

UNSTRUCTURED

Opinions and Observations



@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz

San Francisco

Through April 26, 2015

For 20 years on the northern end of Alcatraz Island, “privileged” inmates in the nation’s toughest prison toiled on the factory floors of the New Industries Building under the gaze of guards in a raised gun gallery. Today, visitors can peer down from the gallery onto the colorful portraits of more than 175 prisoners of conscience from around the world. Painstakingly assembled by volunteers from more than a million Lego bricks based on instructions from Ai Weiwei’s Beijing studio, this sprawling series of mosaics, titled *Trace*, is just one of seven ambitious site-specific installations by the famed artist and activist.

Currently forbidden from leaving China, Ai has never visited Alcatraz. These installations were developed remotely with the support of the FOR-SITE Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to art about place, in partnership with the National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.

The exhibition explores the theme of freedom in manners that range from the abstract to the

didactic but that are always poignantly calibrated to the built space. A five-ton mechanical wing remains trapped and flightless on the factory floor; a writhing Chinese dragon kite peers out the entrance toward the ocean; ceramic flowers bloom in hospital bathroom fixtures. Individual and isolation cells resonate with sound installations, bringing visitors in touch with the music and voices of the persecuted through visceral encounters with spaces in Alcatraz not normally opened to the public. Finally, in the prison’s dining hall, visitors are invited to write a postcard addressed to one of the prisoners depicted in *Trace*, transforming the prosaic exit activity at many tourist sites into a moment when we are asked to consider our own responses and our place in the world.

LIAN CHIKAKO CHANG ASSOC. AIA works at the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, where she collects, analyzes, and communicates data and information about architectural education.

ABOVE

With Wind, 2014.
Photo: Jan Stürmann/
FOR-SITE Foundation.

5 QUESTIONS

Comfort and joy

Charles A. Birnbaum FASLA is the president and founder of the Washington, DC-based Cultural Landscape Foundation. He spent 15 years with the National Park Service as coordinator of its Historic Landscape Initiative and a decade in the private sector, during which he contributed to the Emerald Necklace Park masterplan from 1984–90.

Are there distinguishing traits about Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Necklace that stand apart from his other designs?

The diversity of the passages of scenery that Olmsted was orchestrating was amplified by the built scenic advantages that the Necklace would pass through. We live in a world where the civic realm is often driven by naming opportunities—museum wings, campus facilities, stadiums, playgrounds, themed gardens. Sometimes these introductions lay lightly on the land; on other occasions they don't take advantage of a site's inherent attributes and values. When Olmsted massaged and melded his design for the Necklace, he created a solution that not only worked in harmony with the site's cultural and ecological systems, but also formed a spinal column from which to organize the city and guide its growth. This sounds like landscape urbanism to me, a century before the term became fashionable.

Is there one perch or spot within those 1,100 acres that resonates profoundly for you?

For me the most bittersweet is the spot [overlooking Jamaica Pond] where the Pinebank Mansion once stood. The first time I arrived at this unrivaled scenic vantage point, I was doing reconnaissance work as part of the masterplan with Patricia O'Donnell, Tony Walmsley, Marion Pressley, and Lydia Lowry in 1984–85. Olmsted clearly intended to take advantage of this panoramic view. I sat amongst the ruins of Pinebank, with its exfoliating terra-cotta tiles and wood. What I would soon learn was that Pinebank was the only pre-existing structure that Olmsted integrated into his design. Here was a happy marriage of a landscape that was at once small and big, rich in its

unrivaled topographic variation, and spoke to the idea that change and continuity under the watchful eye of the landscape architect could be site-specific, practical, and rich in its cultural narrative.

What is your earliest impression of or emotional connection to walking the Necklace's paths and edges?

Doing fieldwork 30 years ago in the Back Bay Fens with clipboard in hand and suddenly realizing that I was not in Kansas anymore—this area, overtaken by invasive phragmites, had become a heavily trafficked gay cruising area. For a sheltered 24-year-old who had not yet come to terms with his own sexuality, this was eye opening.

