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## RINGROAD (HOUSTON), 2005: THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN IMAGE

*Written by Bas Princen*

“Our eyes convey to us a surface image of things around us, and the mind processes the viewed objects into ideas and creates an inner world that we interpret in the most varied of ways”[1].

### **Travel**

A few days after hurricane Rita in 2005, I drove east of Houston, anxious to see the effects of this force of nature on the landscape through which we had travelled a few months earlier. I imagined emptiness, void and ruin, but the fragility of the landscape was only exposed by the debris of human interventions – upturned electricity polls, collapsed trailers, car parts and bent corrugated steel panels. The landscape itself was not really affected – it looked the same as I had seen it before; quiet and resilient. It had become a backdrop for the scattered debris.

When I see the image that I made later that day, nothing of this comes to mind. The image of the golden office block on the ringroad at the periphery of Houston has absorbed new references and new meanings. It has become abstracted, losing any relation to the place and time of its making, and relating now instead to other images made before and after.

### **The Sequence (Landscape and Architecture in an Image)**

The chronological sequence represented in this book comprises a series of images in loose dialogue with each other. The sequence was made in 2005 and concentrated on the architecture

and man-made landscape of the “American West”. I started out photographing the man-made landscape of the Netherlands, during studies of architecture and design for public space, using photography as a way to “make space”. Dutch landscape is compact, controlled and fully designed; the architecture of the Dutch landscape resembles the architecture of buildings; Dutch landscape is itself a designed object. By contrast, the American landscape is experienced through its great scale, openness, and a certain wilderness. There is less control and more redundancy, even abandonment and desolation are allowed to surface and consume territory as part of an economic process. In its default state American landscape is not designed – it is not “architecture” – it is “nature”, or at least perceived as such.

Historically, there have been interesting depictions of American landscape and, travelling west in 2005, many of these were in my mind. The birth of photography coincided with the conquest of the American landscape, the frontier. The American landscape was “discovered”, mapped, measured and rationalised through photographs; the myth of the American frontier is photography-based.

In turn, photography itself was defined as a rational medium of scientific, documentary work, through this first portrayal of American landscape.

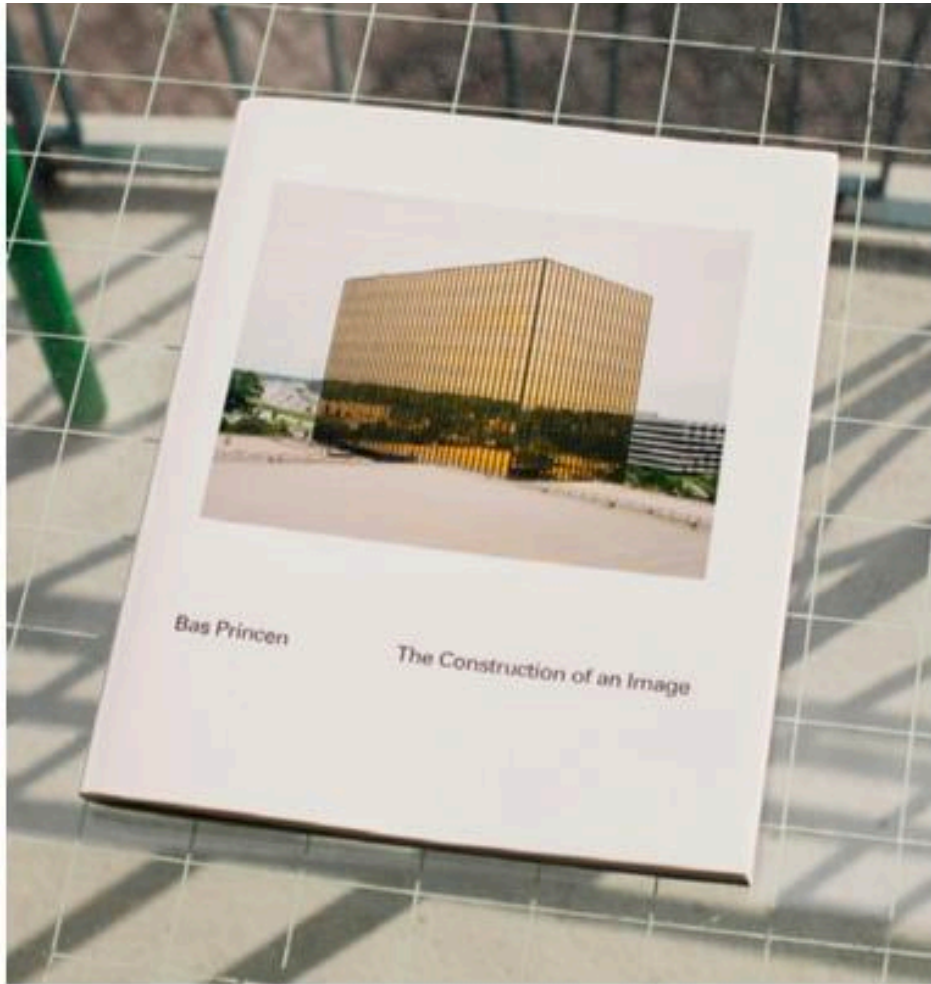
Later different kinds of images, bold photo-based collages of utopian architectural projects were used to show visions of the American landscape. Buckminster Fuller’s Tetrahedron City, Superstudio’s Continuous Monument or Constant Nieuwenhuys’ New Babylon present vast hybrid environments spanning the planet, where gigantic futuristic structures coexist in harmony with the landscape. These collages are interesting as landscape representations because they show landscape as an instrumental part of the projects; the landscape is as important as the architectural objects placed in it.

