



Drawing on a Sense of Place

By Juli Carson

Balbec, Venice, Florence, within those syllables had gradually accumulated all the longing inspired in me by the places for which they stood... They magnified the idea that I formed of certain points of the earth's surface, making them more special, and in consequence more real.¹

– Marcel Proust

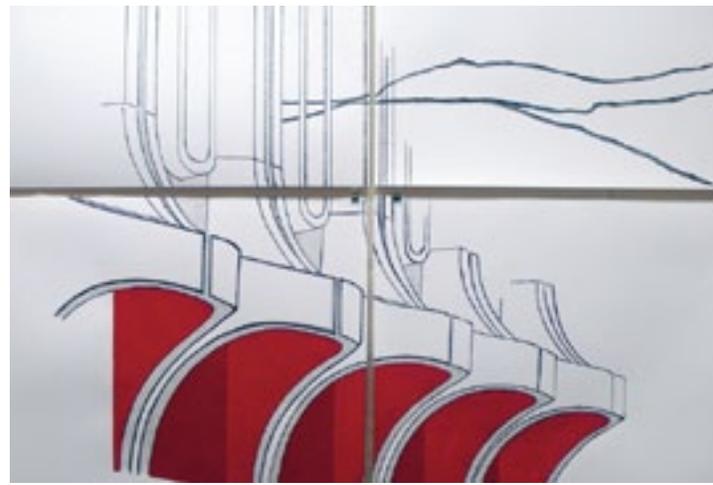
Toponymy – the study of place names – represents the verbal constellation that is displayed on the tormented surface of the universe. Like verbal projectiles, place names are launched by the codified breath of man that is embedded in maps – which serve as emblems for sites – not in the sites themselves.²

– Juan José Saer

What is a location? How is a 'sense of place' imbued by a location's name? Addressing the first question, Heidegger asserts that a man-made structure – for him it was a bridge – isn't built in a pre-existing location. Rather, "...a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge... Only things that are locations in this manner allow for spaces."³ It is thus not a matter of *first* the location, *then* the bridge. Counter-intuitively, a pre-given location is perceived only *after* a structure is experienced *in situ*. What, then, of a location's name? According to Marcel Proust, place-names work in a similar fashion. Because they permanently absorb the mental image that we have of a location, it's impossible to untangle which comes first – the place or the name.

From this 'fracture' of temporal logic, another notion of site springs forth, one Jean Baudrillard calls the *simulacrum*. As an illustration, Baudrillard cites Louis Borges' famous tale of cartographers who drew a map of the Empire so exacting, point by point, that it completely redoubled in size and scope the territory it represented. Eventually, as the map began to fray, it became one with the location so that the distinction between the physical site and its visual representation completely collapsed.⁴ No longer was it a question of 'afters' coming in advance of 'befores,' as with Proust. Simply, in Baudrillard's sense of site, a place and its name exist as *one*.

Enter Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan's *Cabo Nombre* – a large-scale installation representing the iconic façade of the library at the University of California, Irvine – that literally *draws* on these contradictions of site.



Location

UCI's ground-breaking and construction was precipitated by the UC Regents Master Plan, a reformist piece of legislation – signed into law by Governor Pat Brown in 1960 – that sought to extend higher education to all Californians regardless of their economic means. To meet this vision, the Regents hired renowned California architect William Pereira to design the original eight buildings, with the research library seen as the conceptual heart of the new campus. Although it has recently been renamed the Langson Library (after Jack Langson, a Newport Beach entrepreneur who gifted a leadership grant in 2003), at its inception, the library held the generic designation "Library Administration Building." In 1974, it was re-designated by the equally generic name "Main Library." The unbranded nature of the site underscored Pereira's idealist intent: a *UC campus*, centered around a world-class *research library*, penetrated by a surrounding *planned community*. It was a hope for the future that President Johnson conveyed in his remarks at the campus' inauguration: "Your people have the vision..."⁵

That said, the location the Regents selected for their new campus – Irvine Rancho San Joaquin – was anything *but* generic. Its origins were legendary, beginning with the 1864 purchase of three Spanish-Mexican land grants south of Los Angeles by James Irvine, an Irish immigrant of modest roots. By the time of his death in 1886, Irvine had left his son, James Irvine II, approximately 110,000 acres of land – almost a third of present-day Orange County. James Jr. went on to develop the land agriculturally, eventually incorporating the ranch's holdings as "The Irvine Company" in 1894. In 1947, when James Jr. died, the Company held 88,245 acres of land in Southern California and has since become a real estate empire known for developing suburban master-planned communities throughout central and southern Orange County.

