

USELESS SPECULATION:  
ARCHITECTURAL OBSOLESCENCE  
AND THE MICRO-PARCELS OF GORDON  
MATTA-CLARK'S FAKE ESTATES  
(1973)

RICK FOX

“History doesn't repeat, but it often rhymes.”  
--Mark Twain

INTRODUCTION

More often than not, architecture is created to bolster the express beliefs and ambitions of those who sponsor it. Individuals, groups, and institutions in power tend to promulgate symbols of their own prestige. Architecture is thus understood as a tool of the powerful and by the powerful. Real estate speculators are undeniable agents of change; they possess genuine power to transform both natural and built landscapes. Many aspects of the change they promulgate are public and highly visible; others much less so. Processes such as title transfer, subdivision, lot merger, covenants, deed restrictions, dedications, and easements vary greatly in their degree of public visibility. While the twin pillars of real estate economics—market value and investment performance (and their shadow features of irrational exuberance and obsolescence)—do not figure prominently in most academic literature on architecture, these topics have become unavoidable for today's practitioners. An exploration of the

broader philosophical implications of an economically speculative architecture created, bought, and sold by a surprisingly small number of financial elites is highly relevant for anyone wishing to be on the side of fairness of opportunity in the context of today's staggering wealth inequality.<sup>1</sup>

The work of SoHo-based American artist Gordon Matta-Clark is particularly instructive in this regard for two reasons. First, architecture is simultaneously the subject matter and the medium of much of his creative output. Second, he challenges many cherished beliefs about the production of architecture. My point of departure in this essay will be an exploration of one of his lesser known but more conceptually-oriented works, *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* ("Fake Estates"). This work has been largely overlooked by critics eager to comment on his more famous building-cuts. Additionally, *Fake Estates* was a work conceived at a time in the 1970's when New York City was teetering on the verge of municipal bankruptcy, while at the same time promoting massive urban renewal schemes that clearly favored rapacious real estate speculation. These twin circumstances proved fertile ground for Matta-Clark in his work generally, and *Fake Estates* in particular.

In this paper, I argue that this specific work offers us valuable architectural and philosophical lessons if we view it as a *reductio* argument that: 1) exposes several contradictory values that underpin real estate speculation; and, 2) highlights potential pitfalls in the architect-speculator relation.

#### GENEALOGY OF REALITY PROPERTIES: FAKE ESTATES

In late 1973 and early 1974 Gordon Matta-Clark, best known for his building-cuts *Splitting* (1974) Englewood, N.J., and *Conical Intersect* (1975) Paris, purchased fifteen surplus parcels of land sight unseen for between \$25 and \$75 each from the New York City Real Estate Department at two separate public auctions. Fourteen of the parcels are located in Queens, and one on Staten Island. The parcels are tiny odd-shaped fragments ranging in size from a 27 square foot triangular sliver to a 355-foot long strip. The complete inventory of parcels is diagrammed in Figure 1. If all fifteen parcels were somehow aggregated their total area would be 3,264 square feet, not even enough to make a tiny residential lot in Queens.

Subsequent to their purchase, Matta-Clark collected all the relevant legal documents including notarized grant deeds, legal descriptions, sales

contracts, and parcel maps, along with numerous black & white photos he took during various site visits. The discrete works we know today as *Fake Estates* were assembled posthumously, in 1992, by his widow Jane Crawford, prompted by the urging of Corrine Diserens, a curator from the Institut Valencià d'art Modern (IVAM) in Valencia Spain who was researching a Matta-Clark retrospective, using the original materials he collected. While Crawford named the individual works, i.e. "Little Alley" Block 2497, Lot 42 (1974); "Jamaica Curb" Block 10142, Lot 15 (1974); "Maspath Onions" Block 2406, Lot 148 (1973); and "Sidewalk Grass" Block 1107, Lot 146 (1973), it was Diserens who, in her retrospective, named the full collection *Reality Properties: Fake Estates*. The original materials themselves have an interesting provenance that is relevant here. Matta-Clark gave the materials to his friend Norman Fisher who agreed to hold them after Fisher agreed to pay the property taxes that Matta-Clark was repeatedly ignoring. When Fisher died in 1977, his executrix Tina Girouard became custodian who then returned the materials to Crawford sometime in 1979 or 1980. Matta-Clark died in 1978, but around 1980 Crawford began receiving what to her were mysterious delinquency notices from the City that the parcels were being confiscated for nonpayment of taxes. Apparently, at the time Crawford was unaware of her husband's purchases. The eventual foreclosures are ironic given that he had purchased these lots at tax-foreclosure auction. In the case of "Staten Island" Block 1224, Lot 12 (50.34 square feet) the unpaid quarterly tax for fiscal 1974 amounted to \$1.83. As of 2003 only four of the parcels had been purchased by private entities; the other eleven remained in administrative limbo.

