Mapping, building and inhabiting spaces

Session 7

*Representation and recycling: disclosing the geography of waste in the European context* – Cecilia FURLAN

*Building a Common World? Understanding Architecture as World-making and Reconsidering Relationality through the Philosophy of Luce Irigaray* – Andrea WHEELER

*Public space for ambiguous times: where the market meets the street and something else may happen* – Gini LEE (paper pending)
Representation and recycling: disclosing the geography of waste in the European context

Cecilia FURLAN

KU Leuven University Belgium and IUAV Venice University Italy

Area of expertise: Urbanism, Architecture, Landscape Urbanism

During the last decade, the concepts of waste and wasteland have been central to western society. If we translate Thompson’s expression into a spatial dimension, wastelands are the unpleasant consequences of our cultural values associated with land use. The consecutive productive shifts of many western countries coincided with a massive disposal of industrial areas and infrastructures. Today, a legacy of abandoned and derelict landscapes appears. Assuming that maps can be considered as representations of social intent on the territory, in order to study both concepts and this paper proposes mapping as a way of inquiry and unfolding this complexity, therefore it emphasises how the notion of wasteland transforms according to the technological and cultural concepts of productivity. The construction of original cartographies of the Veneto Central area (Italy) and the Charleroi region (Belgium) allows to understand past and contemporary forms of wasteland. In fact the two territories embody macro and micro forms of what A. Berger defined as ‘drosscape’ emerging from different economic and productive cycles (Berger, 2006).

In conclusion, the paper claims that a critical representation of wasteland and its value lies at the heart of understanding (and finding the potential for) reclaiming landscape.

Keywords: wasteland, drosscape, systemic design.
Introduction

“Just as to understand poverty we must study the very rich: so to understand value we must study rubbish. The one is the dark side of the other.” (Thompson, 1981)

The European territories, cities and landscapes are under a metamorphosis due to economic and cultural transformations. Consequently, increasing production continues to transform, use, and waste the land. Industrial revolutions have transmuted western society from a user of fuel, raw materials, and land to a consumer of them (Barles, 2005). Therefore, different forms of wastelands, or what Berger defined as “drosscape,” have appeared, and are becoming a specific category in the western territories.

During the last decades, many architects, urbanists, and planners have simplified the concept of wasteland by considering it only as a natural result of fast urban development or a technological/productive leftover (Lynch, 1990; Berger, 2006). However, although often associated with post-industrial sites or polluted areas, the genealogy of wasteland is much more complex and ancient. The proliferation of altered landscapes in Europe raises contemporary cultural questions. What are the wasteland’s past and contemporary forms? Why reclaim them?

In the current time of transformation, reclaiming wasteland is a big challenge. It obliges an alternative way to look at the landscape, to rethink what already exists, what it has and had been used for, especially what is in a phase of obsolescence (Berger 2014). For these reasons, the research proposes mapping as a way to inquiry the complexity of wasteland dynamics.

Therefore the paper is structured in two sections: with in the first part it will investigate through historical cartographic explorations how spatial distribution of wastelands results from the cultural value construction. Based on the assumption that maps can be considered as representations of social intent on the territory, the paper emphasizes how the notion of wasteland transforms according to the technological and cultural concepts of productivity (Harley, 2001). In the second part, the article studies how the complexities of recycling and remediation are amplified at the territorial scale, especially when they involve ecological cycles of post-industrial sites and waste flows (Belanger, 2007).

Mapping wasteland dynamics is the first step to question the conventional way to see these spaces and to reveal new life cycles. It also provides a way to view the problems from a different level by shifting the negative perspective of wastelands towards focusing on the territorial systemic character of recycling.

Mapping as recycle approach

According to Harley, maps are “constructions of the reality... laden with intentions and consequences that can be studied in the societies of their time. Like books, they are the products of both individual minds and the wider cultural values in particular societies.” (Harley,2001). For this reason, this research decided to inquire the concept of wasteland by a twofold approach: on the one hand, it analyses historical cartography and representation; and on the other hand, it explores construction of systemic design.

1 Observing the American landscape and post-industrial sites from a different perspective, Berger developed a new term – drosscape: “In which this term implies that dross or waste is scaped or resurfaced and re-programmed by human intention. Drosscape is the result of new condition in which ‘vast,’ ‘waste’ and ‘wasteful’ land surfaces are modelled with new programs.” (Berger, 2006)
The intention of a historical cartographic re-construction is to describe how wastelands are altered, justified, and absorbed into culture through a spatial perspective (Lynch, 1990). Furthermore, by observing the ancient cartographical language, the research observed the evolution of the interpretation of wasteland concept. The cartographic analysis, the selective retracing and delayering of historical maps and the contemporary interpretation of historical representations have revealed the cumulative alternation of western perception regarding the land use and the waste land perception.

