

Drawing on a Sense of Place

Balbec, Venice, Florence, within those syllables had gradually accumulated all the longing inspired in me by the places for which they stood... They magnified the idea that I formed of certain points of the earth's surface, making them more special, and in consequence more real.¹

- Marcel Proust

Toponymy – the study of place names – represents the verbal constellation that is displayed on the tormented surface of the universe. Like verbal projectiles, place names are launched by the codified breath of man that is embedded in maps – which serve as emblems for sites – not in the sites themselves.²

- Juan José Saer

What is a location? Moreover, how is a 'sense of place' imbued by a location's name? Addressing the first question, Martin Heidegger asserted that a man-made structure – for him it was a bridge – isn't built in a pre-existing location. Rather, "...a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge... Only things that are locations in this manner allow for spaces."³ For him, it was not a matter of *first* the location, *then* the bridge. Counter-intuitively, a pre-given location is perceived only *after* a structure is experienced in situ. What, then, of a location's name? According to Marcel Proust, place-names work in a similar fashion. Because they permanently absorb the mental image that we have of a location, it's impossible to untangle which comes first – the place or the name. From this "crack" of temporal logic, yet another notion of site springs forth, one Jean Baudrillard called the *simulacrum*. As an illustration, Baudrillard cites Borges' famous tale of cartographers who drew a map so exacting of the Empire, point by point, that it completely redoubled the territory it represented. As the map began to fray, it eventually became one with the location so that the distinction between the physical site and its representation completely collapsed.⁴ No longer was it a question of "afters" coming in advance of "befores." Simply, in Baudrillard's sense of site, a place and its name exist as one.

Enter Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan's *Cabo Nombre* – a large-scale installation about the iconic façade of the main library at the University of California at Irvine (UCI) – that literally *draws* on these contradictions of site.

Location

UCI's groundbreaking was precipitated by the UC Regents Master Plan, a reformist piece of legislation – signed into law by Governor Pat Brown in 1960 – that sought to extend higher education to all Californians regardless of their economic means. To meet this vision, the university's campus was designed by the California architect William Pereira – the research library being 1 of 8 original buildings. Conceived as the heart of the

campus, the library has recently been renamed after Jack Langson, a Newport Beach entrepreneur who gifted a leadership grant in 2003. But at its inception the library held the generic designation “Library Administration Building” until 1974, when it was re-designated by the equally generic name “Main Library.” The unbranded nature of the site underscored Pereira’s *idealism*: a UC campus, centered on a world-class *research library*, penetrated by a surrounding *planned community*. It was a hope for the future that President Johnson conveyed in his remarks at the campus’ inauguration: “Your people have the vision...”⁵

That said, the location the Regents selected for their new campus – Irvine Rancho San Joaquin – was anything *but* generic. Its origins were legendary, beginning in 1864 with the purchase of three Spanish-Mexican land grants south of Los Angeles by James Irvine I, an Irish immigrant of modest roots. By the time of his death in 1886, Irvine I had left his son, James Irvine II, approximately 110,000 acres of land – almost a third of present-day Orange County. James Jr. went on to develop the land agriculturally, eventually incorporating ranch’s holdings as the “Irvine Company” in 1894. In 1947, when James Jr. died, the Company had accrued 88,245 acres of land in Southern California and has since become a real estate empire developing suburban master-planned communities through out central and southern Orange County.

This was the needle that Pereira had to thread between the Irvine Company’s corporate plans and the UC Regents’ reformist ideals. A pragmatic-idealist, Pereira eventually closed the deal with the Irvine Company, who donated 1000 acres to the university in 1959 (selling 500 more for subsidized housing). Five years later, a campus was born. But this is only half the story. The same year, a corporate subsidiary called the “Irvine Industrial Complex” was born, when 2,600 acres of the Ranch was designated for industries landing coveted government contracts to develop missiles, sensors and tracking systems. And so it was that in 1964, under the auspices of the Irvine Company, the arranged marriage of “UCI” and the “Irvine Industrial Complex” came to pass, attesting to the age-old adage: *opposites attract*.

Place Name

Returning to Zinny/Maidagan’s large-scale drawings of Langson Library, why did they call it *Cabo Nombre* – literally “Cape Name” – designating a non-descript piece of land on the southern coast of Argentina? Upon arriving at Cabo Nombre, the Argentine novelist Juan José Saer recounted “...in Tierra del Fuego, we find the quintessential name, one reduced to its minimum expression...that makes the stylized gesture of naming the nameless, leaving aside any internal or external reference, that is Cape Name.”⁶ Like “Library Administration Building,” the designation “Cape Name” is a signifier with no geographic, economic or historical connection to its referent, completely unmotivated by the point on earth it denotes. However, as Roland Barthes once said, *meaning is cunning; drive it away and it gallops back*.⁷ For over time the Library Administration Building’s iconic façade would *become* its de facto place name. As a free-floating signifier in the mass media, the building’s image further detached it from the actual site on which it stood. Paradoxically, this move made the façade indistinguishable,

mythically stood. As such, we again arrive at the peculiar case of Borges's cartographers exacting map of the empire.