Curiously, Crawford elected not to include the tax bills in the assembled collages deeming them, "no longer relevant to the works"<sup>2</sup> perhaps because she earnestly endeavored to present Matta-Clark's

“IT ONLY TAKES  
A SMALL  
SURVEYOR'S  
ERROR TO  
CHANGE A  
PERFECT  
RECTANGLE INTO  
AN OFF-KILTER  
TRAPEZOID  
WITH AN  
UNACCOUNTED-  
FOR SURPLUS  
SLIVER.”

work in the best possible light—in its purest form. In hindsight, her decision is unfortunate for two reasons. First, given that *Fake Estates* is a posthumously presented work, the record is incomplete (or deceptively oversimplified) without the follow-on story of the aftermath of Matta-Clark's purchases because this story tells us a great deal about his collaborative networking method as an artist and social activist. Second, for our purposes of architecture philosophy the eventual disposition, ownership, and transference of the parcels is relevant as an additional object-lesson consistent with the overall import of his intended project. The fact that eleven of the fifteen parcels appear to remain in administrative limbo is of no small consequence to Matta-Clark's critique of property ownership as well as to my argument as to its importance.

What we know of Matta-Clark's intentions with respect to the fifteen parcels comes from numerous and fragmentary sources. Interviews with his contemporaries produce incomplete and contradictory recollections about his intentions. As one commenter put it, "...the story of *Fake Estates* is both mythologized and full of holes."<sup>3</sup> By other accounts he purchased the lots without a clear intent as to what he planned to do. According to Manfred Hecht, his friend and building-cut collaborator, Matta-Clark lost interest in the properties and it was Hecht who ultimately ended up owning them. One of the clearest expressions of Matta-Clark's intentions comes from *New York Times* reporter Dan Carlinsky writing a humor piece about the city's real estate auctions. When asked by Carlinsky after the auction what he planned to do with the lots, an effusive 28-year old Matta-Clark told the reporter he planned to use them in works of art he would soon be creating. Making reference to one of the parcels that had no access to it from the public right-of-way ("Maspeth Onions", Block 2406, Lot 148) he remarks, "That's an interesting quality; something that can be owned but never experienced. That's an experience itself."<sup>4</sup>

What the total record of recollections, interviews and manuscripts reveal is that at the time the complete work he envisioned consisted of three parts: 1) a written documentation of the parcel including exact dimensions and location, and "perhaps a list of weeds growing there"<sup>5</sup>; 2) a full-scale photo of the property; and 3) the land itself. He intended that parts 1 and 2 would be included in a gallery exhibition, and that purchasers would acquire title to the land as part of their art purchase. Thus, part of his reasoning for buying slivers becomes more obvious in that he regarded these parcel sizes to be "manageable" objects in a gallery setting where, for example, he might hang from the wall a 1-foot x 95-foot rectangular, or a 6-foot isosceles triangle-shaped photograph. Neither the full scale photos



nor the gallery exhibition ever materialized.