Contrary to these totalising visions, land artists developed their own image for the American landscape, to show a new vocabulary of landscape interventions. Rather than wanting to conquer its great scale, they were making a place within the landscape, with comparatively small and precise in situ interventions like Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty and Michael Heizer’s Double Negative. These projects, or actions, in remote places are essentially made known through photographs, rather than through direct encounter with the work of art. Land art is more an image and an idea, than a place or an object.

The image and the imagery of the American landscape also extends into built architecture. A whole generation of architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra, Rudolf Schindler, Charles and Ray Eames, and Philip Johnson used the idea of the frontier to create new architecture for new ways of living.

The sequence in this book starts with an image of the derelict “Union Tank Car Dome’ built in 1958 by Buckminster Fuller near Baton Rouge, a kind of materialised leftover of utopian thinking (the idea of the human controlled biosphere), shown as a solitary object in the landscape. After the dome, I photographed other sites of experimental projects, for example the ruin of Llano Del Rio at the edge of the Mojave Desert where, in the 1920s, colonists tried to build a commune on the principles of “equal ownership, equal wage, and equal social opportunities’. Ideas of realised and failed experiments recur in the sequence.

A second theme concerns the ambiguity between the natural and the man-made landscape. Several photographs depict the water infrastructures in California (at the time all of the reservoirs were empty; one looked like Robert Smithson’s Asphalt Rundown). Here, for the first time, I began attempting to photograph the tension between the present and the future in such landscapes. In these images it is hard, or even impossible, to discern whether the landscape is in the process of construction or destruction, if it is being built or becoming a ruin.



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*"The Construction of an Image" Bas Princen, 2016, AA Publishers*

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*Mississippi Delta Outskirt (Train Depot), 2005*

Similar ambiguity between an architectural object and the landscape whose boundaries are unclear or under tension is something I also tried to work with. In the Superior Court image, the building can be imagined as an endless structure in the landscape, echoing the Continuous Monument. The Hour of Power is an image of the Crystal Cathedral, a televised church building designed by Philip Johnson, which in reality looks like a closed office block from the outside, but from the inside is a transparent void with a congregation space and a TV studio. It is a veritable boîte à miracle as proposed by Corbusier, a piece of architecture which owes its infinite potential to technology, in exchange for the ultimate denial of the landscape in which it exists. I photographed it as a kind of hyper-collage, an architecture of pure techno-devices, contained inside a gridded mirror-glass volume, potentially endless. From the first to the last image, the sequence steadily grows more complex visually and thematically. The images interfere with each other, as if they begin to layer on top of one another, adding and reusing elements from the images before.