Simulacrum

This procession of the Library Administration Building into a simulacrum – a copy with no original – occurred in stages. The library made its televised debut in the 1965 KNBC documentary about the university's dedication ceremony. Entitled *Birth of a Campus*, the program featured William Pereira's voice-over narration of the location under construction, where he relays his design choices and decisions:

*Do we design an organic architecture sculptured to the vast undulating unpopulated treeless landscape? Should our design fit the land that was here before we were here? Our answer...is no. It is no because the University of today is a highly urbanized complex, and in the case of UCI this complex just happened to be in the beginning superimposed over a pastoral landscape. Whether or not there are regrets, the reality is that the pastoral portions of this part of the world are gone.*⁸

Rejecting Frank Lloyd Wright's brand of site-specificity – *buildings made to fit the land before them* – Pereira instead attuned himself to the specificity of post-war growth in suburban America in order to “design plans to satisfy the future.”⁹ But Pereira was equally driven by environmental pragmatism, which means he was no utopian. “All the architecture completely recognizes the fact that we are going to be dealing with sun and glare,” he explained. “And so you see these permanent awnings – *eye shades* – which solve the major part of our problems with this climate.”¹⁰ This was the material base of Pereira's signature architectural motif – the library's pre-cast concrete ‘eye shades’ – that would come to represent “UCI” as an institutional simulacrum across Hollywood's motion picture industry over a decade.

In its earliest years the campus was so stark, so purposely site-less, that it was ripe for filmic appropriation. Subsequently, a collective imaginary was sutured onto Pereira's architectonics. Three films were most notable: *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972), in which enslaved apes storm the Administration Building to overthrow their human rulers, is a clear nod to the surrounding military industrial complex in which the campus was embedded; In *Silent Movie* (1976), a film in which people and places play “themselves” as they've come to be known through cinema, features the campus as a vast hospital complex, where a studio executive rehabilitates after mentally collapsing in response to a corporate take-over; and in *Poltergeist* (1982) the Main Library doubles as a research center for a clairvoyant who exorcises a ghost haunting a middle class family home, a commentary on the historical ghosts that haunt the ubiquitous, timeless Southern California suburbs attempting to bury them. As different as these films were – in genre and in period – the library's utter detachment from the undulating treeless landscape characterized these narratives, as if they belonged to the same simulacral trilogy, a cinematic postmodern parable for Irvine's primal scene.

Symptom

And yet nature is tenacious. Just as we write it off, it resurfaces like a symptom or a hive on the library's iconic façade *in situ*.

It's true, the pre-cast concrete slabs – repeated in an almost military order vis-à-vis the broken line of the surrounding mountain's horizon vista – contrast orthogonal order with the surrounding interrupted immensity, as Pereira had intended. However, this signatory element – the upward soaring eye shades – simultaneously evoke a female morphology, both uterine and test tube, as if nature had turned itself into a serial machine of the identical. The result is an architectonic formlessness, in which dialectical oppositions – urban/rural, culture/nature – are seamlessly undifferentiated, producing what Elias Canetti called a crowd symbol, a collective unit found in nature that doesn't consist of people but are still felt to be crowds. The forest, which Pereira's row of pre-cast concrete certainly evoke, is a quintessential crowd symbol. "Man stands upright like a tree and he inserts himself amongst the other trees," Canetti notes. Since "every single trunk is rooted in the ground...it's resistance is absolute," a perceptual resoluteness that makes the forest a symbol for the army.¹¹ And there it is. If something returns on the Administration Building's façade – something repressed by Pereira's idealist-pragmatic design – it is the uncanny state of Irvine's coterminous landscape upon which the campus was built: the treeless immensity and the military industrial complex.

Horizon

Drawing on UCI's polyvalent landscape, something deeper – a phantom trace – resurfaces in Zinny/Maidagan's *Cabo Nombre*. For the sketched and sewn drawings – all produced by hand – are the artists' attempt to master or *embody* Langson Library. In the process, the mountainous horizon eclipsed by Pereira's library reemerges in the form of a single jagged line, running the length of the 10' x 23' mosaic of drawings that depict the building's pre-cast concrete pillars. Architecturally enveloping the viewer, these drawings present a type of crowd symbol for its viewer. In one direction a forest of lines grow steadily upwards, harmonious and resolute; in the other direction a scar horizontally cuts across the structure that has effaced it. Irvine's idealized campus and the militarized industrial complex are thus fused here in the gestural, linear depiction of the façade, while the immensity of the mountainous horizon makes its revenge upon the building's surface. Meanwhile, this horizon line, this scar, is reiterated in the fabric drawings that wrap the remainder of the gallery. But in this case, the horizon line – a product of sewing one piece of fabric to another – is literally *sutured* into the flattened picture plane as an index of work's own making. And yet, the most direct method of laying down a line, the gesture of sewing one border to another, is perpetually ambiguous, in that this act of suture produces a *physical line* in the picture delineating the sky from the land in-as-much as it collapses the two into a one abstract image.

In either case, be it in the mosaic or fabric drawings, this imaginary horizon line – at once scar and suture, a cut and a connection – reifies an invisible crack in the distinction between then and now, land and building, image and site, idealism and militarism, uterine

and rectilinear, all of which define, simultaneously, this contradictory place (name) called UC Irvine.

¹ Marcel Proust, "Place-Names: The Name," in *Swann's Way*, (New York: Modern Library, 1956), p. 555.

² Juan José Saer, *El Rio Sin Orillas*, p. 110.

³ Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Martin Heidegger Basic Writings*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p 332.

⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science," in *Collected Writings*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 325.

⁵ Lyndon Johnson, "Remarks of the President, University of California, Irvine," Press Release, June 20, 1964.

⁶ Saer, *ibid*.

⁷ Roland Barthes, "That Old Thing Art," (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 202

⁸ *Birth of a Campus*, a KNBC Public Affairs presentation, 1965.

⁹ *William Pereira*, James Steele, ed. (Los Angeles: USC Architectural Guild Press, 2002), p. 22.

¹⁰ *Birth of a Campus*.

¹¹ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1984), p. 84.