The Lay Of The Land
Spring 1999

"You are not wasting your time if you are someplace where you have never been"
- Damon Faragut

In the Gallery
Monuments of Displacement
The Aerial Photographs of Bill DuBois

This vast landscape transformations of open pit mining can only be truly comprehended from the air, and Bill DuBois’ photographs of mines, displayed in the Center’s Los Angeles exhibition space from February 13 to April 20, depict the staggering intensity of these man-made landscapes with an unusual clarity.

These oblique aerial images show multicolored evaporation ponds, cascading layers of tailings piles, and huge stepped pits in the remote mountains of Nevada. Nevada is the precious metals mining capital of the country, with more than 50 major mining operations employing over 13,000 people, producing gold, silver, tungsten, and many other valuable minerals.

Mr. DuBois has been conducting aerial surveys of the major mines in Nevada every few years, starting in 1975, when he served as the state inspector of mines. In 1981 he changed jobs, and donated the collection of 1,500 photographs from the previous six years of photography to the Bureau of Mines at the University of Nevada at Reno.

Field Report
The Geographical Center of the Lower 48 United States, at Lebanon, Kansas

First in a Thematic Extrapolation Series Examining Centers

There is no such thing as the geographical center of any state, country or continent.
- G. M. Adams, Senior Mathematician, United States Coast and Geodetic Survey

Just outside of Lebanon Kansas stands a pyramidal stone monument with a brass plaque inscribed with a bold declaration - "The Geographic Center of the United States." The monument was ceremoniously installed at this site in 1940 (before Alaska and Hawaii joined the union) by the locally run Hub Club, despite the fact that everyone in town was aware that the geographical center was actually elsewhere. According to their own calculations, the "actual" lower 48 center was three-quarters of a mile away, in the middle of a hog farm. But the farmer, Mr. Johnny Gris, was reluctant to turn his farm into a tourist attraction, so the hilltop site was selected instead.

Forty-two miles south of Lebanon, a sign and plaque announce another center: the "Geodetic Center of North America." This sign makes no claims at being the geodetic center itself, rather it indicates that the actual geodetic center lies on private property eight miles away, in the fields of Smith's Ranch, where it is marked with a small bronze geodetic survey marker.

Neither of these monuments should be confused with the Geographic Center of the United States (when you include Alaska and Hawaii), which sits seventeen miles west of Castle Rock, South Dakota, or the Geographic Center of North America, fifteen miles

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U.S. Geographical Center Monument, Lebanon, Kansas. CREDIT: Photo

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Making any official declaration, this early endorsement was enough to enable Lebanon's Hub Club to claim its center as official, beating a few other competing communities for the title, which, it was assumed, could lead to considerable tourist revenue, and literally put the community on the map.

The state of Kansas pitched in to help the poor agricultural town develop its new attraction by paving the one mile stretch off the highway to the monument, and a few years later a motel was built overlooking the monument. But the tourists only trickled in to this remote place, near the Nebraska state line, and the motel closed in just a few years, and never opened again.

Lebanon has experienced an even greater decline in recent years, suffering as badly as any small Kansas town without a job base. The school closed in the 1980's, the stately and crumbling Victorian houses are being bought up by Californian investors, and the motel is now owned by a group from Texas that visits once a year during hunting season.

This center, however, remains on the map, a testament to the collective need to find the middle of things. The park around the monument is still maintained by the Hub Club, and a little mobile chapel, with four tiny pews, sits nearby, a manifestation of the spiritual dimension of centrness and balance. Immutably, we all know that every shape has a middle, and every country has a center—a heart.

The scientists at the Geodetic Survey, feeling out of place in this subjective and emotional realm, have opted out of the search for centers altogether. Oscar S. Adams, Senior Mathematician for the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey wrote in an early essay on the subject, "Since there is no definite way to locate such a point, it would be best to ignore it entirely... the conclusion is forced upon us that there is no such thing as the geographical center of any state, country, or continent." But then he concedes, "This is a case in which all may differ but all be right."

The Geographical Center of the United States
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south west of Rugby, North Dakota.

Even if we could agree on which, if any, of these centers is the most significant, we would be wrong to assume that the spots the markers indicate are objective and accurate. Many variables exist when calculating the center of a land mass as large as the United States, and selective criteria and methods can be used, from the selection of different map projections, to defining the periphery of the shape with varying degrees of accuracy.

