

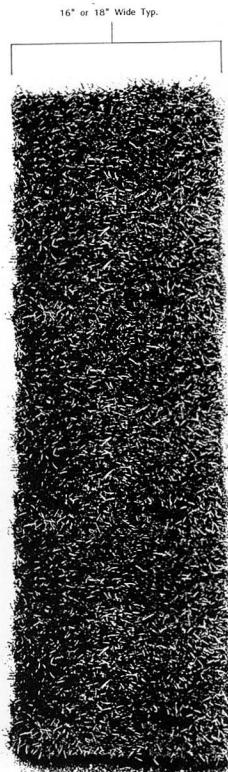
The Weave: A Suburban Work

Bruce A. Johnson

One of Duchamp's most disturbing ideas is crystallized in an often quoted sentence: "The spectator makes the picture..." In a short text published in 1957 ("The Creative Act"), he clarifies his idea a little. He explains here that the artist is never fully aware of his work...between what he wants to say and what the work actually says, there is a difference. This "difference" is in fact, the work.

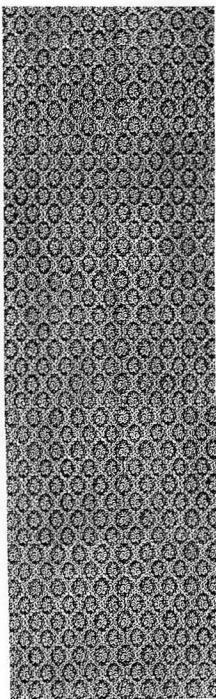
Octavio Paz¹

As first a spectator, the architect is always already an agent at *work* in the creation of the difference of which Duchamp speaks. This occurs through the simple mis-reading² of an idea-philosophy offered forth for contemplation. The *work* produced in this process begins as the textile-like weaving of seemingly disparate histories, things and subjective³ constructs. Unconsciously entangled in this fabric, the architect views the potential becoming⁴ of things via their reappearance as the residue of an idea filtered through an economy of production—a **building**. Likewise, the ubiquitous patterns of the suburban landscape serve as a contemporary depository of idea as invisible reality (a residue). Here, banal and everyday laws of economy form unseen excessive ornament/weavings manifest in the production of the labor intensive and unnatural suburban lawn. Through both the author's own proposition for a new suburban typology of dwelling—*The Soddy*, and Gottfried Semper's, "*The Four Elements of Architecture*," this article will consider the notion of formal



The Ideal Sod Strip

The Wallpaper Strip (Pattern Choice Infinite)



27" Wide Typical

STRAND 1
Suburban Strips

becoming as the product of work manifest through building as a means of production—a weaving.

EnClosure/difference

Gottfried Semper infamously describes architecture as a series of elements which flow from the central place of meaning encapsulated within the hearth. Semper writes;

*Around the hearth...the first rude religious concepts were put into the customs of the cult...It is the first and most important, the moral element of architecture. Around it were grouped the three other elements: the roof, the enclosure, and the mound.*⁵

As these elements evolved, the hearth often became dissimulated (invisible and woven) within the advanced technological processes of building⁶. Remnants of the hearth remain today in the visible reality of tectonics and ornament—both are home to residual philosophical content as reconstituted through process and material. This ideological reconstitution (**difference**) is itself made operative through the *enclosure's* unique ability to integrate (tectonics) disparate elements while simultaneously inventing flickering⁷ conditions of spatial autonomy. Semper writes;

what primitive technique evolved from the enclosure...the art of the wall fitter, that is, the weaver of mats and carpets...the carpet wall plays a most important role in the general history of art...carpets remained the original means of separating space...⁸

For Semper, spatial separation (a displacement from the exterior—an interior) originates via the industrial technique (a process of repetition or patterning) of the textile. Rosemarie Haag Bletter writes;

Semper...now supposed that the industrial arts constituted more basic types...He linked his four elements of architecture with his four categories of industrial

