

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Void

An Introduction to
the Design Concept

Chapter Seven serves as a theoretical introduction to the primary architectural device used in the design, informed by the in-between state occupied by women in South Africa. The Void is used as a means of expression for this state but the intention is to subvert typical notions of the Void, often associated as a negative space, and instead use its innate characteristics to create a space of opportunity. This provides a space of expression for women, who are able to make use of the in-between or 'Other' position of occupation within society and use it to their advantage to create a space of their own that can be used for the pursuit of advocacy for equal representation for women in South Africa.



THOUGHTS ABOUT NOTHING

'Space is nothing, yet we have a kind of vague faith in it.'
- Robert Smithson (1996:6)

Figure 7.1 Anish Kapoor: The Origin of the World, 2004. 'The whole exhibition space is the work, with a gigantic void in a slope that rises up from the floor. The void appears endless, broadening into its depth, and seems to encroach upon the observer, controverting conventional concepts of space.' (Source: <http://www.field.io/inspiration/kapoor-turrell/>)

In this dissertation, conceptual explorations of the potential of the architectural space of the Void are discussed as an introduction to the concepts used in the design. The Void is explored as a space that *'challenges existing forms of occupation'* (Ahmed & Jameson, 2013), requiring a shift of perspective that views the Void as a negative space of nothingness to that of a space of possibility. Due to its lack of definition, the Void provides the opportunity for simultaneous trajectories to exist and enables interactions and relationships to redefine themselves as needed. The Void has use value beyond its minimalistic quality as its 'lack' offers a space of creation and sensation. In modern western philosophy, the void and emptiness are often portrayed as

negatives, with a nihilistic quality of 'nothingness manifested' and understood as an 'other space' (Ahmed & Jameson, 2013). However, in ancient eastern philosophies, the void is attributed with alternative meanings. Nothingness or zero is the origin. In Japanese philosophy, life is made up of five elements: water, air, earth, fire and void. Here, the Void is understood as the immaterial yet essential part of the physical world. Instead of nothing, the Void is something that accommodates imagination and possibility. It is the space in-between or the hollow contained within. It suggests both absence and presence and is a process involving negation – towards nothing, zero, entropy, erasure, tabula rasa (Ahmed & Jameson, 2013).



LEAP INTO THE VOID

Yves Klein and *Le Vide*

Yves Klein was an artist in post-war Europe. His works began as a reaction to abstract art, which was popular at the time. He believed that in viewing abstract art, the viewer invests their own feelings into the piece, leaving little work to be done by the artists themselves. His first works were monochrome canvasses and were presented as satires on abstract art, for not only did the pictures carry no motif, but Klein insisted there was nothing there at all, only “the void.”

From here, his work evolved to express the various meanings to be found within notions of the Void. He explored the Void as a space that ‘*frees us from thought or sensory information, thus providing peace and inspiration*’ (Maloney, 2013). To Klein, the void was the place for infinite possibility, part of an essential process of creation and sensation.

During his most famous exhibition, Klein painted the entire gallery, including all furniture, white and presented the empty spaces as his exhibition.

“My paintings are now invisible and I would like to show them in a clear and positive manner...”
-Yves Klein

Figure 7.2 Saut dans le vide, (Leap into the Void), by Yves Klein. (Source: Maloney, 2013)

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Something from Nothing

'The Hunting of the Snark' is a nonsense poem published by Lewis Carroll in 1876. It follows a crew of ten, sailing the oceans trying to hunt the 'Snark', who turns out to be a very dangerous 'Boojum' or monster. In the poem, the crew consult a map of the ocean to help them find the legendary creature. The map is an 'Ocean Chart' owned by the Bellman, one of the main characters in the book. It helps him and his crew to cross the ocean and arrive at a strange land. The absurdity of the map is that it only shows ocean, literally illustrating nothing, and therefore cannot be a very helpful navigating tool. The map plays with ideas of something and nothing, presenting the vastness of the ocean as a nothingness, yet still serving a purpose.

