

University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Theodore S. Eisenman

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Art of the Land

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Art of the Land

Sonfist, Smithson put the art in earth.

CONCURRENT SHOWS arrive on the heels of the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA's) recent exhibit, *Groundswell: Constructing the Contemporary Landscape* (see Riprap, *Landscape Architecture*, May 2005). Alan Sonfist's 40th anniversary exhibition, *Time Landscape, Reflection (1965–1978–Present)*, ran at the Paul Rodgers/9W Gallery through September 17, while the Whitney Museum of American Art continues to host a retrospective of Robert Smithson. Best known for his iconic earthwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970) in the Great Salt Lake, Utah, Smithson has never before been the subject of a major retrospective. Collectively, these shows reflect the art establishment's growing awareness of landscape.

What would happen if you planted a sixteenth-century pre-Colonial forest in the heart of Manhattan? In *Time Landscape*, Alan Sonfist set out to answer this question at the bustling intersection of Houston Street and LaGuardia Place in New York City's Greenwich Village. A 40-foot by 220-foot public installation, this forest fragment as objet-d'art was

first proposed to the city in 1965, physically completed in 1978, and given landmark status in 1998. Sonfist aimed to re-create what he called the paved-over "primeval forest" of his South Bronx childhood.

According to exhibit curator Paul Rodgers, Sonfist was an instigator of the influential Earth/Land Art movement of the 1960s. "Like his avant-garde contemporaries, Sonfist helped redefine the very definition of art by moving it out of the formal gallery into nature," says Rodgers. "But unlike Smithson, who used land to make art, Sonfist used art to explore nature."

This reference to Smithson

is timely given the Whitney's comprehensive presentation of his sculptures, photographs, films, and earthworks as well as a largely unknown group of paintings and drawings. This assemblage provides an opportunity to revisit a career cut short by Smithson's death in a plane crash in 1973.

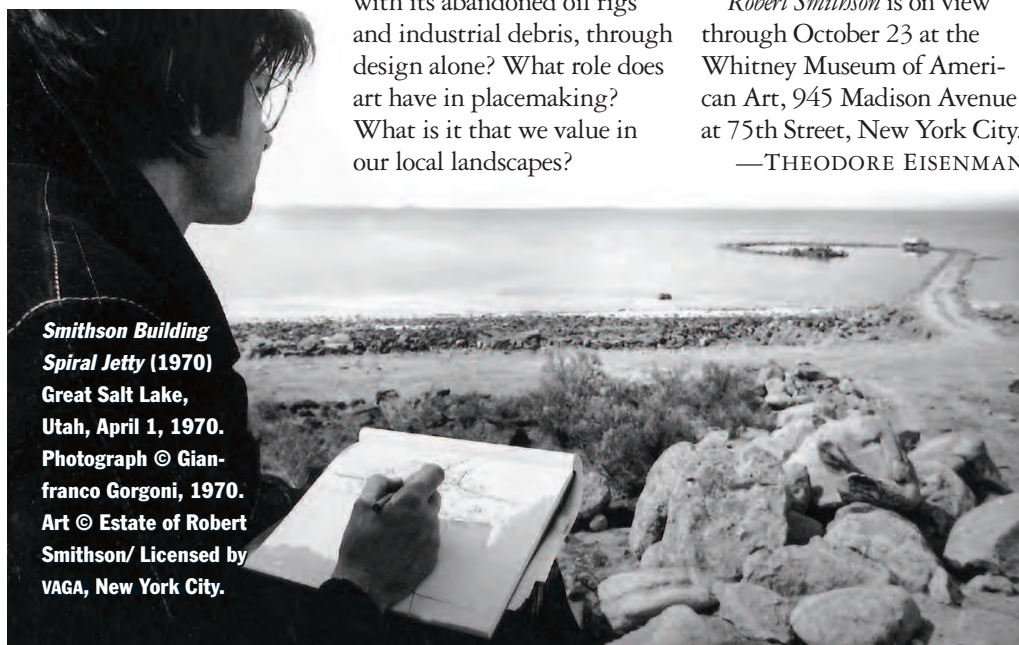
Like *Groundswell*, these exhibits expand our notions of design and encourage critical thinking about our relationship to place. Is *Time Landscape* a desirable urban design typology? How is it that *Spiral Jetty* seemingly transforms the bleak landscape of Utah's Rozel Point, with its abandoned oil rigs and industrial debris, through design alone? What role does art have in placemaking? What is it that we value in our local landscapes?

Above, three canvases form Alan Sonfist's charcoal and acrylic work *Time Landscape: Past, Present, and Future*, © Alan Sonfist, 2005.

Of course, landscape architects are uniquely skilled to address such questions. However, everyone can learn something from these discussions. By highlighting works that interpret and actively shape the relationship between land and people, this sudden outpouring of interest in landscape helps to cultivate a more environmentally literate and design savvy public—a development that should bode well for landscape architects and their profession.

Robert Smithson is on view through October 23 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street, New York City.

—THEODORE EISENMAN



**Smithson Building
Spiral Jetty (1970)
Great Salt Lake,
Utah, April 1, 1970.
Photograph © Gian-
franco Gorgoni, 1970.
Art © Estate of Robert
Smithson/ Licensed by
VAGA, New York City.**

COURTESY WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, BOTTOM; COURTESY PAUL RODGERS/9W GALLERY, TOP