

de-Camping Detroit: Industrial Desertion and Post-Colonial Abandonment

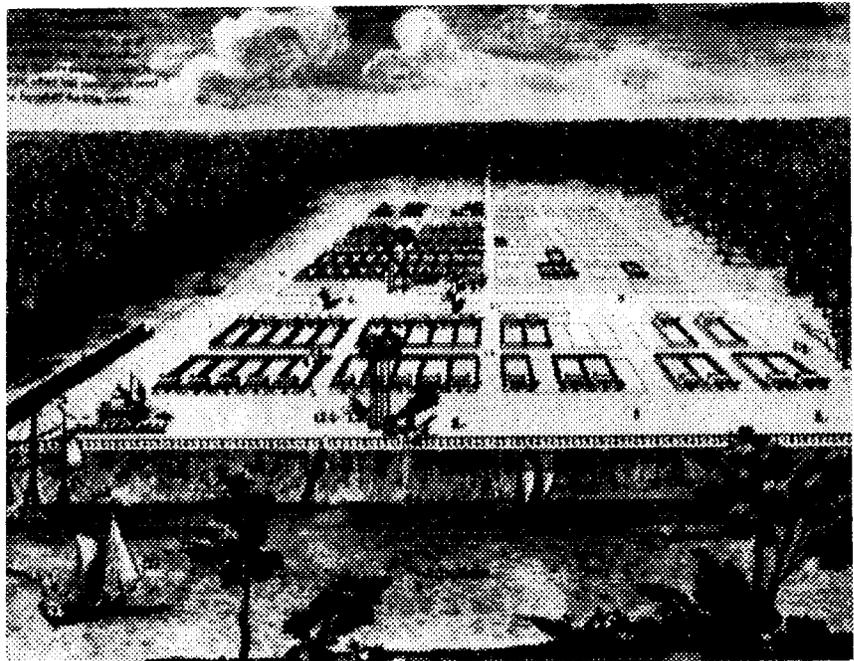
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This image illustrates the ideological conditions of colonial development like no other. Drawn by the cartographer Peter Gordon, its ostensible subject (the clearing, compartmenting, and construction of 18th-century Savannah from the pine marsh of the Georgia colony) could stand for an image of the architectural assumptions of colonization itself. The terms of this colonial projection include the naming and survey of a precinct of land which allow for the vending of property in a series of transactions between colonist and capitalist; colony and capital.

On closer reading, the essentially map-like status of the drawing becomes clear. Intended to be read initially as an aerial view, the painterly conceits of the foreground and sky, failing prolonged inspection, quickly recede in lieu of the plates primary ideational content: the blank whiteness of its newly scrubbed ground.

This ground, as it turns out, provides both a suitable drawing surface and an equally pliable surface for the spatial partitioning of "wilderness." In this sense, the vast sea of pine forest extending to the horizon from which the clearing has been cut exists as an endless, undifferentiated condition of pre-erasure; sufficiently devoid of local specific "situation" so as to provide an ideal condition of pre-developed frontier demanding consumption. Unlike the inevitably palimpsestual ground of the Old World, the Americas are pictured here as an essentially boundless horizontal surface of precinctural possibility. The geometric means by which the map is coerced to coincide with the horizon are the same geometric means by which the projection of colonial power extends to the horizon in the manifest destiny of imperial will.

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are super-



vised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.'

The ostensible purpose of this quasi-military expedition was (and is) the procurement of material and labor; that is to say, the building blocks of industry and capital. Curiously, the military encampment which provides the model for this sort of expeditionary landing site would be virtually indistinguishable from this image with one troubling exception. While the drawing serves nicely as an image of a military encampment either in the process of deployment or withdrawal; it can, in the colonial context, only be read as the first

steps toward an inevitable future (horizontal/horizontal) expansion to the west. In this sense, the military camps an essentially nomadic assemblage while the colonial settlement expects and demands permanence.²

While the encampment can become permanent, its permanence is almost exclusively a function of its temporal utility. Lacking this nomadic conception, the colonial settlement embodies a differing set of assumptions regarding erasure; that is, the settlement will most assuredly be erased, but only to be replaced by its modern improvement in architectural, urban, and industrial terms. In this sense, the Jamestown colony was an unqualified failure, while the equally impermanent military encampments of say, Lewis and Clark, are seen to have operated admirably, albeit temporarily.

Until recently this distinction between "camping" and "settling" has continued to operate along a line of temporal permanence. That is to say, until recently the supposedly permanent settlements of American colonial (read industrial) development have, in fact, been more or less permanent.

