

Who Are the Artists to Watch?

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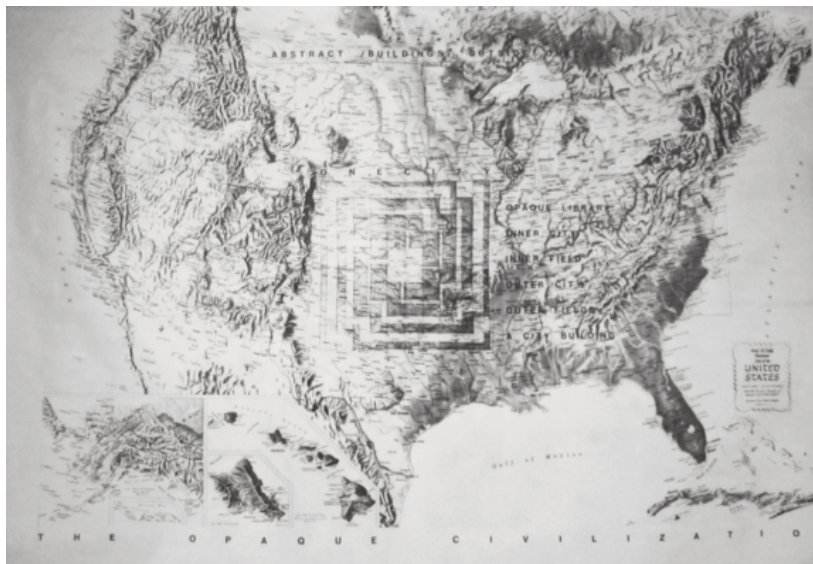
ARTnews

A REALM OF LOGICAL INSANITY

by Maurice Poirer

Wells' character is a Londoner who wakes up in the year 2100 after sleeping for 200 years, his city meanwhile having grown to 33 million people. Although Wells was writing in 1899, the conditions he described exist today. Rising crime, poverty, congestion, air pollution and the increasing difficulty of maintaining order—these are only some of the problems associated with large urban populations. Not least in significance is the anonymity of the individual—the loss of identity that occurs when large crowds gather in one area. (The first serious utopia, Plato's "ideal city," was to be restricted to fewer than 50,000 citizens, largely to allow mutual acquaintance, "for there is no greater good than that the citizens should be known to one another.") Add the problem of finding enough people willing to underwrite construction costs, and it becomes easy to understand why architects have traditionally shunned designing for very large populations. Le Corbusier's most ambitious project, Ville Contemporaine, was meant to house only three million people.

Even the more visionary planners have remained within relatively comfortable boundaries. Paolo Soleri's largest futuristic community to date, Babelnoah, has a designated population of six million. Perhaps only Will Insley could dismiss the usual doubts and limitations to work on the scale he has chosen for his metropolis, ONECITY. It is designed to accommodate the entire population of the United States at some undetermined future time: no fewer than 400 million people.

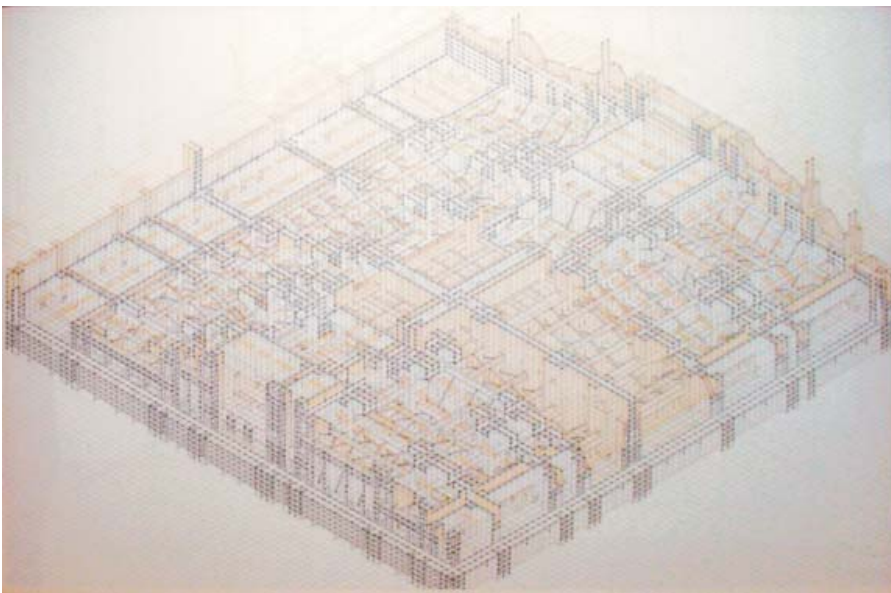


Will Insley
ONECITY Map

ONECITY is so farfetched that it might seem to disqualify itself from the realm of serious art. "Science fiction" might seem a more appropriate label. On the other hand, so much of this information has a compelling logic of its own, while also being mindful of a number of basic human needs, that it cannot be dismissed easily. Insley believes that in order to reach hidden areas of the mind inaccessible through normal procedures of thought the artist must be willing to assume unrea-

