Fig. 33

Fig. 34

Fig. 33
Leslie Street Spit, the Outer Harbour East Headland under construction, 1971. (PortsToronto Archives, PC14/11291)

Fig.34
Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. (© 2020 Holt / Smithson Foundation and Dia Art Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS) / Photograph by Gianfranco Gorgoni © Estate of Gianfranco Gorgoni)

Let the Spit Be!!

Robert Burley

In 1970 the artist Robert Smithson embarked on the building of his most famous earthwork, the *Spiral Jetty*, at Rozel Point on the northeastern shore of the Great Salt Lake, Utah. Constructed of mud, salt crystals, and basalt rocks, the monumental structure formed a 1,500-foot-long, 15-foot-wide coil jutting from the shore of the lake. *Spiral Jetty* was typical of the American Land Art Movement, which espoused creating artworks outside commercial galleries, using natural materials that were site-specific. Smithson was reportedly attracted to the Rozel Point site because of its stark anti-pastoral beauty, and, less predictably, a nearby cluster of industrial remnants from the nearby Golden Spike National Historic Site, as well as an old pier and a few abandoned oil rigs. The contradiction made sense. The sculpture sprang from a confluence of Smithson's widespread interests: the environment, geology, and history. In the myriad of essays and books written on the subject of the *Spiral Jetty*, you can read about its relationship to the modern environmental movement and its ties to universal motifs expressed across time and the cosmos. The spiral form, for instance, can be found in the vestiges of ancient civilizations, in galaxies and nebulae in outer space, or natural forces on our own planet such as whirlpools and tornadoes. Smithson himself wrote: "I like landscapes that suggest prehistory. As an artist it is interesting to take on a persona of a geological agent and actually become part of that process rather than overcome it." The *Spiral Jetty* accomplishes just that. It's a man-made adjunct to a piece of natural landscape, as mutable as its setting is to the whims of water levels and erosion, the face of nature itself. And not simply just as mutable but just as unpredictable. "The route to the site is very indeterminate," Smithson added. "It's important because it [the access] is an abyss between the abstraction and the site; a kind of oblivion."

In the same year, 1970, that Robert Smithson began moving boulders and earth in Utah, a similar landform was taking shape on the waterfront of the City of Toronto. Like the *Spiral Jetty*, it was constructed mostly of dirt and rock deposited by dump trucks and bulldozers. Like Smithson's work it extended out into a lake (Lake Ontario in this case) and offered a single-entry point that led to a particular end point. But it was not the brainchild of a human mind, creative or otherwise. In fact, by this time "the Spit," as it was then known, was no longer associated with any practical idea or purpose beyond its function as a repository for the rubble of demolished buildings in the city's downtown core. The Spit was a dump.

So while the *Spiral Jetty* in 1970 was a focal point in an isolated mountainous landscape that would one day be known as one of the seminal artworks of the twentieth century, the Spit was just one more element of Toronto's chaotic industrial waterfront, along with generating stations and holding areas for coal, oil, and salt; public beaches, grassroots sailing clubs, and unmanaged wild areas. And where the *Spiral Jetty* would one day be described as "a convoluted question mark that casts doubt on man's relationship to the land," the Spit in 1970 looked more like a sagging and slightly sad exclamation mark in search of a sentence. In fact, the Spit had originally been intended to frame an active commercial harbour, but that idea was quashed by changes in cargo shipping along the Great Lakes. And so the site joined many other lost North American

urban landscapes in the latter part of the twentieth century: detritus left by short-sighted planning decisions, the rise of car culture, and urban sprawl.

It's fascinating to wonder today what Robert Smithson would have made of the Spit if he had seen it in his lifetime. It had, after all, the key quality that defined Smithson's chosen sites – those "disrupted by industry, reckless urbanization, or nature's own devastation." It also satisfied Smithson's idea of an anti-romantic "reverse ruin," literally rising up the way it did from the broken bricks and mortar that once constituted the pre-modernist buildings of downtown Toronto. But the Spit also diverged from the *Spiral Jetty* in a way that made it unique. The *Jetty* was remote, requiring a two-hour drive from Salt Lake City, a trip best-suited for four-wheel drive vehicles, at the end of which there were no bathrooms, food to purchase, fresh water, fuel, or cellphone towers. What was startling about the *Spiral Jetty* was its imposition of human geometry on wilderness. What was startling about the Spit, though, was the metropolis looming over it a five-minute walk away. The Spit was the nature of nature wedded to the nature of the city. It had no inhabitants and no history, but its evolution into a hybrid ecological wonder had started already. And almost no one noticed.