Simultaneously, the mapping approach of the contemporary waste landscape permits observations that otherwise would remain hidden or too complex, contributing to the process of envisioning future possibilities (Corner, 1999) although a wide range of visual descriptions are sometimes sterile urban design tools “which bypass the new without describing it” (Secchi, 1992). Therefore two questions naturally arise: why retrace and draw an existing map? Why visualise wasteland dynamics? The answer lies in the fact that mapping should not be a mechanical tracing operation but a deep reading and understanding of the territory, a way to take possession of it (Corner, 1999). Observing the landscapes through a mapping language consents first of all, the comparison and contrast of the landscape within macro and micro forms and also the observation within sites and between sites. Because of their nature, maps are synthetic devices that measure landscape, making its qualities readable. In the analysed case studies “drosscape” cartographies permit multiple perspectives. They overlap waste spaces with ecosystems, watersheds, energy systems, and geographical and topographical conditions, developing a systemic design reading. The method merges the existing territorial dynamics, with multi-layer strategies and historical transformations, helping to comprehend how natural and artificial systems dynamically operate at the regional and local scale, and how they are interrelated (Berger, 2009; Spirn, 1988).

In order to explore these issues the research focuses on the European territory through two case studies: the Charleroi metropolitan area and the Veneto Central region. In fact Europe has experienced different waves of industrialisation: concentrated, decentralised and dispersed (Waldeheim & Berger, 2008). Each cycle produced distinct spatial organisations and shaped urban forms in a particular way. Therefore, the proposed case studies look at wasteland as the result of two different processes: the massive and heavy industrialisation in the Charleroi area during the last century, and the weak and diffuse industrialisation in the Veneto Central region of the last fifty years.

**Macro-forms of wasteland: Charleroi Region**

Exploitation of the European coal industry mainly developed in the centre of Europe, in the territory between Lille (FR), Liege (BE), and Dortmund (GE). The Charleroi metropolitan area, situated in the centre of Belgium, developed around the coal mines and the textile and steel industries. Because of its morphological configuration, the presence of the river infrastructure, and its geological conformation characterised by three coal veins, Charleroi was the perfect setting for heavy industrial production. Large infrastructural elements and industrial platforms, underground corridors and coal hills shaped this territory (Nolf 2008). Until the 1980s, this region was pushed by an economic dynamism. Then, due to the exhaustion of the natural resources, the...

---

2 For the Veneto Central area, the research defines the portion of the territory included between the Treviso, Castelfranco, Padua and Venice provinces. It occupies a surface of approximately 30 by 30 km, with roughly 2.6 million inhabitants.
development of technological production and the stiff competition from the eastern
countries, the region destabilised. Finally the oil crisis and recession of the late 1970s
and early 80s delivered the final blow to the once-thriving region. Since that time, for
decades, the great Walloon industrial machine has been cast into social and economic
wilderness. As a result, a macro-form of wasteland emerged. Until today, abandoned
sites, coal hills, relics of factories and large-scale infrastructure mark the landscape of
la Sambre valley.

Micro-forms of wastelands: Veneto Central area (PA TRE VE)

For fifty years the Veneto Region in Italy was a driving, productive area. Recently the
crisis destabilised the economic and territorial dynamics. In fact this decline has deeper
roots in the industrial process of renovation, which started at the end of the 1990s
(Corò, 2013). Accordingly a plurality of spatial situations coexists in the same area:
forms and cycles of this disposal, abandoned and underused, are combined with the
process of re-qualification and use of productive and agricultural spaces.

The combination of this abandoned process and the dispersed urban condition
generates a constellation of micro wastelands, apparently randomly distributed (Viganò,
2013). Their tiny conformations permit a more resilient metamorphosis, in which the
forms of abandonment and underused spaces are blurred.

1) Chronicles of the (r) evolution of the wasteland representations

Usually, “wasteland description lies not by what it is, or by what it has, but by what it
lacks” (Di Palma, 2014). Emptiness and valueless were and are the key features. In
fact, a long tradition of historical studies has revealed the important role of wasteland in
the urbanisation process. Even though the wasteland concept and its establishment are
generally connected to modernity, we have to consider that their foundation precedes
the modern period (Engler, 2004).