For a young SoHo artist of insufficient means struggling to find affordable housing and cheap gallery space the cultural mythology of a gentry class buying an estate in the economically devastated New York City of the mid-1970's is an irony too rich to ignore. In the early 1970's New York City had become a bleak, violent and dilapidated city in decline. The steady loss of manufacturing jobs as industry moved out of the city combined with a general flight to the suburbs left the city with countless empty buildings. Abandoned tenement buildings and dilapidated side streets were commonplace throughout the City. The Bronx borough alone lost one-third of its population in the 1970's. The Brooklyn neighborhood known as 'DUMBO' remained uninhabited throughout most of the decade. In lower Manhattan the World Trade Center Site was being constructed while deteriorating neighborhoods burned. From 1970-1975 there were 68,456 fires in the Bronx alone.<sup>6</sup> Arson, as a percent of all city fires rose from 1% in the 1960's to over 7% in the 1970's.<sup>7</sup> Landlords would occasionally burn down their own buildings to collect insurance money when they could no longer afford to maintain them. By mid-decade New York City, the global epicenter of capitalism, was sliding inexorably towards municipal bankruptcy.

The absurdity that these parcels were all undevelopable—too small, odd-shaped, poorly situated, literally inaccessible from the public right-of-way—as homesteads, estates, or other meaningful forms of human inhabitation while they maintained their apparent exchange value is crucial to the ethos of *Fake Estates*. Matta-Clark was fascinated by the description of these surplus lots as “inaccessible.” From a 1974 interview with Liza Bear for *Avalanche*, he says:

What I basically wanted to do was to designate spaces that wouldn't be seen and certainly not occupied. Buying them was my own take on the strangeness of existing property demarcation lines. Property is so all-pervasive. Everyone's notion of ownership is determined by the use-factor.<sup>8</sup>

An example of what Matta-Clark might have meant by 'use-factor' is offered to us by a story told by one of his colleagues. Betsy Sussler who accompanied him on one of his 1975 site visits to the Queens parcels, that included a 2.55-foot wide strip of land in a 355-foot alley that neighbors had to cross over to enter into their private garages (Block 3398, Lot 116), remarks that Matta-Clark:

...understood quite well the psychological and political factors involved in walking onto a person's property to inform them that his

[Matta-Clark's] piece of forgotten land he'd bought was in fact part of their driveway.<sup>9</sup>

As far as anyone knows Matta-Clark never enforced his property right to exclude his would-be trespasser neighbors.

Collectively, these fifteen micro-parcels are important reminders of how the urban world is dissected by an underlying system of property ownership, and the laws and regulations governing their transfer. It is tempting to blame senseless bureaucrats for the existence of these land slivers, but that would be misleading. These parcel-fragments are the physical and conceptual residue of the rational machinations of a socially-legitimate process. The name of the collected works given to us by Diserens simultaneously highlights the vicissitudes of property ownership in an urban environment where every patch of dirt, no matter how small, is assumed to be a commodity, and it captures the juxtaposition of the real fragmented New York City with the unreal unified New York City of popular imagination. Matta-Clark was fascinated by the prospect that the mistakes of surveyors and architects might be the genesis of his micro-parcels. After all, it only takes a small surveyor's error to change a perfect rectangle into an off-kilter trapezoid with an unaccounted-for surplus sliver. While it is tantalizing to consider that professional errors and incompetency might be the source of these land fragments the truth is more telling. And the "error" he points to is much larger than a drafting mistake, or simple math error. Contemporary investigations into the title history reveal that these micro-parcels did not come about by accident but instead were the outcome of an intricate system of change in use and ownership—subdivisions and mergers, easements and dedications, road widenings, municipal projects, rural farmland conversions—both public

“ WE ARE BROUGHT FACE-TO-FACE WITH WHAT ARE SQUARELY PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS: WHAT EXACTLY IS THE BEARER OF VALUE? WHAT IS THE GENUINE OBJECT WE ARE BUYING AND SELLING.”

and private.

Matta-Clark was equally fascinated with the North American collective imagination about land speculation these parcels signify. The reasons other buyers offered to the *New York Times* reporter Carlinsky for buying surplus parcels included: 1) a Virginia man who purchased a few small parcels as investments for his children; 2) a man who purchased 20 square foot adjacent to the tiny parcel he already owned in the hopes of selling both to his next door neighbor for a garden; 3) a New York City planner who bought three lots just because he wanted to own a piece of the city he loved; and 4) another man who purchased several parcels as Christmas gifts for his friends.<sup>10</sup> Given these diverse motivations, we are brought face-to-face with what are squarely philosophical questions: What exactly is the bearer of value? What is the genuine object we are buying and selling: Is it the actual land with weeds, trees and fences, or the legalistic paraphernalia of title transfer? Or is it participation in a cultural process (verging on myth) that supposedly grounds our self-worth? Or perhaps it is, as Matta-Clark seems to have intuited, only as art in the full 1:1 scale gallery photographs he conceived but never executed. By any conventional measure of use the land itself has no real value; its token value is the mere residue of a conceptual framework of ownership to which buyers and sellers are deeply committed.