Ringroad, the last in the sequence, is an image of a generic office block on a generic site on the edge of Houston. The image contains elements of images made before, it is also a "miracle box" of transparency, mirroring an uninterrupted horizon. Elements of a banal urban periphery are transformed – non-architecture is shown as architecture, nonlandscape as landscape – they are turned into a potential, a project. The tension between the object and the landscape is made explicit, but also in some way resolved. In the image the architectural object and the landscape come together and unite into one.

### **The Mirror, the Double**

You travel to see new things but, paradoxically, you see them only because in them you recognise something you have known before. The eye travels from image to image. One image may be in the mind's eye, an image seen or made before and stored in your memory (perhaps a reference); the other is there to be seen in front of you. A remembered image leads you to see, or rather to

perceive, a new image. Only through memory can a new image be perceived and recognised. The moment when a thought and reality converge is the moment you stop and start looking for the image.

The camera introduces a set of transformations into the process of seeing; most importantly, it frames, decontextualises, abstracts, measures and records. The view camera I was using at the time would also literally mirror the scene in front of me. The reality doubles, it is inverted and projected as an upside down image on a gridded sheet of ground glass. The image travels through an empty box-like space – a small room – before being captured in negative; the camera as a space capturing space.

On the ground glass you see the image for the first time without its context and can understand more clearly why your eye has stopped on that particular scene; the camera shows you the potential of the image outside its reality. An idea can take shape inside the camera, and it can take several photographs over a long period of time to refine it, to make it recognisable.

Four months after seeing Fuller's dome in the industrial outskirts next to the Mississippi, I stand on an empty parking lot. In front of me is an office building, a highway and some roadside diners. I see that the image hovering – inverted upside down and projected over the grid of the ground glass – is a floating gridded cube cut by a horizon. The two grids perfectly overlap, but the image and the reality have hardly anything in common anymore; the image already has its own reality.

### **Archive of Images (References)**

I work with images at every step; from the first idea to a finished photograph; I look for its references, its predecessors. Over the years, I have made several A5 booklets consisting of series of collected reference images – scenes of landscape and architecture – sometimes famous, sometimes completely unknown, or already long forgotten. These reference images can all be found as digital copies on the internet, to be copied endlessly. The booklets are between 24 and 32 pages long, and the web images are low in resolution and can't be reproduced any larger than 6 Å 9 cm. The booklets are handmade; they can be changed quickly and reprinted on standard A4 sheets. These simple booklets direct my view. They can work, for example, as early maquettes for new books I'm making. They can act as sketches of certain themes and they can set possible sequences of photographs where the references are used as placeholders for the photographs that still have

to be taken. These maquettes are also made to test the possible dialogues and formal arrangements of the future photographs or to make it possible to compress compositions and subjects taken from several reference images into a new photograph. The booklets are not intended to be shown; when the work is finished, the booklet is obsolete.

The booklet reprinted here was made in 2016 during the process of conceptualising this book. It is composed of images collected in 2005 and other references that later resonated with the photographs in the sequence. This work showed that for Ringroad multiple readings are possible.

For example there are links with the modernist ideas of the continuous ground and the incorporation of landscape into a building, and links with artworks that explore man's attempt to recreate or contain nature that may look like "environments" set inside boxes.

Because of the resonance with the camera obscura in the history of photography I now realise that the camera and the image of a transparent grid building are both viewing devices.

### **An Image in a World of Images**

The only way I can think of defining a "good image" is as one that connects itself to some earlier images, and others made afterwards. It is an image that becomes part of our world of countless images and depictions, and can find a place there. This is how an image is constructed; not at the moment of its making but through the way it accumulates meaning over time by relating to other images and ideas. In that sense, an image is always a construct. I think that a photographer generally cannot direct the life or use of an image after it has been finished. Ringroad has never been a document of a place, but it became a capsule of thoughts and ideas and other images have started to resonate with it.

