

THE ARCHITECT PAINTER VISION QUEST: SIGNIFICANT PLACE. Ultimately, all architectures we call great, let alone those we call serious, answer this question: *How do we make in this world a Significant Place to be?* Because the word *building* derives from an ancient word that means "to be." And a truly Significant Place feels important, influential, or special—because it means something. And so we wonder: How can we construct an enduring dwelling? A shelter from the ordinary and the unbearable? A refuge for contemplation and invention? A precinct of poetry and order? A sanctuary for imagination, study, work and rest? How can we establish foundations—for a paradise regained? How can we structure the solid and the void of human existence, the visible and the invisible, make manifest the ardent will to form and the relentless demand to mean, and realize the presence of transcendent architectures that illumine the mind and move the heart, that uplift the eyes and stir the soul? How can we make of building art? How can we make an architecture that reflects the architecture of our being? An architecture that gives outer expression to the ontology of our inner vision? How can we disclose the true form of the edifice of the world . . . through exquisite reflections of beauty and intelligence in habitable form? Architecture presents limitless possibilities for expression of Significant Form and Significant Space: Significant Place.

THE ARCHITECT PAINTER JEF7REY HILDNER LOOKS AT THE FLIP SIDE OF THE COIN INTRODUCED BY EARLY 20TH-CENTURY CRITIC CLIVE BELL. BELL FOCUSED ON WHAT HE CALLED "SIGNIFICANT FORM." HILDNER FOCUSES ON WHAT HE CALLS "SIGNIFICANT SPACE."

Note: An expanded version of this essay appears in [Henry Trucks—Painter](#).

Significi *Spacecraft*

"Perhaps the only entirely new and probably the most important aspect of today's language of forms is the fact that 'negative' elements (the remainder, intermediate, and subtractive quantities) are made active." —Joseph Albers

SIGNIFICANTSPACE **Turning a negative into a positive in the landscapes (and walls) of modern art**



DESIGNING THE VISUAL FIELD—THE ARCHITECTURE OF FORM & SPACE:

1. Left: Paul Cézanne, "Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen from the Bibemus Quarry," 1897. Oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 32 in. The Baltimore Museum of Art
2. Center: Richard Diebenkorn, "Seated Figure with Hat," 1967. Oil on canvas, 69 x 60 in. Rubin collection, New York
3. Right: Richard Diebenkorn, "Ocean Park No. 54," 1972. Oil on canvas, 100 x 81 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE attributes of matter at the atomic level preoccupied advanced physicists at the start of the 20th century. J.J. Thomson discovered the electron in 1897. Ernest Rutherford named the proton in 1919. During the same time frame, **negative/positive** issues involving the visual structure of human-scale space and form preoccupied avant-garde painters.

Cézanne, Matisse, Malevich, Picasso, Braque—these and other artists invented what British art critic Clive Bell famously described in his classic 1914 book, **Art**, as "Significant Form." They didn't try to record a camera-accurate view of the exterior world. They created pictures that broke free, in minor and major ways, from ordinary perception. Artists made paintings according to their own rules. **Form**, these artists asserted, has aesthetic value and meaning—*significance*—in its own right. The true value of form—whether geometric or eccentric, whether figural and abstract—doesn't spring from how well it corresponds with nature or to the way the world looks to those who don't make art.

In addition to research into **Significant Form**, painters also explored to one degree or another what I call **SIGNIFICANT SPACE**: space that radiates importance, influence, and meaning—*significance*—through the arrangement of visual elements, space that leaps to the foreground in the hierarchy of the form-space visual field, space that becomes no less *form* than form itself. Modern, abstract art in large measure evolved from the interplay of these complementary concepts: SIGNIFICANT FORM & SIGNIFICANT SPACE.

One of the major expressions of Significant Space involves what artists and designers call **negative space**. When we look at an object, we see space around the object. The **object** is the **positive** element. The **space** around the object is the **negative** element. Modern painters activated this negative element: They designed the surrounding space that an object generates. They treated space as form! Setting up a yin-yang of ambiguity between positive and negative elements in a picture, painters gave spaces **figural identity** equal in compositional value to objects. In other words, they treated the **solids** (positive objects) and **voids** (negative spaces) as interdependent abstract elements of the visual field. In keeping with Mondrian's manifesto, "The modern artist is the conscious artist," modern painters *consciously* designed the relationships between **figural solids** and **figural voids**.