The three-part nature of the work Matta-Clark envisioned offers important guidance. The ontological distinction between a discernible piece of the earth's surface and a commodified chunk of "real estate" is crucial. Without physical markers such as a surveyor's benchmark, a flagged property corner, a fence post, or some other naturally occurring thing, we only know that a discernible patch of the physical landscape exists as a "parcel" because of the legal-bureaucratic artifacts that record its existence and location. As Frances Richard so aptly puts it, "One can stand on a micro-plot and not know it is there."<sup>11</sup> In this scenario, we can own something but not experience it; exchange it but not inhabit it; delineate it but not occupy it; locate it but not enjoy it. With *Fake Estates*, and Matta-Clark's purchase of micro-parcels useless for any meaningful development, "the absurdity of real estate is laid bare as a bad pun."<sup>12</sup>

By engaging in purchase and ownership of these micro-parcels Matta-Clark sensitizes us to certain absurdities of speculation. Namely, 1) the process of buying and selling in the hope of continuously escalating exchange-value is regarded as authoritative even when it produces an irrational or dubious result; and, 2) the process of parcelization is a useful fiction about democratized economic power that helps prop up

cultural beliefs about value, and about self-worth. The supposition that a normalized process always produces its intended results (“everybody gets a piece of the action”), combined with a slavish adherence to an algorithmic procedure founded (in part) on contradictory assumptions, is the essence of Matta-Clark’s *reductio* argument.

#### ONTIC INSECURITY: MATTA-CLARK’S EXQUISITE CORPUS

As a work of conceptually oriented art *Fake Estates* has strong implications for architecture philosophy insofar as it challenges the security of our ontic commitments to what constitutes the ground of possibility whereupon works of architecture are situated. A useful perspective on the theme of ontological insecurity in Matta-Clark’s work is offered by Pamela Lee. In *Object to be Destroyed*, she argues that his work presupposes the eventuality of its own destruction. Extending this idea of ontic insecurity to *Fake Estates* is an important step to expanding our understanding of the implications of his acquisition of these micro-parcels. Lee’s overall line of argument that Matta-Clark’s work is best seen through the lens of expenditure or waste rather than destruction or violence is compelling. Even though he referred to his principle activity as ‘un-building’, we are not obligated to view it as inherently violent. He did not “destroy” for the sake of destruction, or because he found the world empty of value. Matta-Clark was no nihilist. Through his constant striving to make sense of his surroundings he resisted the notion that we live in a purposeless present. In this regard, Jeffrey A. Kroessler, in his essay “Gordon Matta-Clark’s Moment,” offers the useful insight that Matta-Clark was an artist re-imagining urban decay and finding the inspiration needed to be an agent of positive transformation.<sup>13</sup>

Because he was fascinated with processes of change, and things that embraced their own

“FAKE ESTATES HAS STRONG IMPLICATIONS FOR ARCHITECTURE PHILOSOPHY INSO FAR AS IT CHALLENGES THE SECURITY OF OUR ONTIC COMMITMENTS TO WHAT CONSTITUTES THE GROUND OF POSSIBILITY WHEREUPON WORKS OF ARCHITECTURE ARE SITUATED.”

outmodedness, it is tempting to read Matta-Clark's creative output as a monument to entropy. In his early work he explored senescence and decay, and recorded the process and effects of disintegration. Yet, he is not making a fetish of a ruinous state. He does not valorize it for its own sake. On the contrary, decay, waste, and disintegration are integral to becoming. Contingent circumstance and shifting temporalities characterize his entire output—his work does not lay claim to permanence. His creative practice is not about object-making, or even object-destruction, rather it is about process-intervention. He transformed architectural refuse into reminders of the deeply contradictory impulses of urban development with its deep schism between use-value and exchange-value. Seeing the long arc of Matta-Clark's creative practice as an intervention into collective practices of waste positions us on a path of resistance that in turn points towards some problems of architectural obsolescence that characterize both *Fake Estates* and the building-cuts for which he is most known. *Fake Estates* further sharpens our understanding of the difference between inhabited space, the space of social praxis, and abstract space (the universalized “zoned” commodity) at the same time it performs a wonderfully wry commentary on Kant's disinterestedness thesis by taking an object of such intense desire as New York real estate, stripping it of use-value, repackaging it as useless art, and then completing the circle by seducing the gallery-goer for a second go-round with the offer to sell the art.