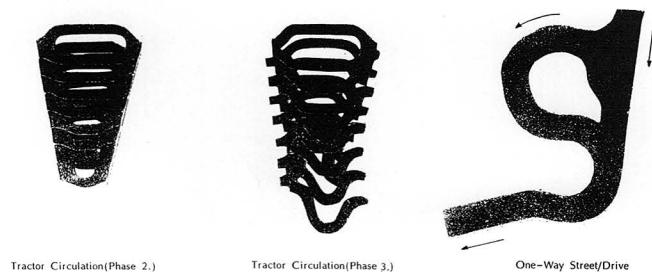
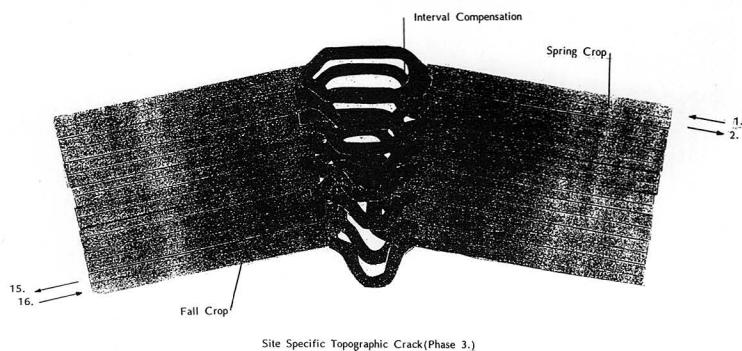
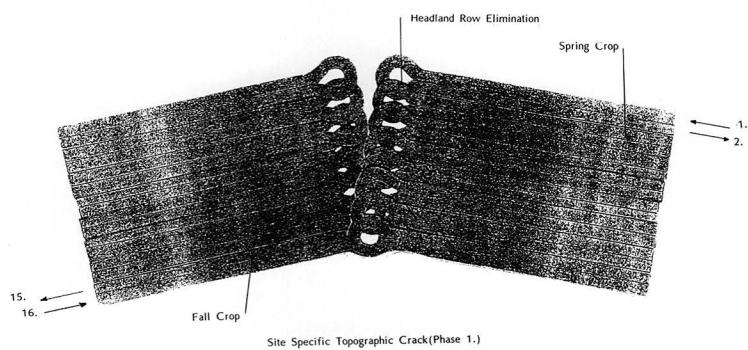
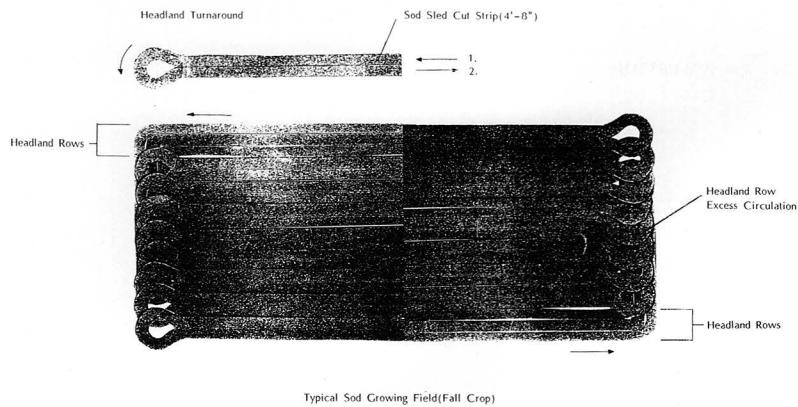
*arts...One would expect metallurgy and ceramics first and textiles last. Instead he begins with textiles.*⁹

As an evolution of agricultural processes, the *work* produced by the textile exists in its repetition (sowing). Here, individual strands carefully structure and support one another in the creation of a systemic whole—each strand ultimately suffers a loss of identity in this formal becoming (suburbs also dis-locate place/identity as they are woven from an infrastructural system [roads, services, etc.] of strands). In a similar manner, the weaver as well can become dis-located (lost) in the homogeneity of the weave; save for an occasional instance of ornament (disturbance) breaking an otherwise repetitively patterned field.

Through like processes, both textile and suburb abstract select aspects of preconceived meaning unable to be transcribed into sheer surface pattern-meaning (outside economy and material limit) becomes a residual left-over; ornament and excess attempt to fill this void as a means of conveying idea(s) otherwise displaced. In suburbia, the timeless techniques of Semper's wall-fitter ultimately play a role in orchestrating this re-placement (transcription) of idea (hearth as building). The industrial arts here manifest dislocation from the desire to build with the methods and materials at hand (economy). Building as such, becomes a forgetting—an oblivion of infrastructural strands (material) woven through the most readily available means of production. In this way, building is reduced to an economic (orthogonal & mass-produced) surface condition out of which the laws of production unconsciously spawn both visible and invisible ornament (excess, habit, etc.).

