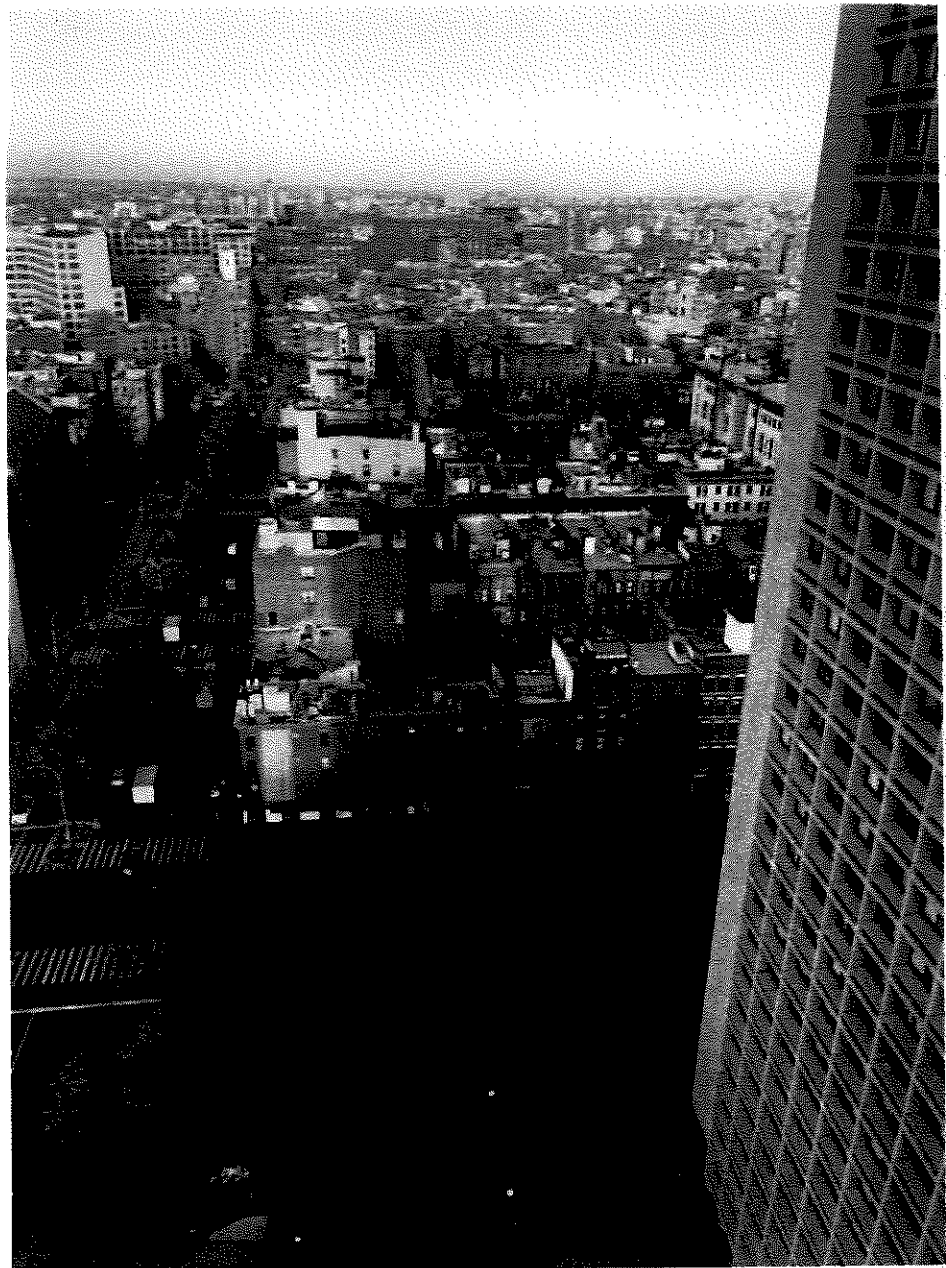


TIME LANDSCAPE

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Down below our apartment on Houston Street in New York is a green space. There is nothing special about it, as it's unkempt, weedy, and inaccessible. It looks like one of those odd city spots a developer has yet to snatch up thanks to some unknown bureaucratic reason. As it turns out, the green rectangle is a thoughtful memorial to the natural world lost to architectural developments.

Time Landscape, as the plot is called, was carefully designed and built in 1978 by the artist Alan Sonfist. When he first proposed the memorial in 1965, he did so as a reaction to the construction of three high-rise buildings next to the site designed by the architect I. M. Pei. The Silver Towers, as they are named, were built by New York University with great speed between 1964 and 1966. Thanks to large scale "slum clearance" (as it was known) in the 1950s, the towers came to represent a new urban vision for New York City. They have a lucid modernist look, complete with a large Picasso statue in their courtyard. Today they are landmark buildings representing the epitome of New York modernism.

Unlike Pei and his many acolytes, Sonfist noticed the immense environmental destruction brought about by the new towers. Reflecting upon it, he decided to propose a "public monument" to the nature lost to them in analogy to "war monuments that record the life and death of soldiers."¹ With the Vietnam War raging, he saw a larger conflict taking place between modernist urbanization and natural habitat. This was a popular sentiment within the counterculture, with the Earth Day of 1970 being one of the largest demonstrations in the city's history. Other artists also began reflecting on how to think through the human vs. nature conundrum, as in the case of Walter De Maria, who created the "Earth Room" across the street in 1977.

In the late 1960s Sonfist found himself absorbed in studying the environmental history of the Silver Towers, trying to find out what the place looked like before the onslaught of urban developments. What plants did the pre-colonial environment have? How did indigenous groups in Mannahatta live? The result of his investigations came in his environmental sculpture of carefully selected trees and plants meant to capture the land and culture lost to urbanity.

Pei's modernism and Sonfist's memorial mark two opposite extremes that also frame our current architectural debates, with the most innovative designs leaning in the direction of Sonfist.

Mitchell Joachim's butterfly sanctuary, Julia Watson's radical indigenism, and Kiel Moe's dissection of the material geography of the Seagram building may serve as examples.² More generally, how to avoid the pitfalls of modernism and embrace a viable environmental future is the shared challenge we face in figuring out how we will live together.

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- 1 Alan Sonfist, "Natural Phenomena as Public Monuments" (1969), in *A Companion to Public Art*, eds. Cher Krause Knight and Harriet F. Senie (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley, 2016), 61–64.
- 2 See Mitchell Joachim and Maria Aiolova, *Design with Life: Biotech Architecture and Resilient Cities* (Barcelona: Actar, 2020), Julia Watson, *Lo—TEK: Design by Radical Indigenism* (Cologne: Taschen, 2020), and Kiel Moe, *Unless: The Seagram Building Construction Ecology* (Barcelona: Actar, 2021).

View of Alan Sonfist, *Time Landscape*, New York, 2019.