Insane? Perhaps. On one hand, the information Insley gives about

sonable positions. "Such positions are then measured according to their own logic," he says. This is the realm of logical insanity, and once we have accepted Insley's invitation to enter it, we are bound for a memorable journey. His drawings alone, which are on exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum in New York through November 25, should impress even the most skeptical among us with their quality and architectural soundness. They are made with a very fine technical pen and include isometric views, sections and X-ray projections. In addition, the artist has written extensively about his work, clarifying its intentions and imparting to it a poetic aura of unusual distinction. This bold crossing of boundaries between the real and imaginary, this peculiar interweaving of plausibility and daring fantasy—in short, the breadth of the artist's vision—is what gives Insley's work so much artistic relevance and so much appeal.



Building Room Under-Building
1978-83
ink on paper, 40 x 60 inches

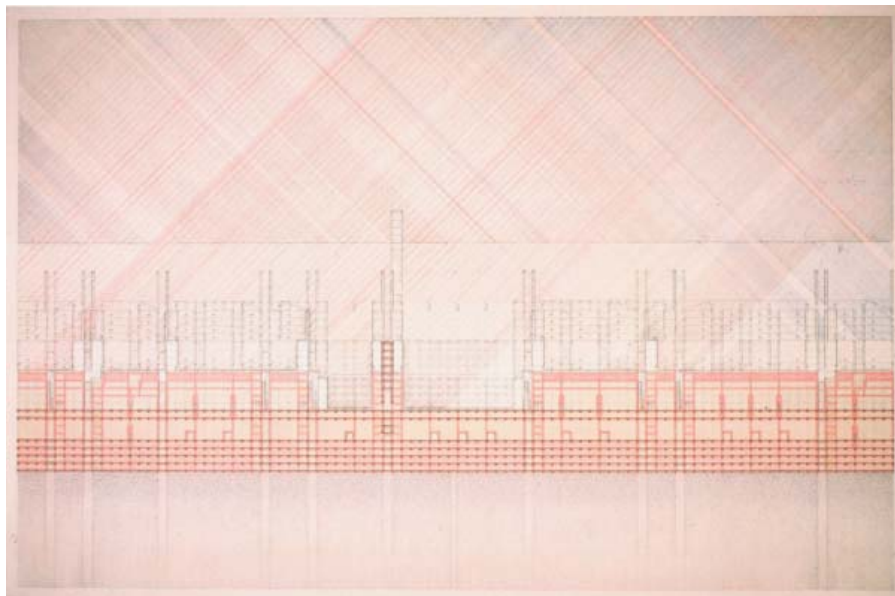
Insley admits that ONECITY may never materialize. In fact, he prefers to speak of it as "buried" in the future and having to do with "the dark cities of mythology which exist outside of normal time." But he also points out that under certain conditions its realization might be the answer to growing urban problems. "Look at how rapidly New York is deteriorating," he says. What he foresees is that American cities may eventually cease to function as dwelling places. People would live as nomads in the countryside until they decided to pool their resources and build a complex to accommo-

date them all—a last, desperate attempt to resolve their differences and ensure their survival. The site of this promised land lies between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. Cutting across lakes, hills, and valleys, ONECITY covers an area 675 miles square. Deployed along the four arms of its spiral plan is the Outer City, a chain of over 14,000 square buildings, each one two and a half miles wide and containing 100 "rooms." Each "room" is the equivalent of a neighborhood, and thus each building functions as a town. One of the more remarkable features of ONECITY is the way nature is integrated into its plan. With the exception of the Inner Field, a mysterious wasteland at the center, roughly 80 percent of ONECITY is park or farmland. Because of the single-file layout of the buildings, in less than 30 minutes inhabitants can be in an outdoor setting with all the amenities of the countryside, ONECITY's height is modest. The buildings rise to only nine stories above ground and descend to an average of nine below; each story is 12 feet high. Transportation to all parts of the city takes place in high-speed trains within corridors encased in translucent walls. "At night," says Insley, "the city glows like a giant digesting jellyfish."