Can you reflect on its candidacy as a World Heritage Site?

As the first urban greenway in the world, and the progenitor of a typology, it's a worthy candidate. The challenge here is not just the global political climate that goes along with any pursuit for World Heritage recognition, it is also about how locals value their heritage. I often ask,

“Why is it that when Bostonians contribute to the arts—including two Emerald Necklace neighbors: the Gardner Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, which along with the Institute of Contemporary Art have raised \$1 billion dollars over the past decade—that parks like the Necklace, based on giving, are not as successful?”

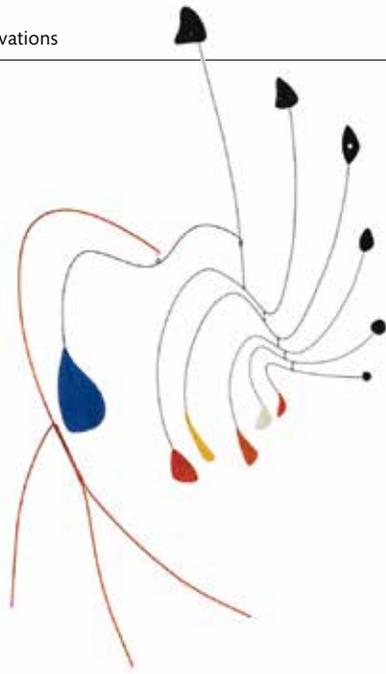
How do you think Olmsted's vision has stood the test of time?

There is a reason there are nearly 200 Olmsted-designed landscapes listed on the National Register of Historic Places, dozens of Olmsted-centric friends groups, more than a dozen biographies, and two documentaries completed over the past few years. Olmsted's legacy has been made visible to millions who live, work, and play in these richly articulated environments that enable individual and collective acts of self-joyfulness. There is a reason why so many people can be found smiling when they are immersed in one of his designs.

BELOW

Jamaica Pond, Boston. Photo: Soe Lin Post.





Calder and Abstraction: From Avant-Garde to Iconic

Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

Through January 4, 2015

Shadows on a scrim dance like falling leaves in the softest breeze—that’s what you first see when you step inside this spellbinding Alexander Calder exhibition. Behind it is Calder’s *Eucalyptus*, all black leaves on wires.

The first great maker of kinetic art, Calder defied expectations about sculpture—starting with its sheer tangibility: mass, volume, gravity. His mobiles float and turn, as ethereal as shadows, their drowsy motion propelled by air currents. “Fed on air, they respire and draw their life from the tenuous life of the atmosphere,” Jean-Paul Sartre wrote.

Calder and Abstraction (organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in collaboration with the Calder Foundation) traces the artist’s work from the 1930s, when he gave his heart and his engineer’s mind to abstraction, to the late 1960s, his heyday as a public artist.

In startling and winsome early works, biomorphic shapes drift before a panel (*Red Panel*) or inside a frame (*Snake and the Cross*), suggesting paintings come to life. They are kin to Jean Arp’s cartoony abstractions. Calder, radically, set the pieces of his compositions adrift.

Using counterbalances, open forms, and flat planes, he devised playful, spirited mobiles and stabiles (which stand on the ground) that moved with enchanting unpredictability. The stabile *La Demoiselle* takes a deep bow and then pinwheels out, its little flats on wires fluttering as if in the wake of that initial bend.

If some of the maquettes for Calder’s public works, such as the orange roller coaster *La Grand Vitesse*, feel tired, that’s because Calder, along with Henry Moore, set now familiar standards for public art. They take nothing away from the exuberance of his art, which as it moves conveys much in this life that we sense but cannot grasp.

CATE McQUAID is a freelance writer and an art critic for the *Boston Globe*.

ABOVE

La Demoiselle, 1939. Photo: © 2014 Calder Foundation.

