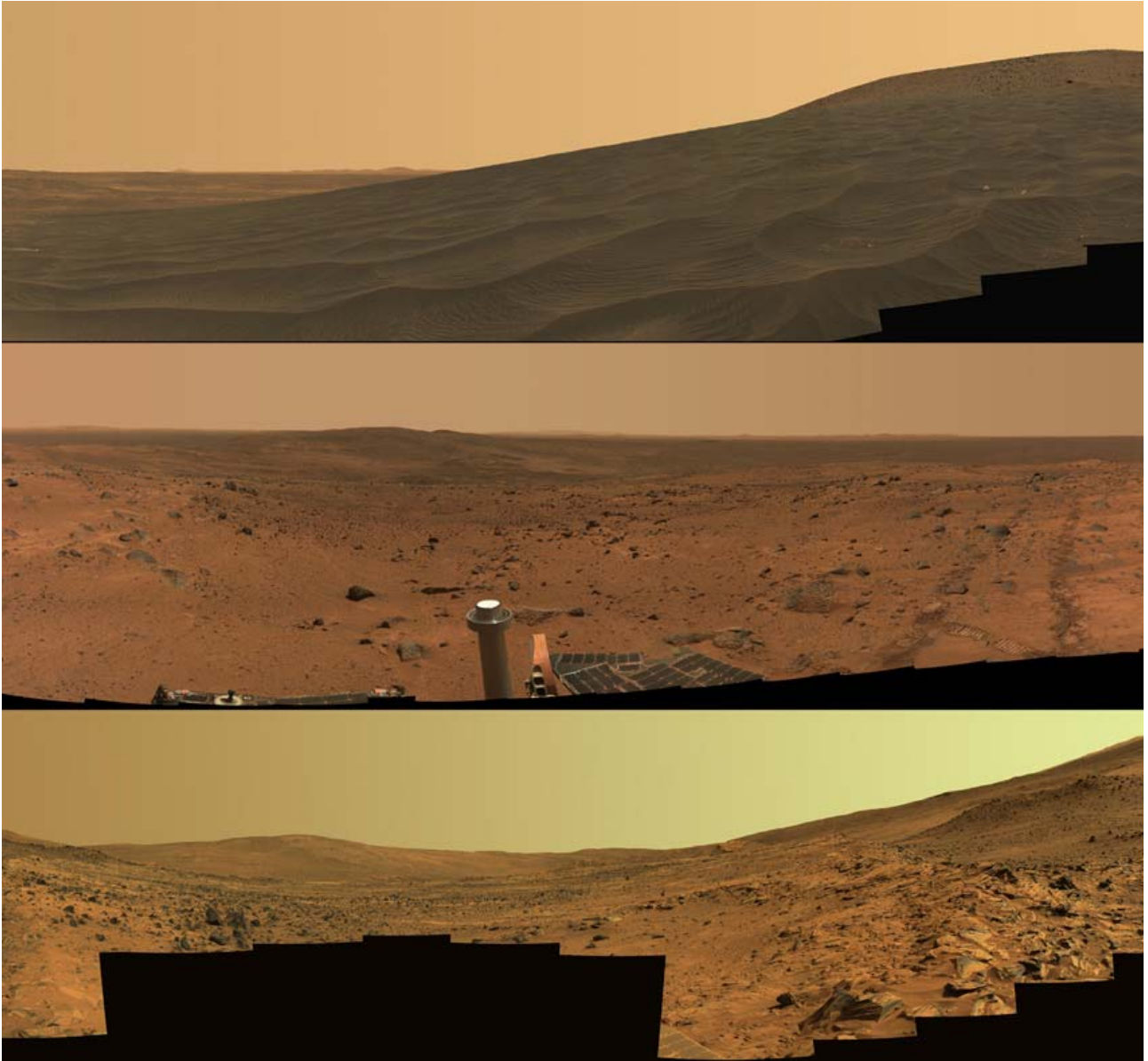


EMPTY SPACES.

by Stefan Davidovici

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Empty spaces fill me up with hope
Distant faces with no place left to go

(from Incomplete, Backstreet boys, heard on the radio)

From the strictly subjective point of view of the human species, any given place may be classified as either never seen and completely unknown, as known but untouched, or as known and artificially modelled to an extent or another.

