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In *Basin and Range*, a book about how the American continent formed, John McPhee states: “Geologists...see the unbelievable swiftness with which one evolving species on the earth has learned to reach into the dirt of some tropical island and fling 747s into the sky. They see the thin band in which are the all but indiscernible stratifications of Cro-Magnon, Moses, Leonardo, and now. Seeing a race unaware of its own instantaneousness in time, they can reel off all the species that have come and gone, with emphasis on those that have specialized themselves to death.” He goes on to quote one of those geologists: “If you free yourself from the conventional reaction to a quantity like a million years, you free yourself from the boundaries of human time.”

By making natural light tangible – framing it as a subject in its own right instead of a constituent of our daily ambiance that is taken for granted -- and recasting our gaze and posture upward, James Turrell’s skyspace asks us to imagine time outside of our human experience or reconsider our sublimation of deep time to the present. He asks us to think of forces instead of events.

James Turrell's larger project is related in many ways to that of the Japanese architect Tadao Ando, who designed the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis. Opened in 2001, the concrete structure features various unexpected apertures that are organized around a central outdoor watercourt resulting in an interior animated by bouncing sunlight. On windy days, the water becomes choppy and the light inside a sparkling mosaic. On calm days, the water reflects pure and brilliant bands of light that move down the wall over the course of many hours.

These projects bring culture and nature together in unexpected ways in urban environments and in doing so pose important questions about what it means to live as a human in the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In *The Shape of Time*, George Kubler's central idea is that all humanly produced objects are a response to human desire or need. The desire or need these two spaces fill are that they filter our humanist endeavor and historical time, embodied by the goings on of a university or exhibition space and set them in the context of a different kind of time, let's call it natural time, geological, or cosmological time – a long, long duree. They urge us to have a sense of humor about our fleeting presence, they grant freedom to think outside of human-centeredness and history. They suture culture and nature together – they challenge the false idea that one has to drive out of the city to find nature, a troubling and nostalgic idea about environment

that bifurcates the world we inhabit into pristine and untouchable nature and exploitable real estate development: the Grand Canyon vs. Houston, a pop up city that I imagine most of us don't associate with geological time. Both the Skyspace and the Pulitzer building draw our attention to light, sky, air, wind – forces that cannot be owned, a commons of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that exist without us and can be negatively affected by us but not wholly controlled.

James Turrell' Skyspace is a visual interruption on campus – it rises from the lawn into a shape that is neither wholly natural nor artificial. Its shape reminds us of pre-Columbian structures, but its grassy walls also make us think of natural formation in the landscape, a small hill. It invites us to ascend but also allows us to cut through. In nature, such forms are the result of compression or erosion, forces bearing down or erupting up over long periods of time. Here, on the Rice Campus in Houston, TX – one of the flattest places I can think of – the skyspace is the result of human engineering. In creating an elevated platform of this sort, Turrell is asking us to confront some of our assumptions about flatness and nature.

Flat terrain that extends on indefinitely – I would argue – does not count so much as “nature” but as land/property/real estate development. Our sense of natural beauty seems caught up in topographical variation. It has often struck me that the way Houston is characterized in its flatness as

a slate that can be wiped clean from time to time with new developments coming and going. I wonder to what degree these attitudes are rooted in a lack of reverence for Houston as a natural site, a site with a geological past.

Turrell's skyspace poses an important challenge here in Houston. He lifts our heads up to the ubiquitous, huge Texas sky that forms the ceiling of our daily lives and frames up a chunk of it for us to ponder. This simple gesture takes us temporarily out of concrete, strip mall, car and interjects us into color and light, atmospheric forces, clouds forming and dispersing. Turrell changes our perspective – instead of a human on two legs whose visual range is dominated by a 4 to 6 foot range in front of us and in our periphery, we are arrested because we are required to look UP. We become aware of forces and a world well beyond our control, diurnal and seasonal cycles that will continue long after we are gone. We are reminded of the smallness and fragility of being human.

