critical analysis, and more visitors than ever."[28](#) It was even placed on a registry of monuments to visit in the States, a development Wines called "an ironic fate for the quintessential anti-monument."[29](#)

The ruin, apparently, is a spectacle as irresistible as a car wreck; its exposure of what is typically hidden provides the building with a transgressive, almost obscene edge as seductive as a strip tease. Hamon's theories suggest one reason why SITE's use of the ruin, a "negative punctuation of space,"[30](#) was so successful in generating ongoing discussion and interest: he points out that "readers of a ruin cannot tolerate the (semantic) void and therefore always tend to fill it [. . .] a reading activity that saturates its subject with meaning."[31](#) We can see how this theory would apply to SITE's designs; by encouraging the visitor to construct his or her own narratives, SITE implicated its audience in the drama of its artificial ruins and thus personalized the visitor's relationship with the building. This was, of course, a very effective strategy on a commercial level as well as an artistic one. Hamon's theories also explain why there would be a strong link between the narrative impulse evoked by the ruin and commercial consumption:

Of course, the activities of the ruin's visitors can go beyond merely reading and writing; they will readily pilfer a piece of the building they visit. Thus, by taking a "souvenir" back with them, travelers not only contribute to the erosion brought by time but also to the cohesive structure of his own personal history. The piece of stone brought home by the traveler becomes part of an autobiographical recapitulation or reassessment, which in turn enables the development of a personalized narrative serving a cohesive and configurative function.[32](#)

Clearly, the collecting impulse inspired by the ruin is readily translated into shopping, with the ruin-as-*memento mori*, perhaps triggering hedonistic consumption even more efficiently than an advertising campaign. The *Inside/Outside Building* probably also brought into play what could be called the "museum

giftshop syndrome"; the decorative "artifacts," taken out of economic circulation and displayed as a part of the building—simultaneously vulnerable and inaccessible—created a frustrated desire in the visitor that was soothed by purchasing one of the identical commodities inside the store. It may be that all ruins evoke a similar sense of frustration and loss that is resolved by the collecting of a souvenir, a purchase.

Wines was open about the fact that SITE's work was meant to function as a draw for shoppers, and that his artistic strategy was intended to serve as a commercial strategy as well. He stated:

The Best standard warehouse format is the perfect embodiment of pragmatism and all public reaction to the buildings is based upon anticipation of the contents. In point, the facade may be considered an annoying but necessary impediment between client and merchandise [. . .] the facade is created to appear as tentative as the subconscious reaction of the clientele would probably prefer.[33](#)

The success of SITE's strategies, both artistically and commercially, suggests that there is a close relationship between public art and consumption, a relationship, which for many artists and architects raises disturbing questions. One difficulty with SITE's fusion of socially critical art with commercially viable architecture is that the relationship between the two is unclear and hotly contested. One of SITE's critics suggested that the firm exploited populist issues to commercial ends, serving the interests of the establishment while pretending to subvert the system: "SITE's criticism of modern life and of modern building is devastating and to the point; but it is criticism launched by people who themselves accept the premises of the life they are criticizing."[34](#) Wines countered with the argument that public art is invariably bound up in the system that produces it:

I cannot think of a single example of public art in history which has been authored otherwise because, no matter what the inherent social/political message of the work may be, the fact of receiving patronage in the first place is evidence of an acceptance of the traditions of elitist support from accumulated wealth.[35](#)

While Wines seemed to accept this state of affairs as a given, the Best showrooms raise the question of whether or to what degree the vernacular *is* the commercial, as Venturi once claimed.[36](#) For many Americans, the selection and display of consumer products is a primary means of cultural expression. By transforming the public ritual of shopping into something reminiscent of looting among the ruins of late-capitalist society, SITE demanded a certain degree of self-scrutiny from the

buying public. But the fact that SITE intervened in this ritual in a way that was pleasurable and engaging for the average shopper encouraged an even higher level of consumption. What happens when entertaining (and possibly manipulative) commercial spectacle and social critique meet in a single work? Does the critique subvert the profit-system of the commodity? Or does the commercial spectacle contain and diffuse the transformative possibilities of the social critique, as many theorists claim? It is hard to say whether SITE's work encouraged or exploited the average shopper's increasingly skeptical attitude towards the myths of advertising and fictions of official culture.

The relationship between commercial culture and vernacular iconography is a crucial issue for public art and is closely tied up with the question of what public art should aspire to be. Should public art attempt to provide a non-commercial basis for popular culture, as it has tried to do in the past, or should it accept and celebrate consumer culture as an inseparable part—and perhaps even the basis—of the contemporary American vernacular? By demonstrating that the same building can function as popular spectacle, social critique, intellectual puzzle, and successful commercial endeavor, SITE showed that there are no intrinsic boundaries between these functions any more than there is an intrinsic separation between art and architecture. At the very least, SITE's designs demanded that the general public and the self-appointed custodians of culture confront the complexity of defining public culture, and that, I would argue, is perhaps the most important task of public art.

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For more information on SITE, inc.'s projects and a selection of additional images see the SITE, Inc. website at <<http://siteenviroidesign.com/>> and Jame McCown, "Best Thing Going," *Metropolis Magazine*, April 2003, <http://www.metropolismag.com/html/content_0403/bst/>.

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