This Must Be the Place

A new survey traces the roots of art matched to its site, from cave paintings to Picasso

By Richard Lacayo

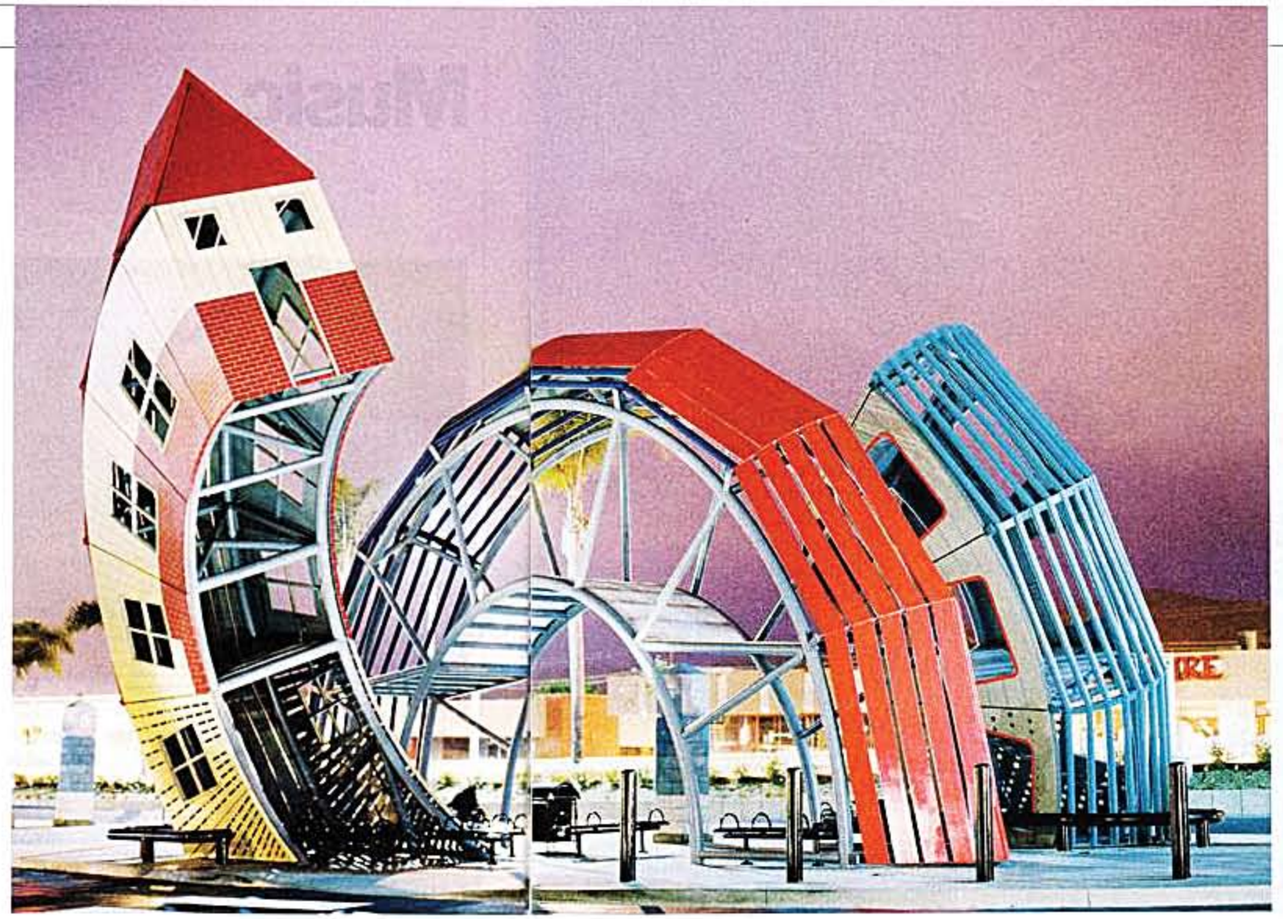
YOU MAY THINK OF *SITE-SPECIFIC* as a term the art world had to coin not long ago to describe things like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, a vast coil of crushed boulders at the edge of the Great Salt Lake. It's site-specific not only because Smithson designed it for that spot but also because, really, who's going to move 6,500 tons of rock to another location? But the 500 or so works in *Art & Place: Site-Specific Art of the Americas* (Phaidon; 373 pages), a coffee-table book so hefty that it's practically site-specific itself, are here to remind you that the term applies across the centuries. The massive earth drawings of the ancient Nazca culture, engraved into the high desert plains of Peru, are as integral to their location as the earthworks of Roden Crater, the extinct volcanic cone in Arizona that James Turrell began carving into sky-art observatories just 30 years ago. Dennis Oppenheim's loopy *Bus Home*, a sculptural roller coaster he erected in Ventura, Calif., in 2002, is undoubtedly site-specific. But so are the carved temples that the Maya began producing in the 7th century. The first site-specific artist was a cave painter with a burned stick.

So among the sculptures, murals, earthworks and architectural carvings in this enjoyable page-turner of a book, the Easter Island heads coexist with a Picasso, and Donald Judd's boxes are never far from a Toltec pyramid. What characterizes nearly all art of this kind is the ambition to make work that transcends its objecthood, something interlocked with its surroundings, not just sitting in them.

But being site-specific is no guarantee of immortality. Just eight years after it was installed in 1981, the steel parabola that was Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, 120 ft. long and 12 ft. high, was pried out of a plaza in lower Manhattan after complaints that it made a public space hard for the public to use. *Art & Place* commemorates it in a chapter dedicated to artworks that didn't survive. Some have disappeared by plan, like Richard Long's *Walking a Line in Peru*, a straight stretch of several miles across a dry riverbed that the British artist hiked in 1972 after having it marked out by local Indians. A literally self-effacing homage to the ancient Nazca, it's gone now, surviving only in photographs.

Art & Place has its flaws, none of them fatal. It's not true that the Rothko Chapel in Houston can be visited only on prearranged tours. It's a stretch to use *site-specific* to describe some of these works, like Mark di Suvero's wonderful *Joie de Vivre*, which touched down at several spots before coming to rest on Wall Street. And how could this book fail to include Mount Rushmore? Problems with securing photo rights? Unlikely. Sheer art-world snobbery? Could be. But no matter. Long after every coffee-table book has crumbled, those boys will still be on-site. ■

Nearly all art of this kind springs from an ambition to make work that interlocks with its surroundings



▲ **GIMME SHELTER** Artist Dennis Oppenheim gave shoppers at the Pacific View Mall in Ventura, Calif., a vibrant, whimsical place to wait for a ride with his 2002 structure *Bus Home*

▼ **CLIFF-HANGERS** Dating back to as early as A.D. 450, these rock paintings in the Colombian Amazon are just one example of some 20,000 paintings in which iron oxide pigments were used to inscribe sacred images of tapirs, birds and geographic landmarks

◄ **MURALS AT A REVOLUTION** Diego Rivera's epic depictions of Mexico's tumultuous path to independence, painted from 1929 to 1945, dominate Mexico City's Palacio Nacional

▲ **ROCK STARS** The moai figures of Easter Island have become as integral to the place as its volcanic peaks and shoreline. Erected between 1100 and 1650, they may be ancestor totems

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