This was the needle Pereira had to thread between The Irvine Company's corporate vision and the UC Regents' reformist ideals. A pragmatic-idealist, Pereira eventually closed a deal with The Irvine Company, who donated 1000 acres to the university in 1959 (selling an additional 500 acres for subsidized housing). Five years later, a campus was born. But this is only half the story. That same year, a corporate subsidiary called "The Irvine Industrial Complex" was born when 2600 acres of Irvine Ranch property was set aside for industries landing government contracts to develop missiles, sensors and tracking systems. And so it was that in 1964, under the auspices of The Irvine Company, the arranged marriage of "UCI" and the "The Irvine Industrial Complex" came to pass, attesting to the old adage: *opposites attract*.



Place Name

Returning to Zinny/Maidagan's large-scale drawings of Langson Library's iconic façade, why did they choose to call their piece *Cabo Nombre* – literally "Cape Name" – the generic denomination attached to a non-descript piece of land on the southern coast of Argentina?

Upon arriving at coastal Cabo Nombre, the Argentine novelist Juan José Saer recounted "...in Tierra del Fuego, we find the quintessential name, one reduced to its minimum expression... that makes the stylized gesture of naming the nameless, leaving aside any internal or external reference, that is Cape Name."⁶ Just like "Cape Name," the designation "Library Administration Building" is a signifier with no geographic, economic or historical connection to its referent, one completely unmotivated by the point on earth it denotes. However, as Roland Barthes once said, *meaning is cunning; drive it away and it gallops back.*⁷ For, over time, the Library Administration Building's iconic façade would *become* its de facto place name. As a free-floating signifier in the mass media, the building's frontal image was even further detached from its physical site. However, this move paradoxically made the façade indistinguishable – within the popular imaginary – from the mythical ground on which the building stood. As such, we again arrive at Borges and the peculiar case of the cartographers exacting map of the Empire.

Simulacrum

The process that ushered the Library Administration Building into a simulacrum – a copy with no original – occurred in stages. The library made its televised debut in a 1965 KNBC documentary about UCI's dedication ceremony, entitled *Birth of a Campus*. The program featured William Pereira's voice-over narration describing the location under construction, where he details his design choices and decisions:

Do we design an organic architecture sculptured to the vast undulating unpopulated treeless landscape? Should our design fit the land that was here before we were here? Our answer... is no. It is no because the University of today is a highly urbanized complex, and in the case of UCI this complex just happened to be in the beginning superimposed over a pastoral landscape. Whether or not there are regrets, the reality is that the pastoral portions of this part of the world are gone.⁸

Cover: Jack Langson Library, Photographer: Robert Plogman
Interior (Left to Right): *Aerial view of central campus, color, December, 1967*. Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, UCIrvine Libraries. Communications Photographs (AS-056); *UCI Library, Arch William Pereira, 1965 (detail)*, wax pastel on paper; *Untitled for UCI (detail)*, colored fabric. Images courtesy of the artists

Rejecting Frank Lloyd Wright's brand of site-specificity – *buildings made to fit the land before them* – Pereira instead attuned himself to the specificity of post-war growth in suburban America in order to “design plans to satisfy the future.”⁹ But Pereira was equally driven by environmental pragmatism, meaning he was no utopian. “All the architecture completely recognizes the fact that we are going to be dealing with sun and glare,” he explained. “And so you see these permanent awnings – *eye shades* – which solve the major part of our problems with this climate.”¹⁰ This design feature was the material base of Pereira's signature architectural motif – the library's pre-cast concrete ‘eye shades’ – that would come to represent “UCI” as an institutional simulacrum for Hollywood's motion picture industry for over a decade.

In its earliest years, the campus was so stark, so purposely site-less, that it was ripe for filmic appropriation. Subsequently, a collective imaginary was sutured onto Pereira's architectonics. Three films are most notable. In *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972), enslaved apes storm the Library Administration Building to overthrow their human rulers, a clear nod to the surrounding military industrial complex. In *Silent Movie* (1976), where people and places play ‘themselves’ as they've come to be known through cinema, the campus portrays a vast hospital complex housing a studio executive who rehabilitates after a mental collapse in response to a corporate take-over. And in *Poltergeist* (1982), the Main Library doubles as a research center for a clairvoyant hired to exorcise a ghost haunting a middle class family home, a commentary on the ubiquitous Southern California suburbs that bury history under timeless stucco and asphalt. As different as these films were – in genre and in period – the library's utter detachment from the undulating treeless landscape characterized each of these narratives, as if they belonged to one simulacral trilogy, a postmodern cinematic parable for Irvine's primal scene.