In the second half of this century, the industrial conditions of American urban development have given way to such an extent as to suggest the impermanent nature of these settlement ~ Among the many examples of this change, none is more "advanced" in its state of post-industrial development

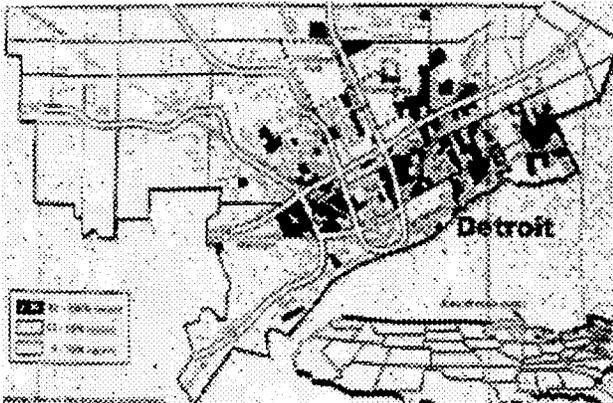


Fig. 2. Detroit Vacant Land Map

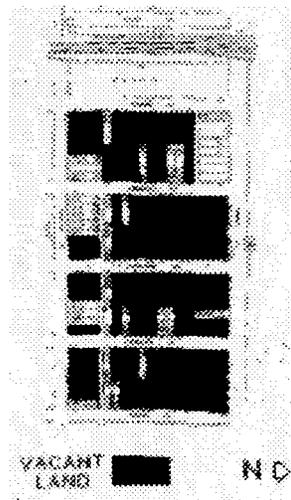


Fig. 3 Detail

than the city of Detroit. More than any other city in the Americas, Detroit has come to embody the essentially temporary conditions of global capital and industrial development. In this sense, Detroit is simply one of a variety of waste-products of the very industrial processes which necessitated its construction. The supposedly permanent settlement, the city, has turned out to be a temporary, provisional deployment; symmetrical with (though of slightly longer utility than) the military encampment.

*Unbuilding has surpassed building as the city's primary architectural activity.*⁴

The architectural discipline, as evidenced by the majority of recent publications, symposia, and projects concerning Detroit has exhibited two responses: alternatively denial and remorse. Both forms of behavior reflect the appropriate response when confronted with the death of a patient. In fact, the architectural and urban professions have clinicalized the body of the dying post-industrial city to the extent that Detroit is conceived as an *urban* failure as though the responsibility for its viability rested with the techniques of settlement that gave rise to its historical development. This is to mis-take effect for cause.

As a product of global capital and industrial development we must take Detroit for what it is; an unqualified success which has advanced to the next stage of its development - an urban by-product of industrial production. Detroit continues to operate as it was designed to, even as it rots.

For architectural thought, the city of Detroit has entered a condition of meaninglessness precisely because it no longer requires the techniques of colonization and development which have become the *modus operandi* of the discipline. Absent the need for these tools, Detroit becomes a "non-site" for architecture in the same sense that the dead body ceases to operate as a "site" for the physician's attention. As the city de-camps, it enters a condition which can not be thought by the discipline as it is presently constructed.

... the dying man falls outside the thinkable, which is identified with what one can do. In leaving the field circumscribed by the possibilities of treatment, it enters a region of meaninglessness ... In our society, the absence of work is non-sense; it is necessary to eliminate it in order for the discourse that tirelessly articulates tasks and constructs the Occidental story of "There's always something to do" to continue. The dying man is the lapse of this discourse.⁵

Not surprisingly, the acknowledgment that Detroit's de-commissioning requires as much thought and labor as did its planning and development comes not from the architectural or urban disciplines but from the city administrators themselves. They, un-fettered by the disciplinary assumptions regarding urban pathology, have been able to think the unthinkable. That is, that the city should be de-colonized. In this sense, Detroit will continue to be the most important site for the development of new urban tactics well into the next

century - tactics of withdrawal, disengagement, and de-campment. Among these activities are the sites of and for contemporary architectural practice.

The city's ombudsman, Marie Farrell-Donaldson, is essentially suggesting that the most blighted bits of the city should be closed down. Residents would be relocated from dying areas to those that still had life in them. The empty houses would be demolished and empty areas fenced off; they would either be landscaped, or allowed to return to 'nature.'⁶

NOTES

- ¹ Foucault, Michel. "Panopticism," *Discipline and Punish*. Vintage Books, 1979. Pg. 197.
- ² Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. "1227: Treatise on Nomadology The War Machine," *A Thousand Plateaus*. Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987. Pg. 368.
- ³ Said, Edward. "Yeats and Decolonization," *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1990. Pg. 70.
- ⁴ Hoffman, Dan. "Un-Making and the Possibility of Critical Work," *On Making*. *Pratt Journal of Architecture*, 1992. Pg. 28.
- ⁵ Certeau, Michel de. "The Unnamable," *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Univ. of California Press, 1984. Pg. 190.
- ⁶ "Day of the Bulldozer," *The Economist*. May 8, 1993.



Fig. 4. Detroit Vacant Land Map