Economy(Saving)

At first glance the suburbs appear trivial; yet the lawn, that seemingly banal and almost accidental expanse between



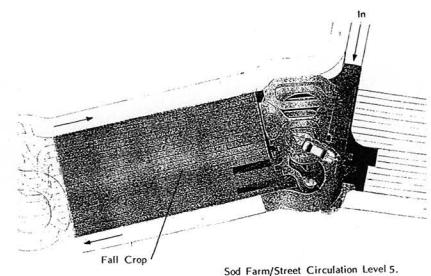
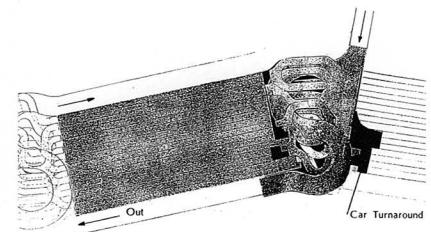
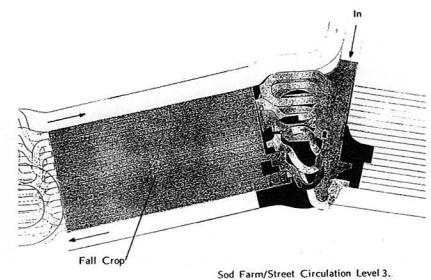
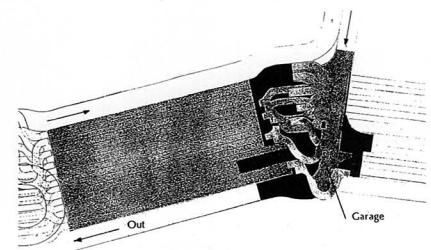
STRAND 2 The Sod Farm

house and street, becomes an everyday oblivion of invisible and dangerous (both toxic and cultural) care. Holderlin writes, *But where the danger is, grows the Saving power also.*¹⁰ Heidegger adds;

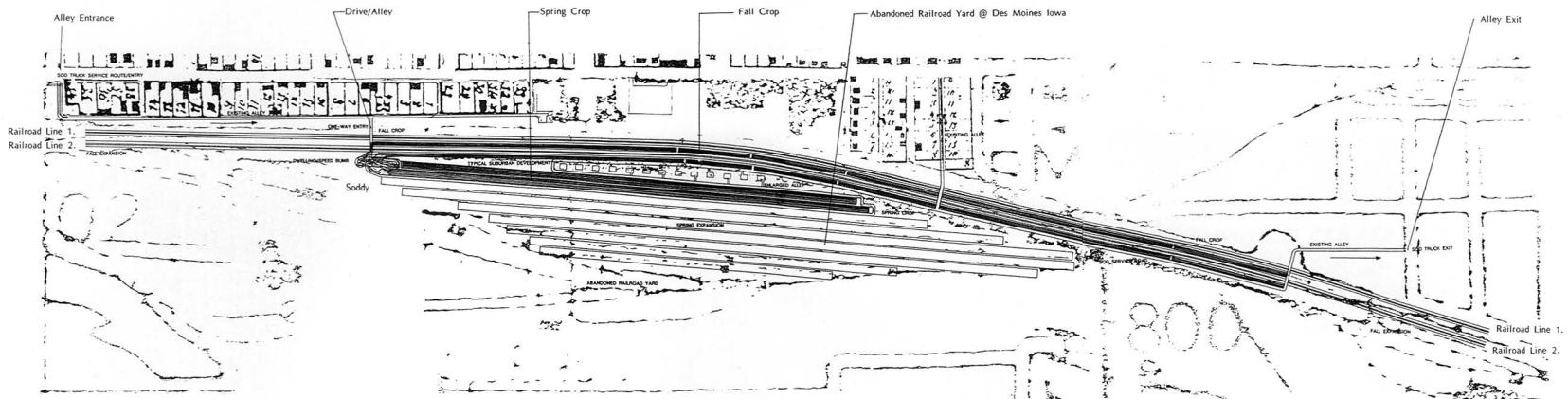
*The danger is the saving power, in—as-much as it brings the saving power out of its—the danger's—concealed essence that is ever susceptible of turning, as the forgetting of something forgets itself and is drawn away in the wake of forgetful oblivion...*¹¹

One of many suburban dangers lies in the dislocation (physical and mental) afforded its occupants as a result of the privatization of the interior—a dislocation ultimately facilitated by an unchecked devouring of the world as enabled through the infinite repetition of street, building and lawn. As a displaced no man's land, the lawn (Semper's carpet wall/mat as a divider of space) aids in the creation of the autonomous subject through its patterning (repetitive voids). Within this suburban pattern, disturbance/difference is efficiently hidden by the standardized closure of the interior (the house as object creates its subject) as a function of modular/surface-reduced building components.