By the nature of the profession the architects are endlessly dealing with the last category – the built environment, be it seen as individual buildings, cities or urban conglomerates. With more or less skill and imagination we are expanding it, completing it, reusing it, trying to understand it, writing about it.

Of course we perceive ourselves as individuals, but at the scale of the human species, and on a long time span, architects may well be seen as just a kind of specialised, anonymous cells slowly building, like coral, the built environment.

Out of nothing this artificial world has come into being. It took ages for it to develop and become, from a couple of palm leaves on the top of three sticks the solid layer of concrete and steel which today is the primary environment of many humans.

Who knows what the built environment will develop into. Maybe it will keep growing, covering the whole globe in an increasingly alien crust. Developing, like the parasite Australian tree-killer, a net which ends up by replacing the tree itself. Probably –hopefully far away in time- it will just disappear, together with our almost total dominance of the terrestrial surface, for one cause or another.

It is fundamental for the built environment to keep growing – it is the very principle of its existence. There are many ways to achieve growth, but the easiest one is to find new spaces to develop. Looking for new, pristine places is a drive as old as humanity itself. It seems that at the very dawn of the human species, our ancestors left the centre of Africa through the Rift Valley, to slowly colonise a world until then never seen by human eyes (1). What our ancestors found was a continuous string of places so wild that they can make the depths of today's Sahara seem Manhattan in comparison. Since then humans have many times completed encircling the Earth. Never seen places are a scarce resource those days – or at least, experiencing such a place is by no means something common today.

But we still feel instinctively the urge to keep looking for such places. Maybe this is why most westerners go yearly to the seaside, like in a mass pilgrimage for an unnoticed religion. Even a sea full of freighters still helps us ensure ourselves, unconsciously, that the world is still more than our own cities. That we are still not a schizophrenic species, closed in itself, with no place left to go. This is why the images of a far away but absolutely banal desert, made out of red dust and stones under a whitish sky, can strike so deeply.

The coloured, high quality images from the surface of Mars started to come in the late 90s with the Pathfinder and developed into a continuous stream with the NASA Rovers since 2004. They started by making the cover page of newspapers all over the world; later on they have been slipping away from the media and from public conscience. For how long, actually, can people find fascinating a desert with boulders. With some hills lying far in the distance. With no canals and not even a hint, for now, of little green guys. But with or without the agreement of media managers, the images of the dusty windy country, where the only character in view is the camera itself, are still coming from the eyes of our two zoomorphic envoys. And they are still incredible.

What is happening hasn't happened with so much acuity since our ancestors were leaving the Rift Valley 50,000 years ago. With every hundred of meters painfully covered by the rovers, our own personal eyes get to see a new place for the first time in human history. It is just a sort of supplementary irony that we can now see a new place only on the screens of our computers, without physically touching it. Even more so when the red desert we see is an understandable, familiar scale space. It is very much like some parts of the Earth, unlike interstellar landscapes of light-years wide rotating galaxies and cosmic scale nebulas. Far as we know it is, the Mars desert is a place we can easily recognise and appropriate mentally.

The effect of the Mars landscape is one of deep relief. It balances the immediate world, so saturated with stuff, that most westerners experience in the 21st century. The

humanity has been starting to suspect already that the place it takes on Earth is becoming dangerously prominent. The very sight of a place out of its reach (although abandoned packages and other spaceship scrap is already littering some areas) brings one back to the mythic times when our own planet was clean, infinite and its resources endless.

For architects, more than on anyone else, the relief effect may be even deeper. For anyone involved with the built environment the idea that its absolute opposite, a place free of anything, exists somehow in the range of our perception can only be refreshing. Oh my God what a place to build something.

Notes:

1 – Bill Bryson, 'A short history of nearly everything', Black Swan 2004, page 548

For more about the Mars rovers see <http://marsrovers.jpl.nasa.gov/home/index.html>

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