#### MATTA-CLARK'S ANIMUS

The social geography of an urban place finds its expression in the architecture if we look close enough. As a result of his building-cut work Matta-Clark had acquired considerable skill in the manual labor of dismantling buildings, working with building materials, and re-capturing architecture-based resources; skills he came to see as relevant to the underserved communities of New York City. In 1977, the year before his untimely death, he was awarded a Guggenheim Grant for a resource center and environmental youth program for ‘Loisada’, the name given to the Lower East Side by its Spanish speaking residents. He used the proceeds to purchase a building on the Lower East Side. The resource center functioned (1) as a community salvage yard where materials and equipment could be recycled or sold, and (2) as a neighborhood youth training program that taught youth how to renovate and maintain buildings for community use. After his death the center completely disbanded.

While Matta-Clark is remembered for the ethical qualities of

his dynamic activist persona—his sociability, exuberance, inclusiveness, and tireless engagement—the aesthetic-political qualities of his overt architecturally-themed projects are restive, impatient, stubbornly dissatisfied, vociferous, and uneasy. Some of this schism may be due to the deep and abiding animus Matta-Clark harbored against the architecture profession. Even though he was originally trained to be an architect, attending Cornell's School of Architecture (1963-1968), Matta-Clark's chief aim, according to critics such as Yve-Alain Bois, is to negate the cultural prestige of architecture.<sup>14</sup> This view is borne out by Matta-Clark himself. In a 1976 interview with Donald Wall in *Arts Magazine*, when Wall asks what reaction Matta-Clark got from *Splitting*, his reply is unequivocal:

I don't think most [architects] practitioners are solving anything except how to make a living. Architecture is a lackey to big business. It's an enormously costly undertaking and therefore, like government, comes equipped with its entire panoply of propaganda. I think Monolithic Idealist problem solving has not only failed to solve the problems but created a dehumanized condition at both a domestic and institutional level.<sup>15</sup>

One way for us to make sense of Matta-Clark's animus would be to view it as his worry that the profession as a whole, at the time anyhow, did not possess a well-formed social conscience. Or at least not a conscience he considered relevant to addressing the pressing problems that surrounded him. In one of his written fragments he writes, "empty and neglected structures were a prime reminder of the ongoing fallacy of renewal through modernization."<sup>16</sup> In his view then, the derelict condition of New York City's land and building-stock is emblematic of the state of the profession as a whole, and like so much of capitalist cultural

“ HE IS NOT  
MAKING A FETISH  
OF A RUINOUS  
STATE [...] ON  
THE CONTRARY,  
DECAY,  
WASTE, AND  
DISINTEGRATION  
ARE INTEGRAL TO  
BECOMING.”

production architecture is destined to become waste. So in this way, it is the means of producing architecture, rather than architecture as artifact (glorious, exalted, banal, or otherwise) that is the precise focus of Matta-Clark's critique. Xavier Wrona offers a useful amplification. He writes that for Matta-Clark, "architecture is not the building but the system that produces a particular kind of building—the order imposed on buildings, not the buildings themselves."<sup>17</sup>

*Fake Estates* explicitly raises questions about what it means to be a propertied person, to own property, to possess it, to occupy it, to abuse it, to glorify it, to transmogrify it, to transfer it, and to dispense with it as one sees fit. In spite of his personal acquisition of real estate he nonetheless harbored a deep resistance to ideologies of private wealth. He viewed private property and the human isolation he believed it engenders as increasingly unsustainable states, telling Donald Wall:

What I am talking about is the very real, carefully sustained mass schizophrenia in which our individual perceptions are constantly being subverted by industrially controlled media, markets, and corporate interests.<sup>18</sup>

Matta-Clark was not enamored of American capitalism, laissez-faire real estate developers, disengaged policy makers, or uncaring slum lords who stood idle while deterioration progressed inexorably to demolition and then to the "solution" of redevelopment. Nonetheless, he viewed abandoned buildings through the political lens of liberalism as symptomatic of a socio-political system: (1) that doesn't look after its everyday citizens by caring for those who cannot care for themselves; (2) that favors the elite at the expense of the general population; and (3) where wealth accumulation is valorized as an end in itself rather than a means to something more worthwhile. Instead, to the greatest extent possible, he focused his own efforts on empowering marginalized citizens to take ownership of their neighborhoods. In his words, an urban site ought to be "responsive to the expressive will of its occupants."<sup>19</sup>

No doubt, the abstract urban grid is a tool for converting raw land into a commodity. As evidenced by *Fake Estates* in which the earth's surface is reduced to a series of complex abstract and interconnected legalistic property descriptors, an otherwise rational process can, with successive iterations, yield an irrational or dubious outcome. Yet, the occasional anomaly is not what obsesses Matta-Clark. Rather, his two-fold reminder is that the usability of a piece of land is necessarily tied to abstract processes of demarcation, ownership, and transfer. Second, the rapacious drive

to accumulate wealth disengages exchange value from the utility of a piece of land. And hence, the ground of architecture is rendered precarious. As Lee, rightly observes, “For property is not so much considered a thing at all but a right: a relationship between object and subject structured around terms of personality and consumption.”<sup>20</sup> In our era, property has become more than an extension of who we are—it now threatens to define us. This threat continues to deepen, and deepen unevenly across the wealth divide.

#### ARCHITECTURAL OBSOLESCENCE: THE EYE OF THE SPECULATOR

*Fake Estates*, far from being a curious leftover side-project to Matta Clark’s more well-known building cut projects, is one tent-pole for expressing his overarching concerns with the related ideas of waste and obsolescence. Matta-Clark’s chief concern with the obsolescence paradigm is that it creates its own set of mythic beliefs by transforming complex cultural processes into ones that seem self-evidently natural, unchangeable, and universal. The false claim that “the new” naturally supersedes “the old” is a long-standing criticism of capitalism. The argument that capitalism sustains itself by promulgating emotional and psychological discontent is another familiar grievance. Other commonplace grievances include: everlasting transience; endless replacement; continuous forced supersession; and, rapid and sudden fluctuations in valuation. While the narrative of relentless devaluation and expendability eventuates in waste, it is precisely this narrative of perpetual change the capitalist entrepreneur needs in order to expand consumer demand for the “new now,” and the “next now.” Joseph Schumpeter, the Austrian economist and ardent defender of capitalism, who in 1942 defined capitalism as “creative destruction,” unapologetically embraced the idea that obsolescence is fundamental to

capitalism. According to Schumpeter, entrepreneurial innovation is the vital force behind the progress and instability of capitalism thus explaining boom and bust cycles. Creative destruction is thus understood as one of the “iron laws” of capitalism. While capitalist enterprise and its critics have moved beyond Schumpeter’s mid-century pronouncements, it seems clear to me that what links Matta-Clark’s *Fake Estates* and his building-cut projects is that both are caught up in this net of “iron laws.” Thus, his critical perspective on capitalism remains relevant along with its impact on us.

In his recent book *Obsolescence: An Architectural History* Daniel Abramson is succinct, “Architecture and its history have lessons to teach about coming to terms with capitalism.”<sup>21</sup> He cogently argues that in the United States the idea of architectural obsolescence was birthed by the real estate industry around 1910. Since its advent in 1913 when it was created by the 16th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the U.S. Tax Code tax deduction for asset depreciation has served to reify the abstract concept of obsolescence into dollars and cents. In the dissociation of economic life-span from natural durability, economic obsolescence runs faster than physical decay and this is by design. The life-span tables in the Tax Code are politically and economically driven to benefit capital. They are not obtained from empirical building science data as to durability and structural integrity of the underlying architectural asset. So, the cycle of real estate investment, disinvestment, and reinvestment operates entirely independent of naturalized obsolescence. Unlike most material objects and consumer goods, land and works of architecture while easily neglected, abandoned, or de-valued are not easily discarded. The invention of architectural obsolescence normalized capitalism’s inclinations and offers a convenient tidy rationale for the chaotic changes it tends to foster. Though Matta-Clark is not the first artist to recognize problems with the myth of obsolescence and its implications for the production and consumption of architectural objects, he is certainly the first to attack it with crowbars and power saws.