Given this suburban pattern; might Heidegger's condition of danger "drawn away" be manifest as the saving power through the very tenant's of suburbia, and if so, what might this condition of building become? Furthermore, as an embodiment of Semper's *enclosure*, could the production and maintenance of the lawn (formerly the textile wall) be seen as a condition of oblivion and homogeneous labyrinth akin to the weaver's cloth, thus requiring its spectator(s) to produce an excessive though unseen condition similar to ornament? Likewise, if such a subversion or displacement (as an integration) could become antithetical to the suburban condition, then rooted within the *enclosure* element lies the latent ability to define space and place as the saving power (as a turning toward oblivion—*work*) of Duchamp's spectator.



STRAND 3 The Prototypical Soddy



STRAND 4 The Site Specific Soddy at Des Moines, Iowa

In response to such notions, the *Soddy* proposes an architecture which, when viewed through the very laws of symbiotic industrial process, might surface Duchamp's difference as the potential for integration inherent in Semper's *enclosure*.

Weaving

The simple beginning is something so insignificant in itself, so far as its content goes, that for philosophical thinking it must appear as entirely accidental.

Hegel¹²

The sod farm, the suburban lawn and wallpaper all share a commonality of method, habit and desire as derived through an industrial and cultural denial of figuration. All three operate by the procedural dictates of the strip; sod is cut in strips, lawns are mowed in strips and wallpaper is hung in strips (Strand 1). All are industrial products which as viewed

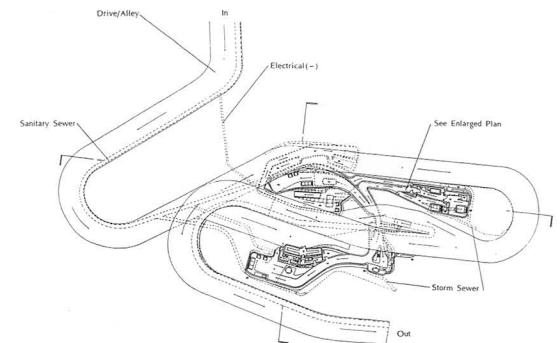
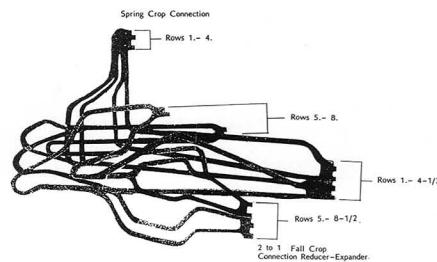
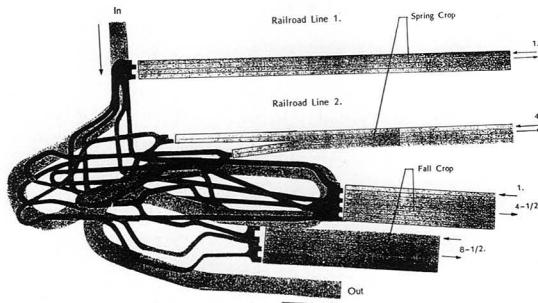
from the lateral perspective of process and economy reveal a notion whereby the perception of interior and exterior might be suspended. As a residual trace of its making, the sod farm thus becomes one possible point of departure for suburban *work*.

Governed by year-round suburban growth, a sod farm is a two crop (spring & fall) per year endeavor. Rectilinear (thus minimizing the excessive Headland turning of the sod cutter) and utterly flat, the sod farm like the subdivision seeks a condition of topographic homogeneity. The wall, lawn and sod farm, must in the suburban context deny their typologically isolated conditions into a cross-pollinated industrial means of co-production. An ideal (siteless) sod farm thus becomes an endless strand. In this excessive and economic flatness, hidden variation exists in the between—crop Headland circulation maneuvers of

the sod cutter itself—a condition (Strand 2) further emphasized by the sectional differentiation required to adjust both spring and fall sod fields to natural topographic difference. In spanning this resultant rift (Strand 3), the Headland circulation ramps of the sod cutter create a condition akin to both Semper's *enclosure* element (where the space between other elements is woven into a systemic whole), and to that of anthropomorphic highway systems where inside and outside merge in a moment of textile-like ornament.

