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JIM SULLIVAN AND MATTHEW DUNN, CONFERENCE CHAIRS
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Unmaking: Disassembly as a Mode of Inquiry

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One of the greatest challenges in engaging students with the process of making during the design studio is instilling a methodology in which they are acutely aware (and by extension, critical) of the acts with which they are engaged. Making in particular, is initially approached by the student as a means to an end, and their natural tendency is to be mindful as to how the completed project, as they envision it in their minds, compares to the progress of the design objects they are creating during a design projects.

Taking an object apart, however, is an act that embodies the idea of a process whose goal is the gaining of knowledge, rather than an act of creation that results in a functional object. It is, in fact, quite the opposite of this, as it renders a functional object useless. Engaging in the act of *unmaking* is one on which the process itself is the primary focus, and can easily be considered "thinking with ones hands". Like mountain climbers responding "because it is there" to those questioning their pursuit, the act of unmaking can be defended with the response, "to see how it works".

This paper will discuss the role of unmaking as it applies to a student's design process in two ways. The first, as the act of physically taking something apart, will be framed as an important methodology of American sculptor Gordon Matta-Clark. His most influential work involved making large geometric incisions into buildings and removing pieces of them in a very deliberate manner, thereby revealing through the act of dissection. Matta-Clark's work will be shown as the touchstone for a design studio in which the students created a carefully crafted cube of wood and subsequently unmade in a series of methodical operations that reveal the nature of the construction and materiality of the work.

In describing the sequence of projects during this design studio, unmaking will be addressed as a conceptual act visualized through various drawing conventions. Drawing types such as the section and the exploded axonometric show the architectural object transformed by the space of the drawing in such actions as slicing or disassembly. These drawing forms are unique in that their names themselves are verbs that are applied to the subject, not merely a description of where the subject is being viewed from. As applied to this design studio, the drawings were not merely tool for analysis or explanation, but instead they became a map of a process that reflected their actions in the physical world.

Gordon Matta-Clark, Unmaker

The procedural sensibility for the sequence of projects given during this design studio was inspired by a variety of sources, but chief among them was the American sculptor Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1975). Matta-Clark, the son of Chilean surrealist painter Matta, was for a time an architecture student at Cornell University before leaving school to pursue art full time. Matta-Clark's most notable works were the site-specific pieces in which geometric forms were carved from the volumes of abandoned or disused buildings.

In the project Bingo (1975), Matta-Clark drew a nine-square grid of 5' x 9' pieces along the façade of a suburban house in upstate New York and subsequently cut and removed each piece intact, while carefully documenting the entire process. The title of the piece itself framed the work as a game-like procedure carried out within a predetermined boundary and the manner in which the grid was removed placed just as much importance on the pieces as on the form of the removal. The cutting action also revealed the composite nature of architectural construction. Structural beams, plumbing, and wiring were all sliced through and the hidden *poché* of the house, as

well as its means of construction were revealed.

The cuts Matta-Clark made were not merely to create the piece, they were the piece.

The methods with which he presented his work belie a sensibility that the actual embodiment of his art was the act of carrying it out, and any pieces that were displayed were artifacts of process, as opposed to art objects. "I feel my work intimately linked with the process as a form of theater in which both the working activity and the structural changes to and within the building are the performance."¹

Like much "earth art" of the 1970's that occurred outside of the gallery, project documentation became the primary means to experience the temporary or remote work and shifted the focus from object to process. This idea, coupled with the action of deliberately taking something apart, served as the guiding methodology for the design studio that follows.

The Unmaking Studio

This studio took place during the second quarter of the second year of Cal Poly's 5 year BArch program. The curriculum at that time, considered the first year of the program to be a skills-building sequence, and the design experience did not truly start until second year. As such, students entering the class had rather minimal experience with making as a vital part of the design process, and most of the students labored, literally, under the prejudice that design was a linear endeavor.

The structure of the ten week course took the form of a series of seven operations, each building on the previous work. I have long been interested in drawing assignment where many steps of the process take place on one sheet of paper, and the initial idea was that the course would employ a similar strategy, except through the construction and manipulation of a single model.