Physical mortality is relatively predictable, whereas de-valuation arising from highly contingent market circumstance is not. To be sure, the impermanence of the built environment is the condition of possibility for virtually all of Matta-Clark’s creative output including *Fake Estates*. While he purchased these micro-parcels amidst the wholesale abandonment of erstwhile usable land and buildings it is precisely this conceptual framework—that architectural change necessarily requires wholesale or widespread expendability—that Matta-Clark wants to criticize in all his

projects.

WASTE AND OBSOLESCENCE IN ARCHITECTURE

While I think it is clear that Matta-Clark understands (if only inchoately so) the distinction between value-extraction and value-creation, and he rightly identifies many of the problems associated with value-extraction, he under-appreciates or misapprehends the potential pitfalls associated with value-creation as a tool for architectural change. These potential pitfalls also have important implications for the architect-speculator relationship. Since the early decades of the twentieth century the architectural community's response to obsolescence runs the gamut from denial through resistance to reluctant acceptance to enthusiastic embrace. Throughout most of architectural history the temporal horizon for works of architecture was characterized by gradualism—the desire for permanence but acceptance of gradual change as inevitable. The past was always present and time passed slowly. Beginning with the twentieth century fixity, permanence, and gradualism began to recede. Abramson puts it this way, “Only in the twentieth century did a place of unending ceaseless change in the built environment come to be understood as the new normal.”<sup>22</sup>

Whether, and under what circumstances, the political question of whether land parcelization is reversible gets overlooked and remains under-theorized in *Fake Estates*. Though a man of strong politics, Matta-Clark's work wants to get at the existential assumptions concerning ownership, value and, use underlying the political. Similar to archeological data, loss of information about the past is one of the pitfalls of real estate speculation as it endeavors to create economic value. Costs associated with these pitfalls are scarcely accounted for in development proformas or financial balance

“ THOUGH  
MATTA-CLARK  
IS NOT THE  
FIRST ARTIST  
TO RECOGNIZE  
PROBLEMS WITH  
THE MYTH OF  
OBSOLESCENCE  
AND ITS  
IMPLICATIONS  
FOR THE  
PRODUCTION AND  
CONSUMPTION OF  
ARCHITECTURAL  
OBJECTS, HE  
IS CERTAINLY  
THE FIRST TO  
ATTACK IT WITH  
CROWBARS AND  
POWER SAWS.”

sheets. Few real estate speculators factor ‘externalities’ such as the loss of historical-architectural data into their economic calculations.

From an ontological perspective, obsolescence is a species of impermanence whose discourse asks us to actively disengage from past-being while encouraging us to privilege incipient, emergent-being. Since their economic power is recorded temporally in architectural obsolescence, the speculator in essence presents us with a bogus historical narrative that is a false dichotomy: either passively acquiesce to the relics of an ossified dysfunctional past, or aggressively seek economic advantage over others for control of a would-be prosperous future. Although we in the architectural community are loath to admit it, and at times quick to justify it, the profession’s incessant drive towards novelty, experimentation, and the pursuit of ever-more dramatic three-dimensional form helps fuel architectural obsolescence. Our prevalent talk of the ‘relevant’ with its emergent-minded focus on ‘the germane’, ‘the immediate’, ‘the topical’, ‘the fresh’, ‘the cutting-edge’, ‘of the moment’, infuses our theory with enticing rhetoric, and inflects practice towards their seductions as Matta-Clark intimates. To the extent that we in the architectural community accept this false dichotomy by embracing a speculatively-driven obsolescence narrative, then yes, we are part of the problem. Those of us in the architecture philosophy community working to foster awareness of social justice issues need to sharpen our attitudes about the temporal composition of the future, the present, and the past. This implies the abiding necessity for a genuine understanding of the temporal processes that constitute the milieu in which we think and act. There is of course, the perennial uncertainty about what future generations will deem relevant. We can never know with certainty just what it is that our future selves will value that our present selves do not.