The stories above ground, known as the Over Building, are where people live. These rise and fall in terraced rows like a series of hills. Skylights and light wells provide natural illumination. Below ground level is the Theater Space, a meeting area for people on their daily excursions to the spaces below—known as the Under Building—from their living chambers above. All administrative, business, educational, manufacturing and processing activities take place in the Under Building. Also to be found here are shopping malls, museums, performance halls and other leisure-time establishments. Air shafts descending through the Over Building ventilate the entire area, while exhaust tunnels channel wastes and fumes beyond city limits. Strategically distributed in the underground section of each building, computers mastermind all city functions.

Vital to the stability of ONECITY are the recognition of crime as a natural un-

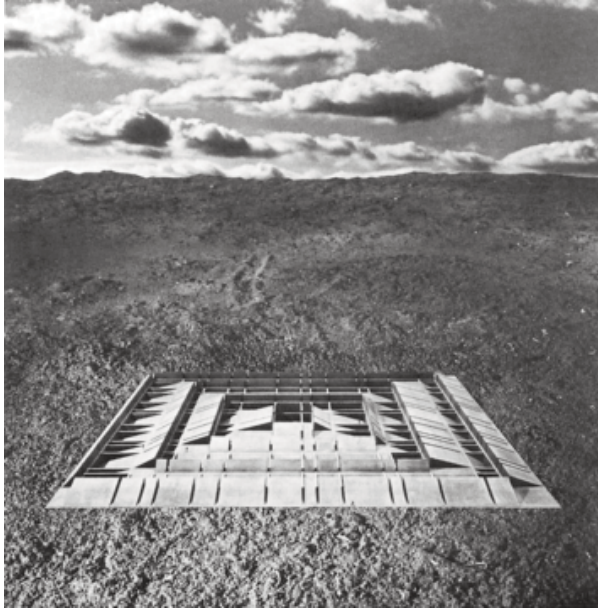
derside of the human psyche and the rigorous segregation of criminals from the rest of the population. Incorporated in each Under Building is a place known as the Ninth Arena, in which all local criminals are confined. There they are allowed to gratify their passions and prey on each other at will. The thrills that such freedom provides are such that commitment is usually voluntary, and only on rare occasions is an individual forcibly incarcerated. A final event in which criminals end



*Building Room Section,
Red, Green Elevation*
1978-81
ink on paper
40 x 60

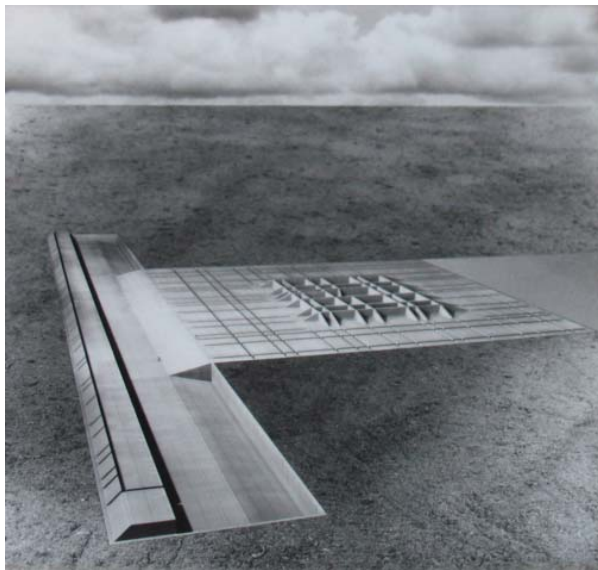
up eliminating one another is a macabre game played in courts known as Theaters of Death. The object of the game is to gain control of an opponent's space. By manipulating buttons much like those in a video game, but which here program actual physical changes in each player's court, the winner eventually traps his victim, forcing him to leave his control booth and explore the possibilities of escape. "Such attempts are usually futile," says Insley, "and the loser is left to starvation and the ultimate indignity." Most citizens of ONECITY have only a voyeuristic interest in crime, and this they can satisfy by spying through slits in the Arena's surface, catching whatever glimpses they can of the criminals' activities.