Out of this newly excavated and figural condition of *difference*, the Headland circulation ramp curb becomes structure for street, wall, and sod strip, etc.; once separative (of house and street) but now connective, the excessive interpenetration of this curb destroys the objectified closure of the interior and allows the lawn to become a literal condition of displacement. Like the Baroque, sod in-

fill panels (based on highway grass retention systems) here create wall surfaces upon which wallpaper strips attempt to align. In this attempt, sod panels as planer surfaces, can only ever approximate the sensuality of the curb's curvilinear path; cracks, rifts and sieves emerge as potentially programmable openings/orifices. Through these cracks, the *Soddy* now visibly merges, what would in a more generalized condition of suburbia, remain an otherwise invisible condition of artifice. Here, inside and outside as like conditions, allow one to literally live in the yard as a cultural ornament. Unlike the tree in the midst of the farmer's field, the *Soddy* is no longer untillable wasteland, but a provider of shade and comfort in an otherwise left-over zone. However, despite this seeming erasure of interior closure, this prototypical version of the *Soddy*, would if repeated, merely replicate the homogeneity of the suburb—a specific site was required.



STRAND 5

The Site Specific Soddy—Infrastructural Plans

As an urban-rural nexus, railroads manifest a disturbing accordance with the sod farm, both in their desire to deny topographic variation (flatness for hundreds of miles dictate a rail route) and in the ability of the sod cutter to operate without interruption between its rails. These lateral affiliations, in conjunction with the similarity between the rail itself and the suburban curb, led to the site selection of an abandoned rail yard in Des Moines, Iowa—a selection (Strand 4) which through site specific variation, could now limit the ultimate growth of the *Soddy* while preserving its unique creation of difference as tectonic integration (Strands 4,5 & 6).

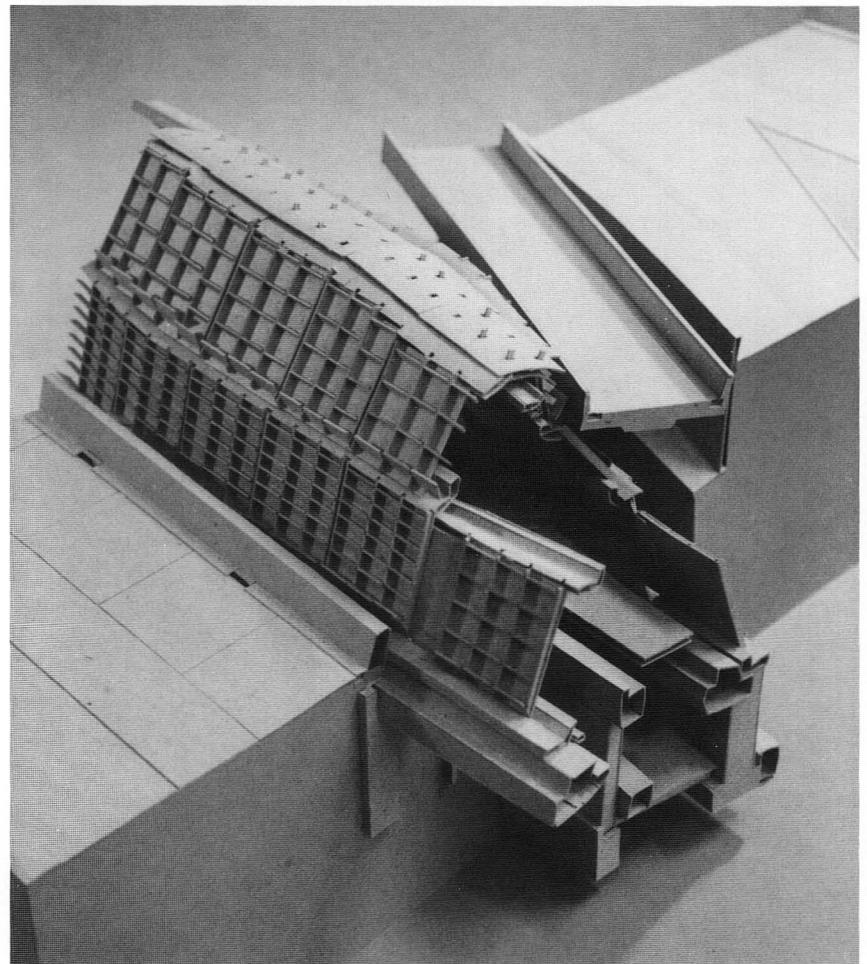
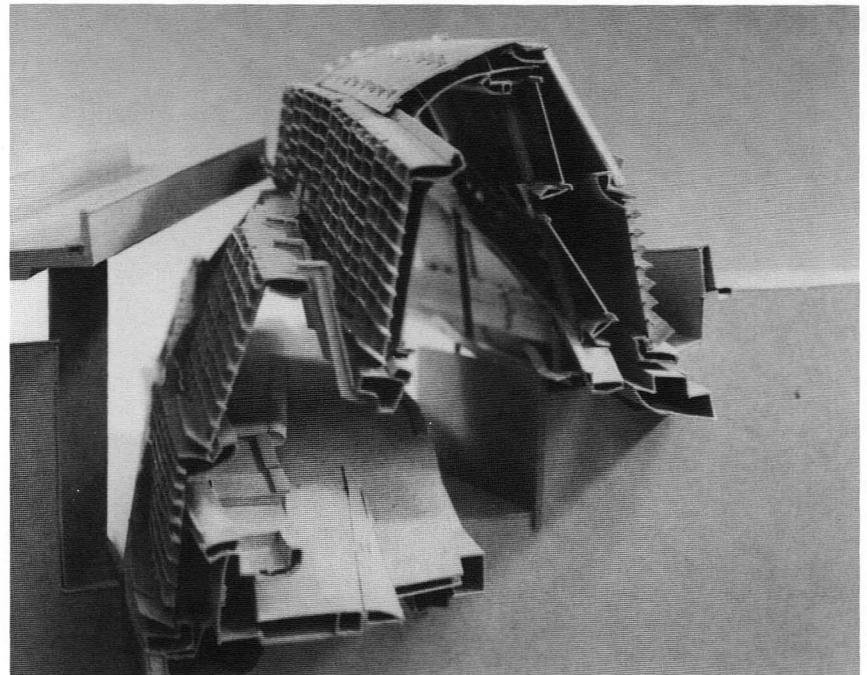
Accessed via the inner-city, the *Soddy's* year-round production now polices existing neighborhood alleys while simultaneously re-greening a blighted portion of the city. In this context the *Soddy* becomes a woven ornament (**difference**) for the dislocated city—a physically inaccessible public zone (as a private residence and working farm) made accessible through the displaced spectator's eye; autonomous separation is now called into question through difference as integration (tectonics as connection). Here, the excesses of the process of production inherent in the suburban condition *become* exposed and philosophically inverted through systemic variation and can no longer conceal Duchamp's hidden difference; a **difference** which illustrates a subversive dep(art)ure from the initial complacent suburban philosophical intent. Architecture here evolves to concretize the perceived reality of an idea (residue of the hearth) as it is made formal through a series of lateral displacements from within a systemic/cyclical means of production—a **building**.