SEEN

Landwehrkanal, Berlin

On the Landwehr Canal, which runs along my street in the formerly industrial neighborhood of Kreuzberg, tourist boats fill the narrow and shallow channel. The banks are dotted with people watching them float by, feeding swans, having a nap, having a smoke. Above the Art Deco Admiral Bridge, the city’s landmarks are quaintly displayed, as if on a postcard.

Constructed in the mid-19th century, when Kreuzberg did not even exist, the canal was an answer to the problem of water in Berlin. Formerly a swamp (the word *berl* meant swamp in 12th-century Polabian Slavic), this landlocked city is surrounded by lakes, and flooding was always an issue. The Landwehr provided much-needed drainage in an area that at the time was outside the boundaries of the city. It also lightened congestion on the Spree River by redirecting ships carrying wood and other construction materials to various sites, much like a railroad.

Today, the canal is chiefly a way of seeing Berlin and its surrounding landscape from the unique angle provided by boats of all kinds—from canoes and kayaks to rubber rafts and cruise ships—and of being seen by others. While many industrial canals in other cities have become abandoned wastelands, due to polluted waters and toxic soils, this former drainage ditch continues to make Kreuzberg one of the most sought after places to live.

JEANNE HAFNER is a writer, researcher, urban scholar, and historian. Her book, *The View from Above: The Science of Social Space*, was published by MIT Press in 2013.

BELOW

Photo: Jeanne Haffner.

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MATTER OF COURSE

Architecture in the Islamic World



I have a friend who wishes he had attended only architecture lectures in college. I know what he means: There is no substitute for the aesthetic dream state of watching slides of beautiful buildings parade by in a darkened room. There were many such moments in Nasser Rabbat's Islamic architecture class at MIT, where every session's slide set began—accidentally on purpose, I think—with a glimpse of Rabbat's handsome 11-year-old son, Kinan.

There is a surfeit of beauty in MIT 4.614, which struggles to cover “fifteen centuries and three continents” worth of Islamic architecture, from the reed huts of Sumer to today's Persian Gulf megaprojects, in one semester. (I attended four sessions.) But it isn't beauty that I remember most about the class. What I recall is a course that was simultaneously fascinating and humiliating, for me. To teach Muslim architecture, Rabbat had to teach Islamic history and culture as well, and at times my ignorance overwhelmed me.

From roughly the 8th century well into the modern era, successive waves of Mohammed's followers dominated Mesopotamia—modern-day Iraq and Iran—plus what we call the Middle East; Turkey; North Africa; and, of course, parts of Spain and Sicily. The achievements of the vestigial Islamic state are head spinning. A Muslim cartographer in 12th-century Islamic Sicily created what many view as the first credible map of the world. According to some historians, Al-Azhar divinity school in Cairo was the world's first university. MIT thinks so. Not far from where we listened to Rabbat's lectures, the Institute has erected a bust of Al-Azhar scholar Ibn-al-Haytham, the father of the science of optics.

To explain why the Abbassid caliph built the 8th-century “round city” of Baghdad for his armies, or how the hypostyle (many-columned) mosques emanated eastward, then northward, then westward from Mecca, Rabbat had to explain the spread of Islamic civilization, about which I knew next to nothing. In a conversation after class, Rabbat tried to put me at ease and somehow convinced me that if ignorance isn't a virtue, it certainly isn't rare. “There are four Arabic speakers in the class [out of a dozen undergraduates], and they don't know any more than you do,” he assured me. “Turks learn Turkish history, Persians learn Persian history, but

they rarely see the big picture.”

“Why should you know anything about this period,” he challenged me, “unless you want to go dabbling in the affairs of these places? It's sad that American soldiers are destroying some of these places without knowing what they are doing. But they are not the only ones.”