When the world did turn its attention to the Spit, in fact, it brought the standard package of perspectives for its "improvement." First came a government-sponsored scheme for an Aquatic Park, which was met with a lukewarm response, then a call for proposals. One early submission from an auto parts company began with the statement: "Toronto is a great city but parts of it make you sick to see them." The remedy that followed described a 400-acre factory complex that included housing, parks, and a school. Subsequent proposals reflected the conventional view that the Spit – or Tommy Thompson Park, as it had come to be known – was an eyesore, a derelict stretch of land in a prime location, at best a blank slate to be filled in or a neglected stretch of scrub in desperate need of a makeover. Proposals for wave pools, wind farms, a theme park modelled on a nineteenth-century seaside village, a golf academy, an airport, and, yes, a casino were included in the 50-plus submissions that were received annually by City Council. Time passed, and more time, and on May 10, 1996, a scan of a handwritten note emerged from the fax machine in the offices of the City of Toronto Executive Committee:

> I am faxing this note to indicate to the committee that I am strongly against any development of the spit or the base of the spit. There are acres of unused land nearby which has no special environmental use – LET THE SPIT BE!!

It was a sentiment that would have been echoed by one of the handful of perspicacious people who had noticed what was happening on the Spit under the city's collective nose: the force behind the book you're reading, Walter Kehm. As Walter describes in his introductory essay, he had fallen under the spell of the Spit and its unique ecology close to the time Robert Smithson was looking out at Great Salt Lake in Utah and seeing a counter-clockwise spiral in his mind's eye. But it was only in the mid-80s, when it had been finally recognized that the Spit was shaping up to be an "environmentally significant area," and its fate was placed in the hands of the local conservation authority, that Walter was officially recruited to help in its design. His mandate: to alter the site to accommodate the explosion of flora and fauna that was colonizing it. Master plans were drawn up by Walter and his team in 1986 and adopted in 1993.

But while funds were made available to begin this transformation, they did not, remarkably, include money for all the elements we commonly associate with parks: public facilities, parking, grassy playing fields, beaches, or carefully planted promenades lined with trees and flowerbeds. It was determined instead that this new landform would have a dual purpose: On the weekends it would be accessible to the public so they could explore its natural wonders, and during the week it would revert to its long-held role of landfill site accessible only to the dump trucks that began lining up in the early morning. The mantra of "Let the Spit be!!" became a battle cry for a

growing constituency of birders, cyclists, and naturalists who had discovered the Spit's off-beat splendour and who began to actively fight off any suggestion about disrupting the natural succession that had taken over. It had taken four decades, but finally, at least on one stretch of the north shore of Lake Ontario, society's idea of what nature should look like had shifted and finally embraced Smithson's idea of "the anti-pastoral" as a phenomenon that might even be, well … beautiful. Tommy Thompson Park today might be home to birds of all kinds, sunken woods, and meadows of native and non-native plants, but it's also defined by chain link fences, shorelines made up of rebar and concrete slabs, and smokestacks visible from nearby industrial complexes.

In the end, perhaps the greatest genius of the Spit is the thing Robert Smithson called "the dialectical landscape"; it has become a place where the natural and artificial features of the terrain have merged. Hence, today visitors to the park admire the vistas of Lake Ontario while studying how the effects of the water have reshaped the bricks, glass, and concrete forms making up the beach. Or they are mesmerized by the ways that a tangle of rebar and the branches of a mulberry tree have intermingled over time. Ultimately there is an engagement and fascination with the collision of the natural and artificial components in a place that is physically in the city but, in many ways, feels very much outside of it. It can all be traced back to Walter Kehm's original master plan, which was informed by a very deliberate decision to fully embrace patience and time in combination with the unexpected and accidental. This is not to say that Tommy Thompson Park is some kind of fortuitous mistake. No significant imaginative creation is. Rather, its strength lies in how it provides a perfect setting for the tricky *pas de deux* between nature and culture, along with the understanding that every transcendent relationship requires the grace of acceptance. On a spring morning, as the five-kilometre trail to the Spit's lighthouse fills up with joggers, birders, cyclists, and photographers (yours truly among them), it's still possible to hear the mantra of this place sung by a chorus of voices that include people, birds, and all other life forms to be found herein:

"Let the Spit be!!"