How important was this? Painter Joseph Albers summed it up this way: "Perhaps the only entirely new and probably the most important aspect of today's language of forms is the fact that 'negative' elements (the remainder, intermediate, and subtractive quantities) are made active" ("Creative Education," Sixth International Congress for Drawing, Art Education, and Applied Art, Prague, 1928).

For the fountainhead of this idea, which also influenced modern architecture, sculpture, and photography, we look to Cézanne. Cézanne's painting *Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen from the Bibemus Quarry* (above, left), for example, produced the same year as Thomson's discovery of the electron, depicts (as the painting's title tells us) a mountain and a quarry. But the sky plays no less a major role. The sky is the largest shape in the composition, and Cézanne treated it as significant space: consciously designed negative space. Through size, shape, and contour, Cézanne gave the sky as much visual weight as the mountain with which it figurally interlocks. And Cézanne crafted their mutual outline with self-conscious élan: He juxtaposed the resolute razor-sharp edge of the left side to the meandering jagged edge of the right. Though the sky conventionally defines the **background** (we can also use the word *field*) against which one sees a solid **object** (we can also use the word *figure*), such as a mountain, Cézanne didn't treat the sky simply as a background, or field, but as a carefully designed solid object, or figure. Cézanne created what art critic Patrick Heron calls "**solid space**" (see his essay "Solid space in Cézanne," *Modern Painters*, Spring 1996, pp. 16-24.) After all, Cézanne wanted to remind us, mountain and sky are both just **paint—two-dimensional shapes arranged on a flat surface**. Neither shape is more solid (or void)—more positive or negative, more object or background, more figure or field—than the other.

Likewise, therefore, neither mountain nor sky is truly behind or in front of the other. Ultimately, they are pieces of a **jigsaw puzzle**—equally important and **coplanar**. By treating them this way—and the quarry, too—Cézanne causes the space between the mountain, sky, and foreground foliage to fluctuate. This **into-the-picture space**, which I call **atmospheric space**, appears **shallow** one moment, **deep** the next (see "Deep Space/Shallow Space," by Thomas Schumacher, *Architectural Review*, January 1987, pp. 37-42). Our perception of shallow space reinforces the truth of the painting's flat surface, while our perception of deep space reinforces the illusion of perspective.

Cézanne-like negative space, as filtered principally through the works of Mondrian and Matisse, became a central concern of Richard Diebenkorn 70 years later in his painting *Seated Figure with Hat* (above, center). Diebenkorn didn't regard the background as an afterthought. He made the background as figural as the seated "Figure" of the painting's title. And in a crucial move more modern than Cézanne, Diebenkorn even shifted the woman to one side, decentering her and giving the background's negative space center stage. The shared undulating contour of the background and the woman, running diagonally from her knee, along her lap, and up over her hat—an echo of the contour of the right side of Mont Sainte-Victoire—creates a beautiful, poignant event. In various ways, Diebenkorn clearly signals that within the painting's **square field of visual activity** the woman has no more artistic significance than the scumbled-yellow **abstract space-forms** that shape her and embrace her.

Which raises a related issue: Does the yellow negative space comprise a **wall** against which the woman is sitting? Or is she sitting in the foreground of a sun-drenched **landscape** that extends to the horizon line at the top of the painting? In the first case, we see the space—the atmospheric space—between the woman and the yellow wall as compressed, closed, vertically bounded by the x/y plane. In a word: **shallow**. In the second, we regard the atmospheric space beyond the woman as receding along the ground-plane to the horizon line. We see and feel this space as extended, open, horizontally expansive along the z-axis. In a word: **deep**. This ambiguity underscores the tension, as in the Cézanne, between the truth of the two-dimensionality of the canvas—a painted surface—and the illusion of three-dimensional depth. This tension, produced by the play of various expressions of Significant Space, operates as a core concept for many post-19th-century painters.

In the brilliant Ocean Park series that he began the next year, and continued to pursue into the 1980s, Diebenkorn removed the anthropomorphic figure. As in this representative painting, *Ocean Park No. 54* (above, right), he treated space and **space-forms as the active essence** of his art. He crafted an abstract, rectilinear architecture of **ambiguity** and **equilibrium** between complementary elements: positive and negative, object and background, figure and field, solid and void, orthogonal structure and diagonal inflection—between flat surface and infinite depth. His magnificent paintings of **SIGNIFICANT SPACE**—an exquisite blend of negative space and atmospheric space—distill the lessons of Cézanne's French mountains and skies and transpose them to the luminous Pacific beachfront of Southern California.