The Lebanon, Kansas "center," in fact, was determined by cutting the shape of the lower 48 states out of a cardboard sheet, and balancing it on a point. This determination of the "center of gravity" of the country (or at least of a jagged piece of cardboard) was used by the Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1918, and placed the center of the lower 48 states at 39° 50' N, longitude 98° 35' W latitude. This method, even at its best, is believed to be accurate only within ten or twenty miles. Though the Geodetic Survey would later regret
CLUI Hosts Visiting Austrians
Two Day Tour Highlights Art in the Desert and Tests CLUI’s FM Transmitter

Students and professors of the University of Linz Department of Experimental Visual Design participated in a two day CLUI led tour of sites in Southern California desert. Each year a class from this highly conceptual art department spends a year in America visiting culturally significant sights and attending lectures by artists, theorists and architects.

Artie Noah Portifoy leads the group on a tour through his sculpture garden. CLUI Photo

Day one of the tour featured a visit with artist Noah Portifoy, who led a tour of his outdoor studio/sculpture garden located outside of Twentynine Palms. Portifoy uses objects scavenged and donated to create large mixed-media sculptures. The harsh sun and strong winds of the desert complete the works, adding a weathered patina to the bowling balls, toilets, clothes, scrap metal, and wood that make up Portifoy’s palate.

Other sites examined by the group on day one included the Giant Rock at Landers (former residence of an alleged German spy, and later the test pilot/UFO proponent George Van Tassel), where the Californian urbanized desert recreational environment performed well for the guests; dirt bikers buzzed about like bees, and gun shots echoed around the shell casing-littered ground.

Artie Leonard Knight leads the group up the Salvation Mountain. CLUI Photo

Leonard Knight, the creator of Salvation Mountain, led visitors up the face of his enormous adobe and paint monument at Slab City. Despite the duties of recent notoriety, including hosting an increase in visitors, and the occasional trip to a museum or gallery where his work is featured, Leonard still finds time to work on the mountain (especially at night, under a bright moon) and has recently built a small, enclosed chapel out of adobe and hay bales.

After a glamorous evening in El Centro and more stops along the Salton Sea, the two-day journey concluded with an architectural tour of Palm Springs, a city that contains a number of interesting modernist buildings that blend into the desert landscape in inspiring and beautiful ways. Richard Neutra’s Kaufmann house (designed for the same family that commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright’s Falling Water), for example, has been recently restored to museum quality, though it is still a private residence (owned by a grocery store chain executive). It sits next door to an Albert Frey house, built for the industrial designer Raymond Loewy. And across town is a block-long set of steel prototype houses designed by Donald Wexler for U.S. Steel.

The newly restored Kaufmann House. CLUI Photo

The CLUI used the tour to test a new low-power FM radio transmitter to broadcast live tour information, directions, and selections of music to the cars following behind the lead vehicle. The CLUI hopes to use this technology both for tours and for stationary interpretive transmissions, inspired by the AM transmitters operated by municipalities around the country that broadcast traffic, airport conditions, and tourist information.

CLUI vehicle, equipped with FM transmitter, leads our caravan. CLUI Photo

The Lay of the Land Spring, 1999
Fire Lookout
Life Atop a Unique Aerial Structure
by Sara Irving

I have spent sixteen summers as a fire lookout on Mogollon Baldy Lookout in the Gila National Forest of southwestern New Mexico. At 10,770 feet the mountain is the highest and the most remote of the ten fire lookout stations within the national forest. The lookout lies in the middle of the half million-acre Gila Wilderness and the shortest trail access is twelve miles along the edge of the Mogollon Mountains. Winters vary due to the southern latitude, but harsh winters force an approach through the deeply incised canyons on the south side, a rough seventeen-mile trip with a five thousand-foot elevation gain.

Fire lookout towers were built and staffed in the latter part of the nineteenth century, their growth progressing from east to west, like that of the country. The desire to protect private property from forest fires created fire suppression policies that naturally included fire detection. Lookouts reached their peak in the 1950’s and have been declining in number ever since. Many lookout towers are no longer staffed, particularly in more heavily populated areas on the east and west coasts where timbering and development have diminished their need. Some have become recreation sites. Many have been dismantled.

The job of a fire lookout is one that has been heavily romanticized. People envision a lone, rugged individual who braves the elements in a beautiful and wild place. It is true that my days on the mountain are often filled with sunsets, silence, rivers of aspen in the wind, the calls of elk at dusk. But here are also different truths, rarely spoken of. I am enveloped in a sublime view, yet my job involves a particularly distanced kind of looking - a separation, a zooming in with binoculars which creates fragments of a whole. I also map the land, plotting fires to the specifics of their legal description, reducing the landscape to coordinates of latitude and longitude. The weather can be both inspiring and miserable, with winds up to sixty miles an hour, hail and snow. There are long periods of solitude, but hikers, horse packers, and Boy Scout troops visit. The silence is broken during fire season by the sounds of helicopters and slurry planes, and the firefighting tactical maneuvers are a constant static over the radio. At night I trace the satellites, the stars, small town lights, the distant sting, mine a harsh yellow glow in desert blackness. Like most places, the tower is a site full of dichotomies.