We move from voyeurism to clairvoyance: the curse of sight becomes the freedom of contemplation.

Octavio Paz¹³

Notes (All emphasis added)

1. Paz Octavio. *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*, Arcade Publishing, New York, 1978. pp. 85–7. Paz also writes: "Vision is never objective; the spectator interprets or distills what he sees. The "difference" is transformed into another difference, the work into another work."
2. Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988. p.169) writes; "the reader...invents in texts something different from what they intended." I interpret mis-reading as building through difference.
3. I am referring to the closure of the reflexive subject. Mark C. Taylor points out: "the reflexive subject turns inward...In reflection, the subject thinks about itself thinking about an object that seems different than itself." See; *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987. p.39.
4. See Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" in *Poetry, Language, and Thought*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, 1971. pp.76–8.
5. See Gottfried Semper; *The Four Elements of Architecture & Other Essays*, translated by Wolfgang Hermann and Harry Malgrave, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989. pp. 101–105.
6. i.e. the integrated systems of Louis I. Kahn & others.
7. This is a reference to landscape tapestries and other organic-like ornaments which represent inside and outside as like conditions.
8. See Gottfried Semper; *The Four Elements of Architecture & Other Essays*, translated by Wolfgang Hermann and Harry Malgrave, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989. pp. 101–105.
9. Haag Bletter, Rosemarie, "On Martin Frohlich's Gottfried Semper," *Oppositions* 4, October 1974. p.148.
10. See Holderlin, Von Hellingrath, Ed. IV, p.227.
11. Heidegger, Martin, *The Question Concerning Technology & Other Essays*, Harper Torchbooks, 1977. p.42.
12. See Hegel, *Aesthetics*.
13. Paz Octavio. *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*, Arcade Publishing, New York, 1978. p. 178.



STRAND 6
Site Specific Soddy Model