In an essay entitled *The Need of Being Versed in Country Things* the writer J.B. Jackson stated that "It is from the air that the true relationship between the natural and the human landscape is first clearly revealed. The peaks and canyons lose much of their impressiveness when seen from above. What catches our eye and arouses our interest is not the sandy washes and the naked rocks, but the evidences of man." I would argue

that the inverse is true in Turrell's skyspace, by looking up we are reminded of the larger natural world – our marks are harder to read on the atmosphere than they are on the land.

Like Turrell's other spaces, this one is demanding. It asks you to change your posture, your way of inhabiting the world, and it asks for your time. In giving your human time, you are rewarded by being reminded of natural time – the two coexist and the effect is heightened by the use of artificial light set against the changing natural light, by the random birds and planes cutting through the frame. The pause and alternative view Turrell is offering is poignant on a university campus that is dedicated, above all, to the business of being human.

Ando's building reads like a large and rather foreboding concrete box from the street. One enters obliquely from the side and compressed through a small outdoor courtyard, enters the building to immediately and surprisingly be confronted with art – one lands in a gallery. This feels abrupt as most art buildings create a transition space to ease you from outdoor to interior – but here culture and nature exist side-by-side, much as is the case in the Skyspace with its artificial and natural light side-by-side.

While one expects a large and voluminous rectangular space inside Ando's building, one finds instead two oblong rectangular spaces

organized around a central watercourt connected by a shorter space on one end. The heights of these spaces are differently scaled spaces such that one is moving from compression to expansion, an effect that is enhanced by various opportunities to move up or down through three sets of staircases, themselves of varying widths. From the entrance gallery, natural light beckons at the far end of a corridor. Passing by the short end of the watercourt, one finds floor to ceiling windows. As one enters the lofty main gallery, the windows shrink down to six feet, framing visitors in their human scale. Standing at this window and looking across the watercourt is a long window running from floor level to two feet capturing only the feet of people passing there. The interior is, in short, surprisingly dynamic – one catches glimpses through watercourt vistas of far distant parts of the building. One moves up and down in space with apertures that guide one's vision in unexpected ways. Whereas Turrell asks you to look up, Ando often asks you to look down – it is difficult to establish a baseline in the Pulitzer – it moves as you do. Your eye travels down to the floor to look for your anchor. Much as the skyspace challenges our visual comfort zone (4 to 6 feet forward and peripheral), so does the Pulitzer upset that human-centered notion of space.

So too does the Pulitzer use natural light to make nature present alongside culture. The centerpiece of the experience is the watercourt, a

gauge of outdoor conditions and forces that are then projected by sunlight into the gallery on/with/alongside the works shown there. The positioning of the windows at times give way to pure sky and at others to the urban landscape backlit by the sky, a juxtaposition as surprising as the entrance to the building. The sky in Missouri is unbelievably colorful, often bright orange, fuchsia, or lavender and exhibiting strong seasonal changes. Like the skyspace, the Pulitzer building makes us think about the immateriality of color and its pervasive environmental presence (Judd plug). To have such an intense and localized experience of nature in this building is even stranger given its location within the city of St. Louis. It is situated in Grand Center, a redevelopment district that straddles the impoverished north side, St. Louis University, and the more affluent Central West End. Grand Center is very much a neighborhood in transition – it is probably one of the last places one might imagine encountering nature in St. Louis.

In fact, my guess is that for most St. Louisans nature is something you go to a park or the suburbs to experience. While Houston may suffer from a lack of geological past, St. Louis seems to suffer from a nostalgic sense of its geological past – that the veneer of urban degradation and blight somehow veil a once-celebrated landscape carved by the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Ando's focus on the sky as well as atmospheric change expands a notion of nature beyond the horizontal

landscape and expands our thinking about how we might relate to this site that is St. Louis going forward.

Both the Skyspace and Pulitzer building make us rethink our definition of nature in urban environments and in reconnecting us with the forces of the natural world remind us (in a positive way) of the smallness and humility of being human – of the differences between events and duration.