Mogollon Baldy Peak has been used for fire detection since 1913, when the lookout rode up daily from the spring at Snow Park, two miles to the south, and used a protractor placed on a stump to site fires. The traditional log cabin was built in 1923, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The wooden tower, built in 1917, was replaced by the current thirty-foot steel structure in 1948. It has a wooden cabin on top, and is surrounded by a steel and wood catwalk for viewing.

While there are amenities, which include a propane cookstove and refrigerator as well as a wood stove, life remains primitive on the mountain and all supplies are packed in by mule. Water is collected from gutters along the cabin roof, stored in a cistern, and hauled by buckets. There is no electricity. The Forest Service radio used for communication are run by batteries, and lighting is by kerosene lamps and candles. The tower has a lightning rod and is grounded by copper wire, providing safety for the lookout, though a direct lightning strike is still a literally hair-raising experience.

The Gila National Forest has a short but intense fire season that runs from late April until the rainy season arrives sometime in July. High winds and temperatures in May and June contribute to the fire danger. There is dry lightning as the monsoon season approaches. The tower has been threatened several times by wildfires. In 1996 a fire started on a ridge to the southwest of the mountain when fire conditions were so extreme that the forest was closed to public use. Drought conditions and the prevailing southwest winds combined to burn 15,000 acres, eventually coming to within twenty feet of the cabin. The spruce and fir forest on the north face of the mountain
was burned, but wildflowers and aspen saplings are returning, part of the larger natural cycle of fire in the wilderness. None of us will be here when the next generation of climax forest returns to Mogollon Baldy. No doubt air surveillance and other technological innovations will eventually replace the fire lookout station as we know it. I suspect that the mountain will some day revert to its former wilderness, much like the regeneration of the fire-scarred forest. I have visited several lookout sites in the Gila where the towers have been dismantled. Sites that are not regularly used and maintained can become dangerous to the public, and the Gila Wilderness Act of 1964 specified removal of all unused structures within the wilderness boundary. There are remains - concrete foundations, bedsprings and pieces of wood stoves half-buried, various unidentified artifacts. As a culture we are not good at endings. We have a need to leave traces, some proof of our existence. Ruins are one way that we honor our dialog with the landscape, in all its rich and bewildering complexity.

The Gila National Forest. Photo by Sara Irving

Firelookout, part of a Center's Windover Residency Program in the Spring of 1999.

A map of the Gila National Forest. Photo by Sara Irving

Firelookouts Through Time

The rallying cry of modernist architecture, that form should follow function, receives perhaps its greatest expression not in the works of twentieth century architects, but in the trial and error methods used to develop utilitarian buildings. Fire lookouts, built in remote high altitude locations and designed to withstand extreme winds, blizzards and earthquakes, are some of the most improbable utilitarian structures. These remote mountain top buildings, some complete woodframe houses hoisted atop spindly towers, others little more than a seat on top of an improbably high tree, have all been defined by the landscape they rest upon and the purpose they serve. The earliest fire lookouts of the late nine-teenth century consisted of little more than a tent and a tree, which the lookout would scale several times a day. Eventually, crow's nests were nailed to the top of these trees, and by the 1920s the federal government began a massive building campaign, establishing a network of more substantial structures across the hillslopes of America. Since the 60s, aerial surveillance, video equipment and infrared sensing devices, as well as a "let it burn" policy has drastically reduced the number of lookouts. The romance of living atop a lonely mountain, and the enforced solitude and contemplation of the job, has inspired a number of writers to work as fire lookouts. The season after Gary Snyder's stay in a fire lookout shack, Jack Kerouac took up residence in the same building on Sourough Mountain in the Cascades in the summer of 1956. Kerouac's Dharma Bums, inspired by Snyder's Buddhism and mountain sojourns, ends with the protagonist (Kerouac) falling to his knees on the floor of the lookout shack in a prayer of thanks for the beauty of nature that surrounds him. (Left) Devils Mountain Lookout, since 1916-1935. (Right) Sister's Lookout, a 101 foot tower in Oregon. Photos from Fire Lookouts of the Northwest.