The most intriguing component of ONECITY is the central Inner Field, an area 135 miles square surrounding a single building known as the Inner City. The Inner City's core, the Opaque Library, houses "the city's mythological secrets." For enigmatic reasons—and even though Insley refers to it as "seed and soul of ONECITY"—the Opaque Library is an empty structure. Insley describes it



Building No. 17 Passage Space Spiral
1984
photo-collage
47 x 47 inches

as “a maze of slanted tunnels... an introversive cache, twisted and slipped away from expected nomologies.” Entrance is denied to all, yet citizens are drawn to it by a mysterious force and hike across the Inner Field to probe its secrets. “Once there,” says the artist, “there is nothing to see except empty space. Brief slits in the shell allow only sparse beams of light to penetrate the interior. The visitor is left to spy on mystery, but only the upper chambers are visible, and they reveal nothing.” From what Insley says about the citizens of ONECITY, it would appear that they have a highly developed form of democratic government. “All are obligated by law to vote and do so virtually every day on some matter or another. There is no visible central authority, no visible leader. They worship the horizon line as a mythical space between earth and sky through which one may journey into the future and return to the present to record what one has seen. Insley claims that he received much of the information about ONECITY on such mental journeys. In one, he says, he thinks he saw the Theater Space: “For a minute I slipped elsewhere... but I couldn’t identify it at the time.” He adds that reverence for the horizon line explains why the buildings of ONECITY are designed, on the whole, to have as many stories below ground as above.



Buildings No. 19-20
1970-72
photo-collage
30 x 30 inches

Insley grew up in Indiana and, before moving to New York in 1957, attended the Harvard Graduate School of Design. “It was there, as an architecture student, that I began toying with the idea of a city,” he says. “I used to draw little sketches of its features, though I had no premonition of what they would lead to.” By the time he settled in New York, in fact, he had given up architecture and shifted his attention to painting. “I wanted to be an artist,” he recalls, “and in those years that meant above all for me to be a painter.” For several years Insley confronted problems traditionally associated with and specific to painting, but his efforts seemed to lead nowhere—until 1963. In that year he saw an acrylic painting by Frank Stella, a square partitioned by diagonal stripes. “It was the most amazing painting I had ever seen,” he says. “It was so pure, so clear and so architecturally ordered, with no prominent trace of brushwork, that it struck me as everything a painting should be.”

This single experience led Insley to reconsider his approach to painting and to come to terms with his Harvard training. "I decided that my mistake lay in thinking as a painter, and that I should henceforth think as an architect." Insley began by executing a series of shaped paintings in which a grid is the basic element. His primary purpose was the investigation of two-dimensional space, a concern shared by many artists at the time. While he thought of these works as diagrams, he also viewed them as specific pieces of wall in full architectural scale and titled them "Wall Fragments." "Then," he says, "I asked myself the obvious question: where did these fragments come from?" The question appeared obvious to him primarily because of his work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for seven years as a file clerk, sorting to record cards of the museum's collection. Many items, such as Greek vases and suits of armor, were in fragments, and each fragment had its independent card. As Insley recalls, "The fact that each fragment stood for a whole that might not be available was very useful information to me." The answer that emerged was if there are wall fragments there must be a wall; if a wall, a building; if a building, a city; and if a city, a civilization, with a government, a religion, a mythology and so on. This idea, which crystallized over many years, led Insley to ONECITY. And at some point he began to feel that the "Wall Fragments" were facsimiles of fragments belonging to that enigmatic structure lying at the heart of ONECITY—the Opaque Library.

Insley points out that crucial to the conception of ONECITY was the experience of New York itself: "Unquestionably it was living in New York that allowed this vision to emerge. The city fascinated me... all this concentration of energy. Walking in the city, which I did extensively, was also very important." While arguing that his work has nothing to do with science fiction, he admits that once settled in New York he read a lot of it—particularly H.G. Wells and H.P. Lovecraft—and that this must have helped free his imagination. Asked whether he could recall any situation in his youth that might shed light on the conception of ONECITY, Insley remarks that in grade school he designed puppet theaters: "I built the stage, the puppets, the scenery: I took all the parts and put on the entire performance. The idea of doing the whole thing, of having control over this whole world, fascinated me." A later important factor in his development was the spirit of the '60s: "Reaching out for new boundaries... it was in the air!" It was in the late '60s that he unconsciously took a major step on the road to ONECITY when he began designing abstract buildings. In Insley's plans, the abstract buildings surround ONECITY as vacant ruins in a wilderness. And, paralleling the artist's own progress, they will be built before ONECITY is constructed.

