

Burdened Ground: An Architectural Essay on Land Art, Reclamation, and Post-Industrial Mining Landscapes

João Soares¹, Jared Fantasia²

¹University of Evora, Department of Architecture

²University of Porto, Faculty of Architecture FAUP

Keywords

Post-industrial mining heritage; Land Art; Reclamation; Maintenance; Robert Smithson

Taking Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty (1970) as its point of departure, this essay examines construction, materiality, entropy, reclamation, and post-industrial landscape. It considers the pertinence of Smithson's work and his attitude towards space, matter, and landscape for architecture: a way of looking more sharply at questions of construction, material behaviour, heritage, and transformation that are fundamental to architectural practice. The essay first turns to the making of Spiral Jetty and Smithson's collaboration with contractor Bob Phillips. Drawings, photographs, and Phillips's recollections reveal a recursive process of drawing, construction, observation, and revision in which machinery, unstable ground, stone grading, access, and technical expertise actively shaped the work.

Form emerged through negotiation between artistic intention, situated construction knowledge, material behaviour, and changing judgements on site. The discussion then expands from the object to the transformed territory of northern Utah. The Rozel Point oil field, railroad causeway, quarries, polluted landscapes, and Smithson's mining and reclamation proposals situate Spiral Jetty within a broader geography of extraction, infrastructure, waste, and labour. Maps and archival images recover histories often excluded by canonical aerial photographs, challenging the representation of the work as an isolated gesture in empty nature.

This reframing places entropy within construction itself, where changing site conditions and material responses generate knowledge, rather than appearing only as later decay of a finished object. Finally, reclamation is considered an architectural problem. If landscapes are already burdened by extraction, ecological change, and accumulated material histories, reclamation cannot simply return them to an imagined original condition. Instead, it can enable ecological repair and future use while preserving the legibility of disturbance, labour, waste, and transformation.