The Legacy of the Land Spring, 1999
Books Noted
A sampling of books new to the shelves of The Center's library

Atomic Spaces: Living on the Manhattan Project, by Peter Bacon Hales, University of Illinois Press, 1997

Atomic Spaces is the story of the Manhattan Project from a land use and cultural, not a technical, perspective, tracing the acquisition of land, its development, and the effect of the program on workers and the local population. Using a vast archive of material amassed by the government Hales compiles a detailed history of the Manhattan Project's impact on the physical and psychological landscape.

Extreme Conditions: Big Oil and the Transformation of Alaska, by John Strohmeyer, Simon and Schuster, 1993

Since the oil rush replaced the gold rush, Alaska's economy and politics have revolved around oil. Journalist Strohmeyer follows the path of oil money that has transformed the political landscape of Alaska.

Fire Lookouts of the Northwest, by Ray Kresek, Historic Lookout Project, 1998

This is an exhaustive catalog of fire lookout towers in that region, full of photographs, biographies, and anecdotes. With hundreds of photos depicting a baffling array of building styles, from crew's nests atop trees, to wood frame buildings perched on narrow rocks, to elaborate stone structures, this is an architectural history both obsessive and sublime.

Go Tell It on the Mountains, Stackpole Books, 1996.

In this collection of essays and journal writings, fire lookouts share their lonely, and when lighting approaches, dangerous life atop the mountains of the west. From bear attacks to hallucinogenic mushroom ordeals, this collection of anecdotes chronicles the isolated lives of fire lookouts.


Around and beyond the earth's atmosphere lies a man-made haze of radio signals, an electromagnetic sphere of information. The Handbook of Radio & Wireless Technology provides a technical overview of transmission technology, from radio and TV to cell phones, satellites, and navigation systems.

Houses in Motion: The Genesis, History and Development of the Portable Building, by Robert Kronenburg, Academy Editions, 1995

Often neglected and designated by architects, and historians, Kronenburg takes the stance that portable buildings offer viable solutions to economic and design problems. Houses in Motion traces the history of portable structures from Tipis and shipbuilding to the development of trailers and 20th century experimental structures. The book is perhaps most valuable for the last chapter which tackles the image and identity of portable structures and the people that inhabit them.

The Pacific Tourist: The 1884 Illustrated Trans-Continental Guide of Travel from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, edited by Frederic E. Shober, Crosses Publishers, 1970

A facsimile edition of a tourist guide published in 1884 and sponsored by the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads to draw tourists to the west. A valuable historical resource, this book contains a guide to each city served by the railroad, some that have grown into urban centers and others that have vanished from the map. The Pacific Tourist provides a glimpse at what the landscape and cities of the west looked like before and during their transformation by tourism and migration.

Railroad Wrecks, by Edgar A. Hain, Cormwall Books, 1993

While transforming the landscape and revolutionizing mass transit, the railroad has also produced a fair amount of carnage. Combining Ballad-esque accident evocative with train spotting, Railroad Wrecks falls into the popular genre of coffee table disaster books.


Lost in the storm of negative publicity surrounding the Rajneeshi takeover of Antelope, Oregon and the subsequent charges of election fraud, theft, and sexualized possessions, was the story of the development of a huge self-sufficient commune. As its height Rajneeshpuram could support festival crowds of 15,000 people with its own reservoir, organic farm, post office, vineyard, and even its own airline. Consisting of essays by followers who remain true believers to this day, Weber's book lacks objectivity and polish, but it does contain some inside information on the development of Rajneeshpuram's complex and short-lived infrastructure.


In this gonzo-journalistic endeavor, Outside magazine editor Tim Cahill tells the story of his 15,000 mile journey from Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic Circle in a GM truck. Battling customs bureaucrats and bad roads, Cahill completes the journey in less than twenty-four months and makes the Guinness Book of World Records for the longest drive south to north.


Webber, whose publishing empire also publié Rajneeshpuram, Who Were Its People, has amassed an exhaustive history of suppressed and forgotten attacks by the Japanese on North America during World War II. The book details Japanese balloon bomb launches from Japan and carried in the Gulf Stream to targets all over the U.S., attempts to start forest fires with incendiary bombs, and air raids on metropolitan areas.