The visualization of ONECITY, then, was not triggered by any one incident but rather by a series of forces affecting the artist's professional development. "I needed a problem so enormous that it would offer me endless possibilities," Insley says. "I needed to extend my thinking as far as it would go. And ONECITY just emerged as the answer."

Insley made the first plan of ONECITY in 1972 and realized its final form in 1978. Since then he has made a series of drawings elaborating on ONECITY's visual character. Some show isometric views of the Over and Under Buildings, while several deal in detail with sections of individual building rooms. The view of the Over Building, for instance, includes such particulars as air shafts, sky lights, walls, walkways, and towers rising from the center of each building to signal their locations within the horizontal buildingscape.

While the general conception of ONECITY can be traced to Insley's "Wall Fragments," its idiosyncrasies owe much to the artist's fascination with mythology, labyrinths, abandoned buildings and vast, flat landscapes. (Insley cites the Great Egyptian Labyrinth, which, according to ancient sources, included 3,000 rooms, half of them underground.) It is also possible to detect in ONECITY ideas previously considered by others. Its square spiral plan, for instance, recalls Le Corbusier's designs for a Museum of Endless Growth, and the notion of locating services underground goes back at least to Leonardo da Vinci. Hovering over ONECITY—and indeed over all of Insley's work since the "Wall Fragments"—is also the reductivist impulse that engendered minimal and systemic forms

of art in the early '60s. On a broader level, ONECITY has obvious affinities with the utopian ideas and ambitious visionary designs that were in favor in the early part of this century, and it is in this wider context that it might seem ultimately to belong. Yet at the same time its sociological and mythological implications tend to set it apart in a separate class.

No less provocative than Insley's design for ONECITY is the group of drawings and models for the abstract buildings to be constructed beyond the city's perimeter. (Insley differentiates these imaginary structures from conventional architecture by setting off the word "buildings" with slashes in his writings about them.) Work on these buildings will begin long before ONECITY's inhabitants turn to the construction of ONECITY itself. They will be abandoned immediately upon completion, and left to future generations to seek out. They will have the mysterious appeal of the half forgotten. On a formal level, they are among the most advanced examples of abstract architecture ever conceived.

The drive to abstraction has a history as old and continuous as architecture itself, from ancient Egyptian mastabas to the conceptions of the 18th-century architect E.L. Boullee (who had a significant influence on Insley). But a purely abstract architecture, one totally devoid of utilitarian function, is a 20th-century phenomenon that emerged soon after the rise of abstract painting and sculpture. The Russian Constructivist Kasimir Malevich was one of the first artists to devise architectural designs that qualify as abstract in the full sense of the word. In his "Suprematist Architectural Models" of 1920 to 1922 he investigated theories of solid geometric architectural form with, however, no specific indication of scale or development of space that might be contained. While other advanced architects of the '20s made abstract studies, they were generally applied to practical ends, such as a house or theater contained. While other advanced architects of the '20s made abstract studies, they were generally applied to practical ends, such as a house or theater: lurking behind, even though at a remote distance, was the specter of functionalism.

It remained for more recent generations to experiment further with abstract architecture. Beginning in the mid '60s, artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer chose remote areas in which to give visual form to their conceptions. While their works do not on the whole qualify as true architecture, the concept of seclusion they explored was to be important to Insley. Since then, artists such as Alice Aycock and Mary Miss have devised architectural sculptures that are almost totally abstract. In fact, some of the elements they have used can be found in Insley's buildings. But Insley appears to be the first to have pursued the notion of architecture of abstraction in all its implications. In particular, no one has focused as he has on the problem of abstract architectural space. Much as Robert Rauschenberg has done with the fundamentals of painting, Insley has dissected the concept of abstract architectural space to its bare bones, paying attention to such factors as location, facilities, accessibility, and, not least, the rivalry between space and structure in architectural composition. In purifying the notion and experience of abstract architectural space, Insley has gone further than anyone else.

Like ONECITY, Insley's buildings are as far removed from practical considerations as can be imagined. There are no roads or signs leading to them or their vicinity. The would-be visitor must seek them out and provide for himself throughout the journey. Whatever human conveniences the buildings may offer are there by accident. All are exposed to the elements, and no provisions exist for their maintenance. They also normally have no set entrance. One is neither encouraged to penetrate them nor discouraged from doing so. "One is simply ignored," says Insley. Reaching the center of a building usually involves difficult climbs and descents. There are no railings, and it is easy to fall. In some buildings the inattentive visitor could drop 30 feet. Many spaces can be seen but not entered.