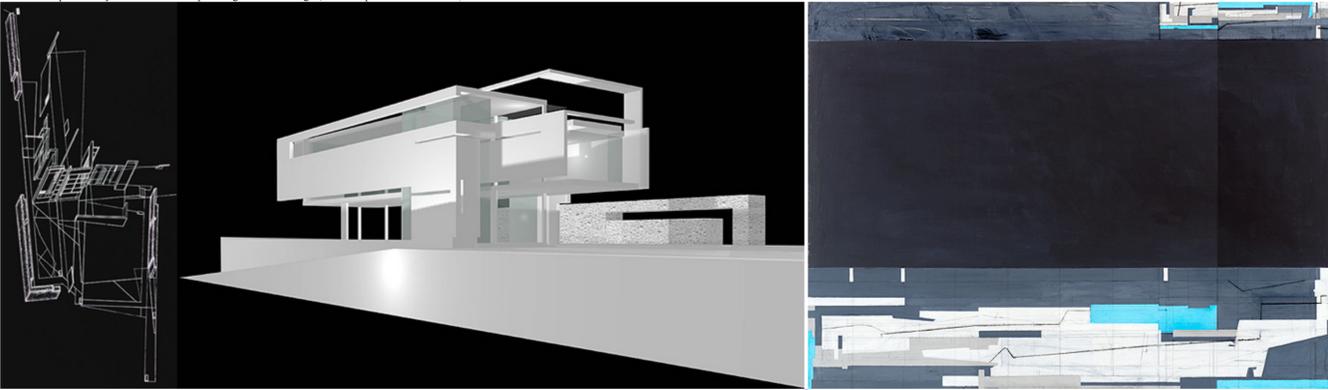
To me, Diebenkorn's Ocean Park paintings represent **walls & windows** (i.e., **vertical surfaces/facades**—composed of transparent, translucent, and opaque materials), as well as **landscapes** (i.e., aerial **maps/site plans**). I see these walls and landscapes as light-reflective, electromagnetic **aesthetic fields** that are at the same time **highly charged** and **neutral**. And I think Diebenkorn's works, including his earlier **space-making pictures**, resonate with instruction for advanced painters and architects today.

I build on what I see in Diebenkorn's paintings in [my work](#). I build also on what I see in the work of other **space-maker painters**, such as Georges Braque (e.g., **1**: *Still life with a violin*, 1912), Pablo Picasso (e.g., **2**: *Head*, 1913), and Milton Avery (e.g., **3**: *The White Wave*, 1956); as well as **space-maker sculptors**, such as Henry Moore (e.g. **4**: *Seated Figure Against Curved Wall*, 1956-57); **space-maker photographers**, such as Arnold Newman (e.g., **5**: "Portrait of Edward Hopper," 1941); and **space-maker architects**, such as Rudolph Schindler (e.g., **6**: Kings Road House, 1922—photograph and axon).

Following in their footsteps—for example, **7**: "Significant Space—Knight's Move: Cut, Separate, Shear," 1997—I, too, consider myself a **space maker**. I call my work **SPACECRAFT**.



Other examples of my **SPACECRAFT** paintings and buildings (click on photos to see more):



JEF7REY HILDNER (aka Madison Gray, Eliot Plum, and Henry Trucks) is an architect, a painter, and a writer. Author of *Garches 1234*, *Picasso Lessons*, *Daedalus 9*, and *Henry Trucks—Painter*, his award-winning work and his essays on the theory and practice of art appear in a wide range of publications, including *Global Architecture Houses*, *Journal of Architectural Education*, and the book *Architectural Formalism*, which features his essay "**Formalism: Move | Meaning**" alongside essays by theorists Rosalind Krauss, Peggy Deamer, Robert Slutzky, and Colin Rowe. Hildner focuses on **Formalism** in his forthcoming book *Visual Effects*, the title of his presentation at the 2016 Syracuse University Florence Architecture Program symposium, "**The F Word**." He earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Princeton University.

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See also my pamphlet **PICASSO LESSONS: The Sixth Woman of Les Demoiselles d'Avignon**. "PICASSO LESSONS" underscores the essence of SIGNIFICANT SPACE: the product of a design in which FORM functions not only as SPACE-OCCUPIER, but also as SPACE-DEFINER. And for even more about SPACECRAFT, see my essay **MILTON AVERY: Puzzle Master**.

See also my essay **COLLAGE READING: BRAQUE | PICASSO**, in which I maintain that I'm the first to see Significant Space operating at the very heart of Synthetic Cubism.

JEF7REY HILDNER [THE ARCHITECT PAINTER](#) | 09.07.2000 (Updated 05.07.2012)