The entire sequence of projects was entitled "analogous construct", a term making reference to the idea that the architectural model did not merely have to be a means of representation, but a possible instrument of speculation and discovery.

Operation One: Built Site

The first task in the sequence was to create an object that was to serve as the site, both conceptually and literally, for the term's explorations. The students were asked to create a cubic form of approximately 200 square inches made of at least 20 piece of wood, glued in a manner to create a flush exterior. They were also required to leave at least three voids within the volume.

Inevitably, questions arose about what this was going to eventually become, and what kind of intention they should have regarding the seams and joinery of the piece. They were informed to be deliberate, but not overly self-conscious about the joinery, and this step would be the first of many in the process. Most importantly, they were asked to create drawings simultaneous to the act of making, and not in preparation for it. Along with the completed cube, they were required to create an "unfolded" elevation of their site that mapped (a key term here) the joinery and showed all the elevations of the cube placed in relationship to one another as if the cube had been flattened into a single surface. (Fig. 1) This set up a methodology that lasted the duration of the term in which making and drawing were done simultaneously, and each action was to relate to the other in some manner.

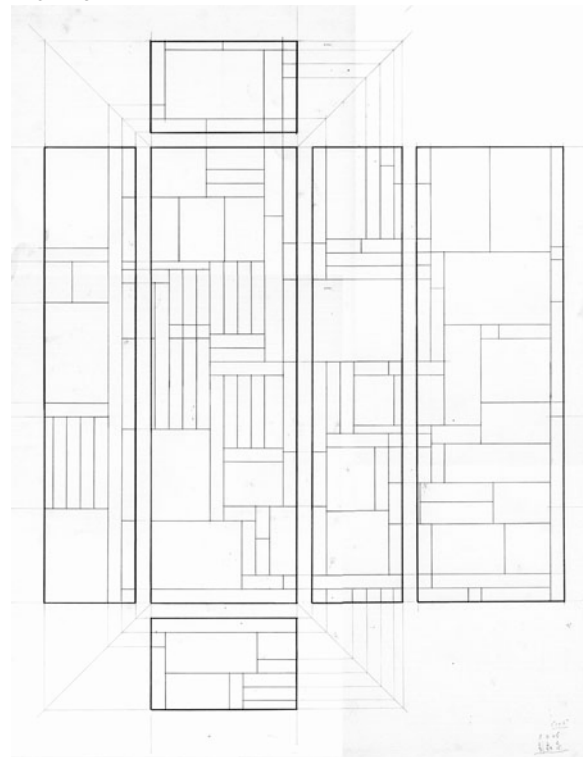


Fig. 1

Operation Two: Site Works

The next task the students were given was to make three excavations into their site. The form of these excavations was to be directed by the regulating lines of the cubes joinery, and the areas of excavation were to be documented as another layer of information on the drawing executed previously.

Two aspects of this operation were of great importance in regards to the sensibility I wanted to convey to the students. First, the drawings for this phase of the project were not carried out on fresh sheets, but rather added to drawings they had already completed. This served to create an attitude that drawings were not objects that were frozen in time upon completion, but rather could be carried out in conjunction with the act of making as an effort to better understand the process and provide a means for more ideation.

The start of manipulations on the cube shared an attitude with the drawings that the product of their process, as carefully crafted as it may be, was not to be a precious object, and most important, one that never necessarily complete. This was the first indication to the class that the design process would not solely move forward (making), but also move backward (unmaking).

Operation Three: Void to Solid

This operation was the first in which work was not carried out directly *on* the site, but rather used information *from* it. The drawing component of the previous operation required the students to carefully measure and draw the voids of their work as if they were actually solid, and now they were to carry this out using plaster. This effectively raised the issue of translation in the design process, as the mere change of material from wood to plaster had a brand new set of potential responses, especially in that the process required the use of formwork. Students quickly picked up that the joint lines of the wood could be inscribed in the formwork, adding another level of information to the plaster pieces (and to the drawings as well, as students were required to draw all formwork as exploded axonometrics on existing drawings).

Students were asked to place aside the plaster pieces and the formwork from this operation

for use later, as a kit-of-parts generated by the making and drawing processes.

