DECOLONIAL LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

Alan Waxman, November 19, 2016

1. Critique colonial practice by seeing, reading, and creating landscapes from inside - **we are the neighborhood**

2. Operate with folly (vulnerability) and hierarchies of folly within our socio-ecological systems as a landscape architectural design methodology - **we are vulnerable**

3. Understand socio-ecological frameworks that create landscape infrastructure and derive their power from their ability to assimilate or manage dissenting edge conditions - **we are the center**

4. Deploy "wildness" and its management (as a kind of embodied landscape social pharmacology) to address health issues locally, as a way to coalesce power into marginal spaces, creating public space and sanctuary - **our 'toxicity' is our 'sacredness'**

1. Critique Colonial Practice

In the **Sinking Gardens Project (2012)** of XiXi National Wetland Park in Hangzhou, abandoned boats once used for daily life in the desakota city-scape - of fish ponds, home sites, and foot paths - are positioned in an occupiable garden topography. What was once an urban mechanism and living social topography is rendered into a landscape sculpture. Each boat is dedicated to a displaced family/village removed from XiXi National Wetland Park as it transitioned from landscape urban desakota to preserved "ecological resource." **As we play with social process and reveal public space in the midst of authoritarian transformation, our work becomes monument to replaced, "naturalized" neighborhoods that are silenced into the landscape of the "park."**

Although positioned in China, the Sinking Gardens tells the story of North American colonialism: the indigenous desakota urban-scape has been "naturalized" over two centuries or more into a divided patchwork of "landscapes" either seen as resources to be exploited or preserved. Inhabitants, indigenous or otherwise are celebrated as either productive members of industrial society or considered essentially wasted pest species.

How can landscape architecture operate without being the machine of colonial "naturalization"- albeit a beauty making, celebratory machine? Our practice is the work of the most powerful elements of human nature - the joy human beings find in the presence of each other. What an irony that it is so often deployed at the dialectical behest of a colonial power structure of consumption, mindless work, and waste creation.

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2. Operate With Folly

Desire lines and points of folly are places of vulnerability and marginalized urban conditions. As **the currency of vulnerability is healthcare,** ecosocial design operates as landscape architecture for public health.

These **points of vulnerability, where ecosocial design operates, are urban anthropocene ecotones often characterized vis a vis their relationship to the mainstream as "primitive," "savage," "negative," "hot and cold," "empty," "toxic" or other "borderline" psychological conditions.** This borderline condition is imposed by way of the centering and peripherializing nature of colonial infrastructures built for production and consumption of energy - physically embodied in roads, rivers, dams, plants, animals, and diseases of "wealth creation" as well as socio technical infrastructures of economic value and aesthetics of beauty in perspective.

There structures of power expand and maintain their epistemes and their respective socio-ecological landscape "fields." **In North America the ethic of "freedom" is one of the most powerful epistemological drivers of infrastructural growth.** An example of this in practice is the automobile which, by guaranteeing individual autonomy, manifests the state in the form of asphalt roads and massive highways; some of our empirically largest physical built infrastructures on the planet. The effects of this kind of "freedom" based infrastructure is far reaching, from dividing up biodiversity into islands, to allowing large scale upland timber operations, to, perhaps most notably, global warming from fossil fuels (as well as increased Tar Sands mining and pipeline construction). The highway is, after all, constructed from a large part tar, and allows vehicles to travel at high speeds by way of fossil fuel consumption.

Landscape urbanists have suggested methods of mapping and even designing massive infrastructural change - change that hypothetically operates part and parcel with these large colonial infrastructures as a way to undermine them and perhaps head off global climate change in the process. However, it is also essential to understand the cultural and epistemological drivers that create and maintain these infrastructures. In this way we can resist and transform them.

3. Understand Socio-Ecological Frameworks

Different epistemes create different physical infrastructures. Salmon and rivers suitable for migration and spawning of anadromous fish is an infrastructure with a very different materiality and practice than North American highways and automobiles, although **perhaps salmon are to rivers as automobiles are to highways.**

Restoration in the Columbia Basin led by the Columbia Intertribal Fish Commission takes a biotechnical approach where technological systems of colonial control are usurped by way of health and traditional cuisine oriented practice. The result is a kind of decolonial infestation that spreads with salmon, it's intelligent meaning, and it's deliciousness.

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In the **"fishmobile" project (2010)** "technical know-how" can "solve" the "problem" of salmon migration by putting salmon in automobiles. The fish "drive" by way of real time data interfaces correlated with water scenting technology geocoded along highways. This project takes on a spooky relevance when considered in terms of the effect of (self driving) vehicles on human, pedestrian oriented cities. The automated car, which will offer unprecedented access to rural areas in the next ten years, may encourage exurb development large scale, having a similar effect on cities as the "fishmobile" would have on salmon. It is perhaps unfortunate that, currently, humans allow "wild" salmon to live "urban" and "pedestrian" lives while humans are stuck waiting in lines, riding in buses, and living lives of work, consumption, and waste.

The crux of the ecosocial revolution is to **recognize that edge conditions of "wildness" contain the key subjects of decolonial infrastructure, the key players in creation of ecosocial design.**

Salmon are labeled "wild," "primitive," and perhaps even "toxic" (if they swim close to the Hanford nuclear site or other toxic waste site for example.) They are considered to live lives of "insecurity" on the "edge," the "ecotone" of human society, and they aspire to "freedom," implying they are living in some kind of colonial cage. These traits could be derogatorily labelled to people as well, particularly in situations of marginalization, although they may have little to do with the actual society of the group, or the actual life way of salmon or some other "wild" species. Are salmon not methodical and determined, despite being labelled "wild?"
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4. Deploy "Wildness" and its Management

Ecosocial design is landscape architecture that operates in this "wild" space; it's actors are the human and nonhuman beings in this space. The cultural traditions woven between them are the mediums of ecosocial landscape architecture.

Practice should not ignore colonial hierarchy and infrastructure. To advocate the creation of off the grid "eco-village" communities based on visions of autonomy and harmony with an imaginary projected romanticized nature is to live in, at best, a happy delusion and, at worst, an operation of privileged and exclusive escape. On the other hand, to "elevate" ourselves into the seat of technical control in parliament or the White House, or the board of trustees in an oil company only assimilates ourselves into existing consumption and waste infrastructure. Corporate and institutional inertia to change proves that corporate strength is tested by its ability to incorporate dissidents into the role of power holders, to assimilate the other into the role of the case study, the proud acolyte, or even better, the CEO. In addition, to believe one must be in a seat of power cements socio-technical hierarchy into one's human and presently inextricably biophysical lifestyle. Assimilating values of the center, we commute, to "get there."

Landscape architecture as ecosocial design is a decolonial design that operates with "wildness" IN its marginalized position IN its position of "high risk" and "high vulnerability." The state maintains its power in terms of its ability

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to meet the needs of its most marginalized inhabitants. **By owning these risks ourselves, and offering a local ecosocial practice with data feedback, the neighborhood maintains its own epistemological raison d'être while also acquiring power from the state.**