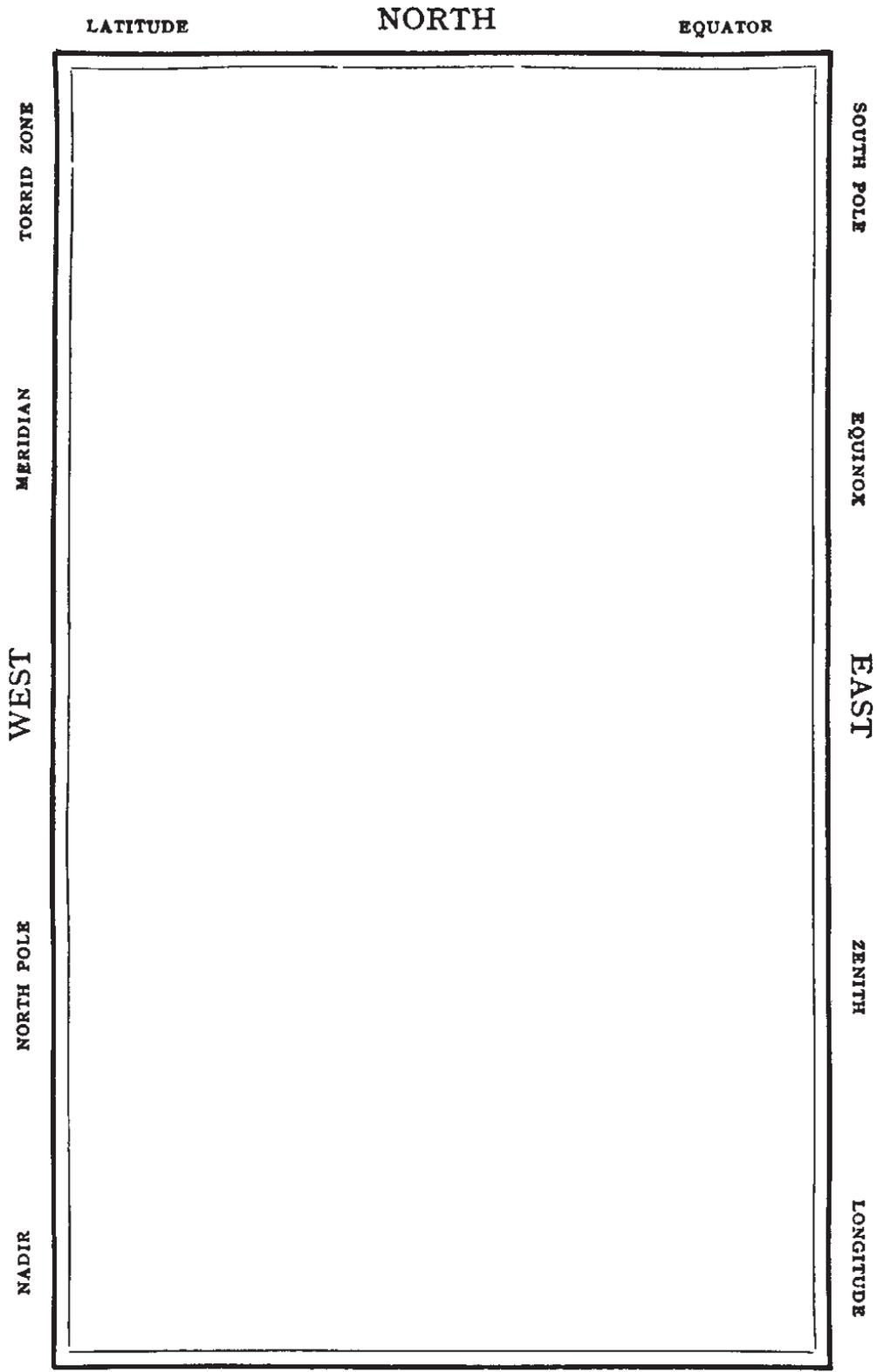
An Extract from the poem:

“He had bought a large map representing the sea,
Without the least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
A map they could all understand.
“What’s the good of Mercator’s North Poles and Equators,
Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?”
So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply
“They are merely conventional signs!
“Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!
But we’ve got our brave Captain to thank:
(So the crew would protest) “that he’s bought us the best —
A perfect and absolute blank!”