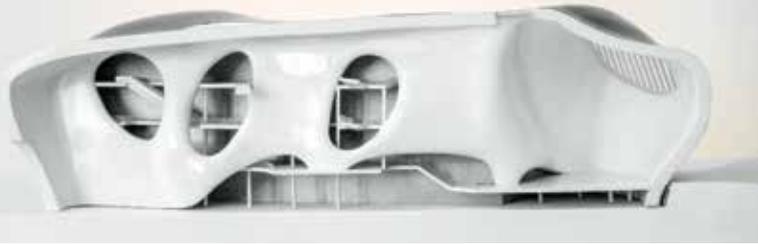
And here is another leitmotif of the innocent-sounding MIT 4.614: the recurring theme of desuetude and destruction. On the one hand, many of the mosques, palaces, mausolea, ribats (small forts), and hospitals have disappeared more or less naturally under the sands of time. Abu Jafar's Round City has vanished, as have the glorious 10th- and 11th-century Fatimid palaces of Cairo. But many architectural marvels have been forcibly “repurposed” in the name of God. Perhaps the most famous example is the 8th-century Mosque of Cordoba, a World Heritage Site now known as La Mezquita de Cordoba. Here the Catholic Church simply absorbed and integrated the Great Mosque into its Gothic plan.

Much of Cordoba's Great Mosque remains standing. Not so ancient Islamic mausolea, destroyed by Wahhabi Muslims in Saudi Arabia who reject the veneration of mortal beings. Not so portions of the 9th-century, 170-foot-tall Malwiya Minaret in Sammara, bombed in 2005 by Iraqi insurgents after US troops stationed snipers on its top floor. While we were sitting in Rabbat's classroom, the destruction of Islamic architectural sites continued apace. Fighting between the Syrian Army and fundamentalist Islamic insurgents destroyed the minaret of the 11th-century Umayyad dynasty mosque in Aleppo, also a World Heritage Site. “It's a huge loss,” the Syrian-born Rabbat told the class.

What did I learn? All of the above, and much more. I learned humility in the face of knowledge. Alas, the more you study, the less you know.

ALEX BEAM's book *American Crucifixion*, about the death of Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, was published this year.

ABOVE
Cordoba's Great Mosque. Photo: Tony Castillo.



MAD about architecture

National Building Museum, Washington, DC

September 15, 2014

Picture in your mind's eye the sheer, fog-shrouded rock cliffs depicted in ancient Chinese landscape paintings of the Shan shui style. That's what Ma Yansong, founding principal of Beijing-based MAD Architects, evokes when discussing his contemporary architecture, which is rooted in flowing metal panelized forms. Addressing an audience gathered in the entry hall among the colonnades of the National Building Museum, Ma explained how Shan shui's sloping garden landscapes and elemental approach inspire his current work. He proposes a new building typology consisting of sleek, undulating massive forms to resolve the unique challenges of rapid growth in China. By creating a variety of scale and function, Ma believes cities can grow in a viable, responsible way. A graduate of the Beijing Institute of Civil Engineering and Architecture and Yale University, Ma was the first Chinese architect awarded a RIBA Fellowship in 2010.

As he walked the audience through a series of stunning slides of proposed and built works, he highlighted several major projects, including 2011's Inner Mongolia's Ordos Cultural Center. Ma rejected the lunar-like desert landscape of the site: "This project is a reference to the image of a desert that has been there forever; by placing a metal building on the desert, like a spaceship landing, it does not carry any identity with it. When you put the two together it creates a time gap, neither old or new."

Ma's masterplan for the Nanjing Zendia Himalayas Center refines his approach to scaled communities. This 6 million-square-foot development attempts to solve rapid expansion by proposing clusters of dense urban-like communities. Ma reimagines the scale and diversity of landscapes depicted in Shan shui paintings as a model for large residential development, with the masterplan's towers, streets, and public spaces finding direct parallels in the rock cliffs, footbridges, and gardens common in this ancient artwork. A series of streams crisscross small-scale shops and pavilions that are seemingly tucked into a dense urban forest of trees. It is in this diversity that Ma sees a new typology for urban growth that will flourish apace with the expansion of China, while remaining rooted in a rich cultural past.

SAM COATS ASSOC. AIA is Gensler's firmwide head of intern development and academic outreach.

ABOVE

Ordos Museum model by Fang Zhenning. Photo: MAD Architects.