

# From Soil to Site



**Noah Scheinman**

It is called skyline. But is it not also strata? In the context of the city, soil exists at the edge of mental perception, the visual and conceptual limit of the everyday.

A City is the interaction of cultural and biological histories, which is really a single history, and expresses itself plainly and candidly in the soil. A site is inscribed by a logic that understands land as space for development, ground as real estate, and the world beneath as incidental matter.

Ecology does not exist without the politics and economics that shape it, and excavation results in a network of new deposits; a series of provisional landscapes where soil is transformed from *earth* to *dirt*.

Dirt is soil that has “lost” the characteristics that give it the ability to support life, and thus is circulated amongst the economy of things—as backfill, as resource, as waste.

What is not alive is much easier to police. Dead soil is embankments, is bricks, is piled in mounds, is on our clothes and under our fingernails. It is either productive or out of place.

Soil continues to be the medium of life, the location where history is recorded as it is made.

From *Soil to Site* is a project that attempts to consider the processes by which *earth* becomes abstracted through various technical, economic, and cultural frameworks into an object of scientific study, financial value, and social meaning. It is the outcome of ongoing research into the relationship between ecology, political economy, and the built environment—a relationship that is especially acute and complex in cities,

where market flows and infrastructural systems collide with colonial histories and a dense population of human actors. In the first phase, soil is collected from specific locations in Toronto that are currently under development. Using a variation of rammed-earth construction, the material is then compacted into generic rectilinear forms. The formwork is removed *in situ* and each finished sculpture expresses qualities specific to the site from which it was gathered. Embedded within are histories of place and environment, the change and interaction recorded and made visible. In the second phase, the soil



is also analyzed for physical composition, presence of organic matter, and fertility. These measures provide another scale and language for thinking about the tendency of urban development to abstract land into a universalizing system of value—as well as for considering the enduring capacity of *earth* material to sustain life even as it is cast about, or deposited, and pronounced dead.