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Within and Among

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Allied Works Architecture

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Within and Among

Brad Cloepfil
Allied Works Architecture

Architecture begins with a site. As architects we act upon a site and simultaneously, forces of culture and time act upon the buildings we create. Site is the potential of building, the field or range of forces (environmental) and opportunities (experiential) that exist in a place. Sites are physical, topographical, environmental, but they are also cultural and institutional. Where all sites carry the same value, built or un-built, urban or rural—each site holds a specific possibility. Architecture must be cultivated from the site, rising up out of the existing forces.

—Brad Cloepfil, *Occupation*

Occupation

The existing forces embodied by a site are what we commonly refer to as context. An awareness of context implies a relative positioning of the self. I am here, among these buildings, or within this field, at this place in the history of ideas and technology. In acknowledging surroundings as specific, as forged or affected by particular physical or cultural forces, experiences or qualities, you have begun a conversation of context. One that leads to inclusions and exclusions, one that discerns, edits and amplifies. At Allied Works, we consider these responses to context as the fundamental acts of architecture.

I can think of five primary types of response to context:

Narrative—employing prescribed ideas in response to place.

Relational—us versus them, a position of measuring.



Denver landscape. Image: Victoria Sambunaris

Responsive—engaging an existing quality or character.

Aggregate—assimilation of many disparate pieces.

Evocative—poetic response to perception and experience.

Within these types of response—and I'm sure there are many more nuanced distinctions—there are possible acts of making. These are the active

responses that assert a position, an engagement in the conversation of context, and thus orient the potential building while providing the force to hold its ground in a particular context. They are:

Amplification—magnification of qualities and characteristics.

Editing—acts of inclusion and exclusion.

Illuminating—literally casting light on a situation or subject.

Discerning—a more nuanced act of distinction than editing.

As examples of these responses and actions, I present the following four examples of our work as case studies—types of contextual response and the acts of making applied to various sites.



Maryhill Overlook. Image: Sally Schoolmaster

Context as Landscape: Maryhill Overlook

The Maryhill project began with a site on the Columbia River, chosen as a summer studio project I was then teaching at the University of Oregon. The initial context was a narrative position, entitled “The Sitings Project,” which stated that every site generates its own specific response and, subsequently, acts of

building gather their primary will from those responses. Whether urban, rural, forest, or desert, all sites apply a force to making that informs and propels a specific architecture. The simple concrete ribbon of the Overlook was an acknowledgement of the scale of that barren landscape—a primary mark of distinction that created a here and a there, but was also occupy-

able. A place in which to hold and measure yourself against a seemingly infinite landscape.



Context as Building and Memory:

Museum of Arts and Design

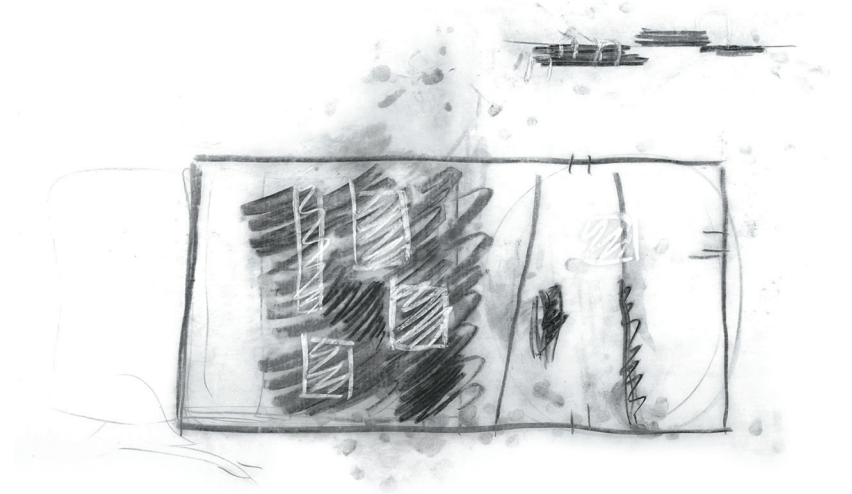
For the Museum of Arts and Design, the context was a moribund nine-story concrete box, clad in crumbling marble—essentially a closed mass, at one of the most important intersections in New York City. In response to this structural context, we created large cantilevers from the existing concrete walls that allowed us to cut into the building. The result was a solid mass broken open by the force of light entering the galleries, simultaneously framing views out into the city and park. It was essentially an act of editing and amplification: removing material to amplify the interior and exterior relationships. The context of memory was powerful on this site. The primary perception of the building for the prior forty years was one of color and contrast—a white building seen in light, from four sides, against a dark masonry city. That perception was propelled forward by our selection of materials, a primarily white glazed tile that changes color with shifts in light, proximity and angle of view.

**Context as Content and Design:
Clyfford Still Museum**

The Clyfford Still Museum began with the work of Clyfford Still and the desire to bring the artist's paintings, long hidden from view, into the light. The physical site was given, a small piece of prairie in the cultural heart of downtown Denver.

We brought the sky to the ground, and into the body of the building, which, with its complex concrete formwork, became the source of light for the

art. Being within the building, also establishes a specific relationship to the work of Clyfford Still. The scale of the spaces, the intervals between galleries, these were all determined in response to the experience of the individual in relationship to Still's paintings. In the end, the building swerves as an amplifier of the context of his work.



Clyfford Still Museum. Image: Jeremy Bitterman

**Context as Mark or Model:
Case Work**

Our forthcoming exhibition, Case Work, features concept models and sketches that embody visceral moments in a visual conversation, where the particular medium—charcoal, pencil, wood, glass, steel—is chosen both for its physical potential and for its elemental material nature. As individual objects, they are acts: made moments. At their best, they represent the potential of an idea—of binding a building to a forest site, of splitting a mass open for light and views, of bridging a park with the surrounding city. Taken together, they are more than cata-

lysts for subsequent inquiry, they are thought explorations in scale—ideas about architecture, experience and making that are the precursors to buildings. In their very abstraction, these works initiate discourse on building and site, public and private space, and the nature of making and structure.

The first charcoal mark on a page begins a conversation of response and reaction to that visual act in real time. It initiates a contextual response to the mark itself—what it communicates, what it portends. The visual exploration, this rich development of a visual context

through iteration, creates a field of perception that is specific to its own particular media. And the choice of material and media is a contextual response to the idea and projected experience. Materiality becomes an evocation of both real and qualitative speculation—the choice of wood splitting open in the Musée Cantonal des beaux-arts du Lausanne, of the bronze landscape braid of the Musée National des beaux-arts du Québec, or of a steel line through the forest in the Dutchess County Estate. Whether sketch or model, these are all complete acts. They present a position in their materiality, scale, and abstraction that anticipates another

response, at a different scale, in a different medium.

Site and Context

The choice of a site, or the potential of “site” in all forms, is the beginning of location. This conception of site evokes open ground and a sense of the possible. Site portends building. Context embodies the given forces acting in and upon a site. Each site holds a specific code of context, to be unlocked through acts of marking and making, ideally forging an architecture that amplifies understanding of our position in the world.





Images: Allied Works Architecture