-Lewis Carroll, The Hunting of the Snark (1876)

Figure 7.3 'Ocean Chart' by Henry Holiday for The Hunting of the Snark' by Lewis Carroll, 1876. (Source: Maloney, 2013)

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Scale of Miles.

Ocean chart

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The Void as Urban Device: The Nolli Map

Considering the spatial theories that are discussed in chapter 1 of this dissertation, parallels can be drawn with that of Giambattista Nolli and his map of Rome, drawn in 1748. What both of these approaches have in common is an understanding of the social nature of space as an alternative to the static, impartial character of space presented by Euclidian perspectives. These perspectives are also evident in the figure-ground maps that are used in contemporary urban design. In figure-ground maps, voids are depicted as leftover spaces, in between the objects of buildings. The Nolli map, rather than distinguishing between interior and exterior space, distinguishes between private and civic space. Buildings can be perceived as either figure or ground due to their natures as either civic or private. The Nolli map reverses

the focus from solid, as typically done in the figure-ground map, and places the emphasis on the void. Furthermore, it adds an additional layer of understanding by allocating the 'voids' or white spaces of the map with a social quality. We read the city not only as interior/exterior or built and unbuilt but are able to understand it in terms of its social nature. Focus is placed on the voids between buildings as social space, rendering the actual footprints of buildings as less important than the public, civic spaces that surround them. Here, the void is viewed not simply as an open space but as the primary space with social and civic purpose. The void is given a dimension of the social, instead of being represented as a static and accidental. The void presents itself as the object rather than the subject.

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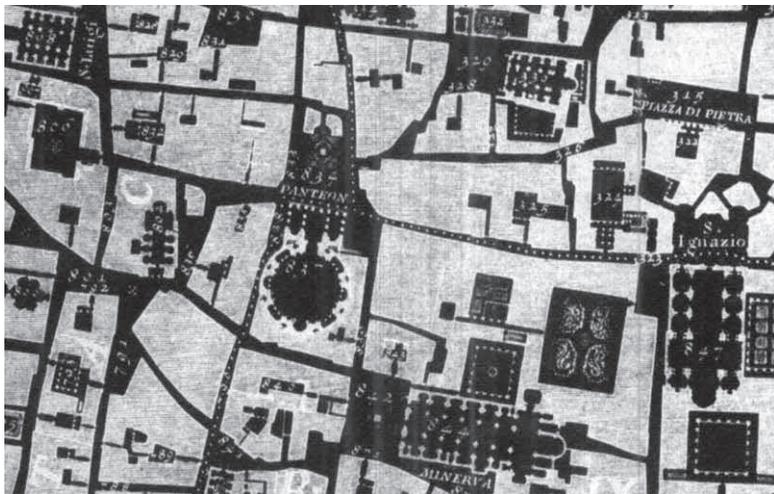
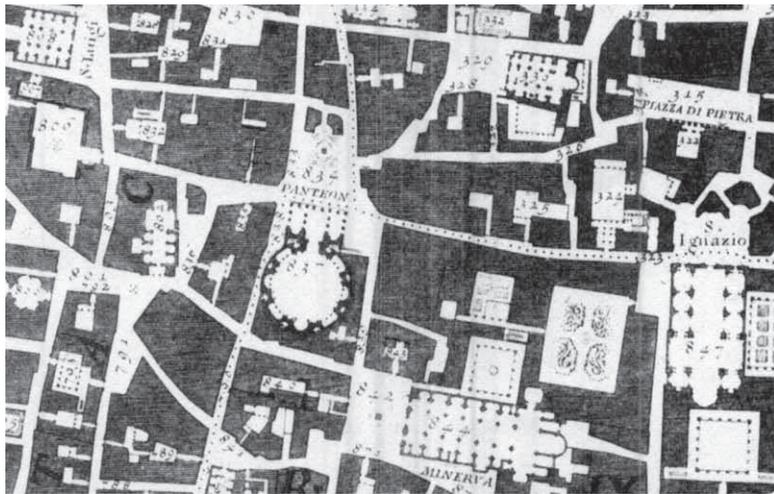


Figure 7.4 A Portion of Giambattista Nolli's map of Rome and the inverted map below. (Source: <http://tsarchitect.nsfanigan.net/?p=1116>)