The buildings assume various geometric forms, but their structural means are always kept outwardly unassuming so as not to draw significant attention to their design: vertical walls, slanted roof like platforms, square or rec-

tangular pits. Unlike a Gothic church, for instance, where the structure can easily take precedence over the spatial experience. Insley's buildings display no eye-catching feats of engineering. There are, furthermore, no adornments of any kind. All surfaces are of a bare, flat material as indifferent as concrete, and no vegetation is intended to grow. As a result of this restrictive idiom, the space defined tends to assert itself with virtually unrestricted authority.

Insley says of the buildings that their sole purpose is "to contain spatial situations sympathetic to the religious beliefs of the people." This is reminiscent of Kandinsky's desire to free painting from its representational content. Kandinsky believed that if form and color were sufficiently dissociated from recognizable subject matter, painting would be able to speak to the soul more intimately. Color, especially, would release its emotive and psychological power more forcefully. In the same way, space in Insley's buildings dissociated from practical concerns and relatively unchallenged by the low-keyed structure, should theoretically be able to engage the soul on a purer level. A sudden expanse of space, for instance, might arouse feelings of release, while the dark, confining space of an underground tunnel might build up anxiety to the point where it reaches the traumatic intensity of a nightmare. Between the liberating power of space at one end of the scale and its entrapping power at the other, a whole range of emotional and psychological reactions is possible.

Insley drew his first building in 1967, and to date he has designed more than 40. As with ONECITY, reverence for the horizon line determines their general layout. All have a very low profile and many unfold below ground. They vary in length from 300 to over 1,200 feet and normally rise to no more than 12 feet above ground level. Their tendency is to blend with the landscape. In addition, those rising above the ground—known as Stage Spaces, Channel Spaces and Passage Spaces—are open to the sky throughout. When approaching the drawings and models it is important to bear in mind the circumstances in which the buildings would be ideally experienced in solitude, silence and total isolation from the world around. It is to the meditative side of human sensibility that these buildings appeal.

Consistent with this ascetic spirit is the buildings' lack of climactic moment: reaching the focal point of one of them normally offers no gratification other than reaching it. In /Building/ No. 1, Stage Space Reduce (1967), for instance, the visitor makes his way through a series of platforms rising and falling at increasingly sharper angles while the width of the space he occupies gets increasingly narrower. Each step in the series concludes with the possibility of exit through an opening in the boundary wall. The last platform is unattainable, and the journey, theoretically, ends there. /Building/ No. 27, Stage Space Cluster (1971) includes four square courtyards, one of which has been filled and is therefore inaccessible. The other three are open and increase in size to a maximum width of 189 feet. Access to each is through narrow passages at ground level. Inside, bare sloping walls delimit the space, which would not be unlike that of a cloister.

Passage spaces, which first appeared in 1968, are the most elaborate of the /buildings/ that rise above the ground. In these, narrow horizontal passages are cut through solid angled forms in such a way that one can nearly always see through the outside. In /Building/ No. 42, Passage Space Hill Slip (1975), "many of the passages and walls lead to dead ends," says the artist, "and there is constant frustration and denial of further progress. It is merely by chance that one reaches the center and still more by chance that one returns to the outside. There are many entrances and numerous routes of travel within, and the visitor may spend several days investigating the complex without exhausting the possibilities of experience."

Most mysterious of the /buildings/ are the Volume Spaces. These never rise above the ground and from any distance are virtually invisible. First designed in 1968 as simple pits, they developed into highly complex structures

descending more than 100 feet below ground. In these, Insley explores the more sinister and frightening aspects of space, as the visitor is required to make his way through a network of tunnels that may end up burying him alive. In */Building/ No. 41, Volume Space Interior Swing* (1973), a central well angles 120 feet into the earth. Radiating from it is a network of passages, some of which connect while others lead to dead ends. "It is extremely difficult and dangerous to penetrate this */building/*," says Insley, "and in all probability the traveler will become lost in the dark maze."

Since Insley's */buildings/* are abandoned to the elements, time eventually obliterates them. But memories of them outlive their existence, says the artist. As with the Great Egyptian Labyrinth, an aura of enigma and mystery develops around them and persists long after all traces of them have vanished. "Ultimately," says the artist, "their existence sinks into mythology."



Abstract Building view 2

1972

photo-collage, 15 x 30.5 inches