### **When Only the Image is Left**

We found the rusting yellow "Union Tank Car Dome" by Buckminster Fuller in the middle of nowhere at the outskirts of Baton Rouge in April 2005. I later found out that the dome was bulldozed by its owner on Thanksgiving Day 2007, a few weeks before its 50th anniversary – an event that would have automatically made it eligible for heritage protection in the US. This gesture of destruction eliminated not only an exceptional architectural object but also its value as a realised experiment. Annihilated as a piece of reality, the experiment now returns again to imagination

and to an image. Inspired by the ruins of Mayan temples, Frank Lloyd Wright's Ennis House was severely damaged in the earthquakes of 1989 and 1994, and eroded by time and rainfall. When I saw it in 2005, it was itself a ruin which mirrored its inspiration more closely than desired. In 2007, the house was reconstructed, not only for architectural value but also for its memorable role in film history as a classic Hollywood set piece. The house was eventually returned to its pristine 1924 image; time was not allowed to interfere with the monument. It is unclear if the photographs I made eleven years ago are valuable as fictions or documents or both. It is an interesting reversal that the images I had intended and photographed as ideas, as projects, are now, with time, also becoming relevant as documents. The golden building is no longer gold. It has been updated and reclad in new silver glass, perhaps more energy efficient. A student told me that he was sure the building had never been gold and it was I who had coloured the glass digitally.

Time in photography preserves a moment, but it also creates a fiction, a myth, a story.





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*Ennis House, 2005*

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*Reproduction of a A4 reference booklet.*



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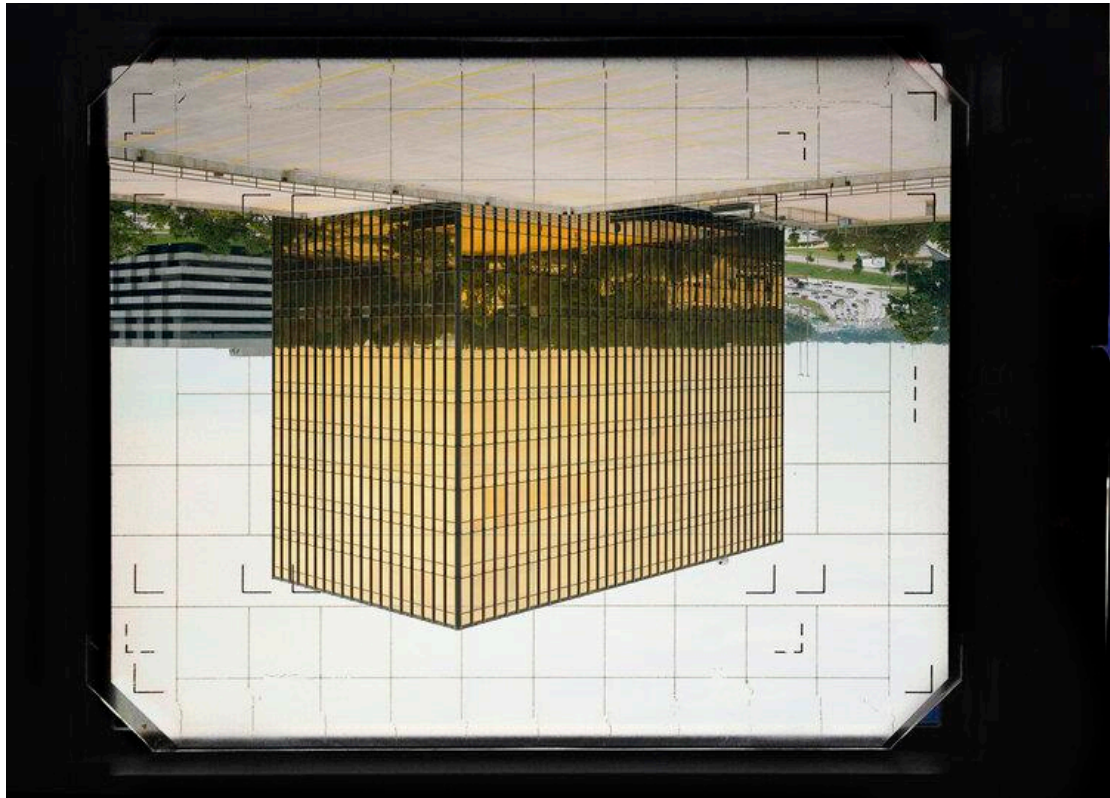
*Superior Court, 2005*



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*Ringroad (Houston), 2005*



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*Inverted and upside down matt-glass projection: "Ringroad Houston", 2005*

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[1] August Sander, "Photography as a Universal Language", a lecture for WDR radio on Sunday 12 April 1931.