Symptom

And yet nature is tenacious. As soon as we write it off, it reemerges like a symptom or a rash – in this case on the library's iconic façade *in situ*.

It's true, the pre-cast concrete eye shade slabs – repeated in an almost military order vis-à-vis the broken line of the horizon created by the surrounding mountains – contrast orthogonal order with the surrounding interrupted immensity, just as Pereira intended. However, this signatory element – the upward soaring eye shades – simultaneously evokes a female morphology, both uterine and test tube-like, as if nature had turned itself into a serial machine of the identical. The result is an architectonic formlessness, where dialectical oppositions – urban/rural, culture/nature – are seamlessly undifferentiated, producing what Elias Canetti called a *crowd symbol*, a collective unit found in nature that doesn't consist of people but are still felt to be crowds. The forest, which Pereira's rows of pre-cast concrete certainly evoke, is a quintessential crowd symbol. “Man stands upright like a tree and he inserts himself amongst the other trees,” Canetti notes. Since “every single trunk is rooted in the ground... its resistance is absolute,” a perceptual resoluteness that, according to Canetti, transforms the forest into a symbol for the army.¹¹ And there it is. If something returns on the Library Administration Building's façade – something repressed by Pereira's idealist-pragmatic design – it is the uncanny state of Irvine's coterminous landscape upon which the campus was built: the treeless immensity and the military industrial complex.

Horizon

Drawing on UCI's polyvalent landscape, something deeper – a phantom trace – resurfaces in Zinny/Maidagan's *Cabo NOMBRE*. For the sketched and sewn drawings – all produced by hand – are the artists' attempt to *embody* Langson Library. In the process, the mountainous horizon eclipsed

by Pereira's library reemerges in the form of a single jagged line running the length of Zinny/Maidagan's 10' x 23' mosaic of drawings depicting the building's pre-cast concrete pillars. Architecturally enveloping the viewer, these drawings present a type of crowd symbol. In one direction, a forest of lines grows steadily upwards, harmonious and resolute; in the other direction, a scar cuts horizontally across the structure that has effaced it. Irvine's idealized campus and the military industrial complex surrounding it are thus fused here in the gestural, linear depiction of the façade, while the immensity of the mountainous horizon takes its revenge upon the building's surface. Meanwhile, this horizon line, this scar, is reiterated in the fabric drawings that wrap around the remainder of the gallery. But in this case, the horizon line – a product of sewing one piece of fabric to another – is literally *sutured* into the flat picture plane as an index of the work's own making. And yet, the most direct method of laying down a line – the gesture of sewing one border to another – is perpetually ambiguous. This act of suture produces a *physical line* in the picture that delineates the sky from the land in-as-much as it simultaneously collapses the two into one abstract image.

In either case, with the mosaic or with the fabric drawings, this imaginary horizon line – at once scar and suture, a cut and a connection – reifies an invisible fracture in the distinction between then and now, land and building, image and site, idealism and militarism, uterine and rectilinear, all of which define, simultaneously, this contradictory place (name) called UCIrvine.

- 1 Marcel Proust, “Place-Names: The Name,” in *Swann's Way*, (New York: Modern Library, 1956), p. 555.
- 2 Juan José Saer, *El Rio Sin Orillas*, (Buenos Aires: Alizana Editorial, 1991), p. 110.
- 3 Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Martin Heidegger Basic Writings*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 332.
- 4 Jorge Luis Borges, “On Exactitude in Science,” in *Collected Fictions*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 325.
- 5 Lyndon Johnson, “Remarks of the President, University of California, Irvine,” Press Release, June 20, 1964.
- 6 Saer, *El Rio Sin Orillas*, p. 110.
- 7 Roland Barthes, “That Old Thing Art,” (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 202.
- 8 *Birth of a Campus*, a KNBC Public Affairs presentation, originally broadcast on Month, Day, 1965.
- 9 James Steele, ed. *William Pereira*, (Los Angeles: USC Architectural Guild Press, 2002), p. 22.
- 10 KNBC, *Birth of a Campus*.
- 11 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1984), p. 84.

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CABO NOMBRE

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