Jandl's book catalogs a set of retro-futuristic buildings that put the materials of the industrial revolution together with mass production and prefabrication. Most of these innovations in building techniques and materials have since been incorporated into the building vernacular, but the bold, undisguised use of metal, glass and concrete as design elements in residential architecture has failed to catch on. While few homeowners today live in houses with steel or concrete clad walls, many tract homes in the endless suburbs of America sit atop concrete slabs and have walls containing steel studs instead of wood. Lavishly illustrated, this is a post-modern take on modernism, where the optimistic use of new building technologies and industrial materials takes on, in retrospect, a sense of senescence and folly.
**The Center for Land Use Interpretation Shop**

**Ordering Information:**
Please add $3.00 shipping and handling for the first item, $0.50 for each additional item, and 8.25% tax if ordering in California. Make checks or money orders payable to The CLUI. Mail to: The Center for Land Use Interpretation, 9311 Venice Boulevard, Culver City CA 90232. Phone: (310) 839-5722

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**CLUI Publications**

- **The Nevada Test Site: A Guide to America’s Nuclear Proving Ground**
  - The only book available that describes the nation’s known nuclear weapons and R&D test sites facility.
  - Printed by both antimatter printers and Department of Energy officials!
  - 60 pages, fold-out map and over 100 illustrations and original CLUI photographs.
  - $12.50

- **Hinterland Catalog**
  - Illustrated catalog of the 100 sites included in the 1997 CLUI exhibit. Hinterland: A Voyage into Eastern Southern California.
  - 119 pages.
  - $13.50

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  - Illustrated workbook in this remarkable, 210-mile roadway. A perfect weekend-long trip from Los Angeles.
  - 80 pages.
  - $12.50

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  - "An in-depth investigation of other cities."
  - Self-guided tour of a portion of Oakland, California's industrial waterfront.
  - Published by the CLUI.
  - 24 pages, illustrated booklet.
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  - An illustrated history of this remarkable engineering accomplishment, the largest indoor hydraulic model in the world, now abandoned.
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  - A report on the primary test sites scattered across the globe, and the hundreds of other sites where nuclear blasts took place on, beside, and above the earth, in the former USSR, USA, Africa, Australia, Pacific Ocean, and elsewhere.
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  - $7.50

- **Around Vanderhoof**
  - An Examination of the Suburban Landscape of the Great Salt Lake Desert Region.
  - A guidebook to "points of interest" in this special American landscape, with maps and directory information.
  - 62 pages.
  - $12.00

- **Subterranean Renovations**
  - The Unique Architectural Spaces of These Caves
  - Examines the phenomena and describes and depicts some of the best show environments in the United States, with comment and vacation information. From the CLUI catacomb.
  - 30 pages.
  - $5.00

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**CLUI Newsletter**

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**The Lay of the Land**

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  - Specify size (S, L, XL, XXL).
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  - Offers views of 14 of the CLUI's Suggested Photo Spots!
The Lay Of The Land

Spring, 1999

Upcoming CLUI Events
April 23 to June 27, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Center’s exhibit, Commonwealth of Technology: Replacements on the Contemporary Landscape of Massachusetts includes more than 50 photographs in an installation that is part of “Landscape: Outside the Frame” at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s List Visual Arts Center in Massachusetts. As part of the exhibit a bus tour, led by the CLUI, will visit sites in the field. Tour is on May 1, Call (617) 253-4400 for more information.
June 12 to July 29, Seattle, Washington: CLUI exhibit about Washington State will be featured as part of the “Land/Loss/Action” exhibit at Seattle’s Center for Contemporary Art. Two bus tours and a high-speed boat tour are planned on the weekends of June 13 and 20th. Call (206) 728-1960 for more information.
June 23-27, Wendover, Utah: Annual Volunteer “Work Party” at the Center’s Wendover Complex. Work includes the restoration of two more buildings that the Center has leased on the abandoned airstrip. Call (310) 839-5722 if you want to participate.
Other upcoming exhibits and events at the Center’s Los Angeles exhibit hall this summer include a presentation of recently discovered information about the creation of Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty, by Stratton scholar Hikaru Ogawa, and an installation and presentation by nuclear artist James Acevedo, as well as an installation and presentation of the work of postcard maker Merle Powers, by Sabrina Marlo.

The Center for Land Use Interpretation is a nonprofit research organization dedicated to improving the collective understanding of the human-made environment. If you would like to assist with any of the projects mentioned in this newsletter, or any other project mentioned in CLUI literature, please contact The Center. All gifts are tax-deductible.

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The Center for Land Use Interpretation may be contacted in the following manner:
9331 Venice Boulevard, Culver City, CA 90232 USA
(310) 839-5722
Fax (310) 839-5603
e-mail: clui@clui.org
www.clui.org

CLUI Corps:
Sarah Siemens, Mark Curtis, Melissa Stone, Igee Vazquez, Dave Vanni, Amy Russell, Dan Grayson, Matthew Coughlan, Lacy Lim, Chris Kelle, Dana Wilson, John Alconas, Jon Flanagan, Sabrina Marko, John Freisch, Kelly Coyne, Suzanne Mott, Erik Karran, Lisa Magee

Newsletter Editors:
Erik Karran
Sarah Siemens
Matthew Coughlan