Under the influence of disembodied market forces, architectural obsolescence would appear to transcend politics, state influence, and individual subjective interest. It is as if human worth is being judged entirely by “objective” external standards not of human construction. In short, under speculation human dignity is relegated to the sidelines. This should not be the case. It is a mistake to portray what is essentially a complex series of interconnected value judgments as if they are disembodied objective quantifiable natural laws, because this caricature wrongly masks the essential human agency of the ones doing the judging—we the living. It is of just this sort of disempowerment that Matta-Clark warns. *Fake Estates* is simultaneously comic and tragic. Tragic because the notion of a propertied estate as the summative expression of human worth propels the

continued squandering of natural and architectural resources, and the splintering of the social space that grounds such worth. Comic—comically absurd—because the process of speculation continues to generate more of the same.

ENDNOTES

1. Les Leopold offers an abundance of empirical data on the accelerating U.S. wealth gap in *Runaway Inequality: An Activist's Guide to Economic Justice*, New York: Labor Institute Press, 2015.
2. Richard, Frances. "Mythology: the Evolution of Fake Estates, Part II," In *Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's Fake Estates*, ed. Jeffrey Kastner, Sina Najafi, and Frances Richard, 51-61. New York: Cabinet Books, 2005., p. 53.
3. Richard, Frances. "Space Between Places: The Evolution of Fake Estates, Part I," In *Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's Fake Estates*, ed. Jeffrey Kastner, Sina Najafi, and Frances Richard, 38-50. New York: Cabinet Books, 2005. p. 40.
4. Carlinsky, Dan. "'Sliver' Buyers Have a Field Day at City Sales," *New York Times*. October 14, 1973. <http://www.nytimes.com/1973/10/14/archives/sliver-buyers-have-a-fieldday>. (accessed January 6, 2018).
5. *ibid.*
6. Bessa, Antonio Sergio and Jessamyn Fiore. *Gordon Matta-Clark: Anarchitect*. New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2017., p. 10.
7. See, <http://all-that-is-interesting.com/1970s-New-York-Photos/>, (accessed July 5, 2018) and <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/30/nyregion/30books.html> (accessed July 5, 2018)
8. Richard, Frances. "Remove Your House: Gordon Matta-Clark's Physical Poetics," In *Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's Fake Estates*,

- ed. Jeffrey Kastner, Sina Najafi, and Frances Richard, 62-71. New York: Cabinet Books, 2005. p. 65.
9. Richard, Frances. "Space Between Place," p. 47.
10. Carlinsky, " 'Sliver' Buyers Have a Field Day at City Sales."
11. Richard, Frances. "Remove Your House," p. 66.
12. Lee, Pamela M. *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000., p. 103.
13. Kroessler, Jeffrey A. "Gordon Matta-Clark's Moment." In *Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's Fake Estates*, ed. Jeffrey Kastner, Sina Najafi, and Frances Richard. New York: Cabinet Books, 2005. p. 37.
14. Bois, Yve-Alain and Rosalind E. Krauss. *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York: Zone Books, 1997, p. 120.
15. Diserens, Corrinne. ed. *Gordon Matta-Clark*. New York: Phaidon Press, 2003., p. 188.
16. Lee, p. 94.
17. Wrona, Xavier. "Urbanism and Revolution: 2 or 3 Things about Gordon Matta-Clark and Georges Bataille." In *Gordon Matta-Clark: Anarchitect*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Jessamyn Fiore, New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2017, p. 96.
18. Diserens, *Gordon Matta-Clark*. p. 182.
19. Johnson, Cara M. "Directing Energy: Gordon Matta-Clark's Pursuit of Social Sculpture." In *Gordon Matta-Clark: Anarchitect*, ed. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Jessamyn Fiore, New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2017, p. 52.
20. Lee, p. 109.
21. Abramson, Daniel M. *Obsolescence: An Architectural History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 7.
22. Abramson, p. 14.