Operation Four: Sectioning

Operations so far had been deliberate and almost surgical, so the severity of the next step caused a bit of angst in the class. All of the students were taken to the shop, where they were required to cut their model in half on the band saw, which created a literal section through their work. (Fig. 2)

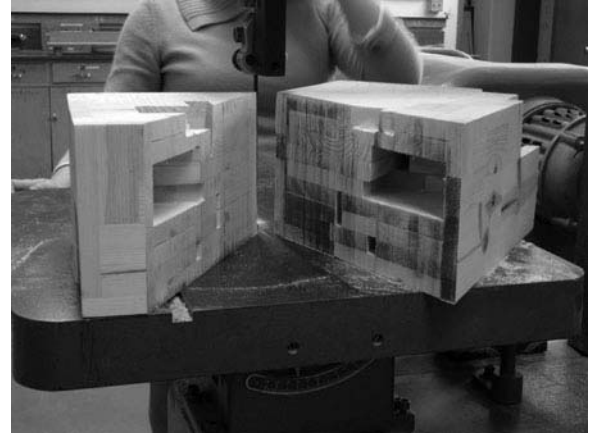


Fig. 2

Pushing through the giddiness that resulted from so quickly and dramatically altering an object that had been the center of so much focus, the students were excited to see that the cuts revealed a section that was completely different than what they had envisioned. What was important here was that a section was something that they had previously experienced only by envisioning it, and this was the first time that they had literally, taken a section through the project. Matta-Clark's words fit into this operation nicely, "The act of cutting through from one space to another produces a certain complexity involving depth perception. Aspects of stratification probably interest me more than unexpected views which are generated by the removals—not the surface, but the thin edge, the severed surface that reveals the autobiographical process of its making."²

Operation Five: Tectonic Re-connection

This step required that the students suture their site back together using mechanical fasteners in a manner that was tectonically expressive. A 2-inch gap was left between the two halves to reveal the cut and allow it to ultimately be occupied, and the introduction of

hardware to the project not only began the process of layering another material onto the work, but emphasized the idea that this object could occupy many scales. Especially important because many students still regarded this as a scale object, although there was no indication that it was.

Operation Six: Aperture

Continuing the idea of site preparation, as well as reinforcing the idea of the model as an instrument for exploring the site and not merely reproducing it, a lens was required to be fixed to the cube, focusing on an area that the student believed would make an appropriate building site. This step, although relatively minor in its affect upon the form of the project, was important in that it introduced the idea that this project was to somehow interact with the body. The aperture was meant to not only serve as a view port into the site, but to act as a mediating element between the viewer and the object.



Fig. 3

Operation Seven: Three Spaces

The remainder of the term was spent developing three spaces on or within the site. Scale was indeterminate and program, as such, was equally vague: a space for looking

up, a space for looking in, a space for looking out. Each of these spaces, as built in or on the site, was to incorporate the plaster pieces and formwork created previously and the location, placement and expansion of form were to remain within the previously established sensibilities.

Conclusion

My intent in designing the projects for the term was to create a long thematic arc in which students would be consistently taken out of their comfort zone and placed within a situation where they could not jump to too many conclusions regarding their project. The process was intended at a fundamental level, to keep them focused on what was in front of them and not fall into a habit where the drawings and models they were creating were solely to illustrate a fully formed idea in their head. The idea of unmaking was the vehicle for this, and provided a mean by which the students could consider their process as something that not only produced an object, but could be studied on its own. One of the students made a comment regarding the process that I found to be incredibly profound: that they were like archeologists digging up artifacts of their own creation in a ruin they designed. Rather than "unmaking" this makes me think of one of Matta-Clark's many word plays: "anarchitecture", a process part structured anarchy and part destructive building.

Notes

¹ Matta-Clark, Gordon. "Gordon Matta-Clark's Building Dissections" " in *Gordon Matta-Clark, Collected Works and Writings* Ediciones Poligrafa: Barcelona. 2006. p 132.

² "'Gordon Matta-Clark's Building Dissections,'" an interview by Donald Wall reprinted from *Arts Magazine*, May 1976" " in *Gordon Matta-Clark* Phaidon Press: London. 2003. p 181.