The first traceable concept of wasteland was found in the “The Great Charter of Forest”
of the Magna Carta (1225). It was defined as “ravaged, injured un populated or wild in
legal use, piece of land not in any individual’s occupation but lying in common”
(Gidwany, 2012; Linebaugh, 2009). Wastelands were associated with non-arable lands,
characterized by a variety of ecologies mainly connected by their wilderness, by their
resistance to domestication, and by the absence of conventional signs of urbanization
(Di Palma, 2014). Therefore it was possible to play on the dual connotation; they were
considered as something useless and something not properly used. Similar definitions
were found in government documents and popular pamphlets, in which wasteland was
defined as a commons (Gidwany, 2012; Neeson, 1993). Certainly wastelands were
considered informal economical sources of fuel, raw materials and food supplies. They
were productive fields external from the land market and logics; thus, productivity
became the main parameter with which to establish spatial value. For instance,
cartographical illustrations of the 16th century represented only the efficient functional
spaces identified by the lines of the drainage and irrigation systems. Because of the
cultural perception that such spaces were valueless, they were represented as white
undefined surfaces on the maps.

Two centuries later, after big reclamation campaigns, only 1% of the green surface
could be considered as a non-cultivated area. By looking at different cartographical and
paint representations, wasteland appeared to fall into three main categories: mountain,
forest and swamp (Di Palma, 2014). Thomas Burnet, in 1678, described the Alpine
landscape as nothing he could have imagined. Rocky mountains were perceived as terrifying and desolate landscapes (Di Palma, 2014).

The uselessness of the hard rock surface was identified with the absence of value. Similar perception was also associated with the forest idea. From the 12th until the 18th centuries, the forest was considered as something uncontrolled, outside of the domestic sphere. Actually the term in itself derives from the Latin world *foresta*, which means something outside (Gidwany, 2012). Moreover, in the collective imagination it was often associated with the presence of beasts – the hare, the bear and the wolf. Finally the wetland’s value was not appreciated because of the ambiguous condition of the soil. It was consider neither ground nor water, neither solid nor liquid.

The retrace and observation of the Ferraris Carte of Belgium (1706) and the Kriegscarte of the north-east of Italy (1798-1806) present how wasteland became a mapped category. It was identified as heathland and swamp areas. In both cases, indeed, the surface of the ground was capable of being cultivated and even domesticated (Di Palma 2014)

Even the mapping study of the Austrian cadastre (1817) and the successive Napoleonic one (1852) emphasise wasteland as a sterile area, sandy site, or woodland with wild vegetation and stones not adapted to domestication. Specifically, in the French document it was called “Herm: Désigne un terrain inculte ou aride, friche et land vain”; while in the Italian document it was denominated as “Zerbo: Terreno incolto o boschivo, che non è sterile ma produce qualche posco di erba o piante” (Ferrighi 2014). Consequently wasteland was considered an excess matter and material that is unruly and inappropriate.

The necessity for national cartographies, IGM and IGN maps, developed simultaneously with the major industrial and social transformation of the territories. Therefore the way in which wasteland was perceived, produced and mapped slowly shifted. For instance, the 1908 ING of Charleroi shows two kinds of wastelands: the tumulus or Terill, coal hills created from the industrial carbon residue, and the swampy areas. However, from a close reading of the map it is possible to observe the appearance of white surfaces in between buildings and infrastructure. These white areas are unmapped spaces without a specific value connotation; what Vasset, by observing these white lands in the contemporary IGN and verifying them in reality, describes as: mysterious spaces, space in transition, terrain illegally occupied, post-industrial sites, wild green areas (Vasset, 2007). Because of their unconventional nature and materials, even the modern cartographical maps are not able to classify and represent them as in the past.

---

3 Their primary goal was the visualization of territory for military purpose. They are also considered the first example of maps with geographical coordination references

4 The Napoleonic Cadastre applies to all urban and rural properties (built or not). The literal information is strictly linked to the geographical one. A plot is defined as an entity linked to an owner and to a fiscal division, following the Napoleonic concept. Basically, the cadastre has a fiscal, an informative and a certain probative function. It was the first document that unifies the different local systems into one common European cadastre, an important consequence of which was to unify territorial representations and codifications


6 Unknown author, from “Istruzioni generali della congregazione del censo” Biblioteca Pontificia, 1823

7 Istituto Geografico Militare (IGM) and National Geographic Institute (NGI) are the national agency of respectively, of Italy and Belgium. They produce different series of national topographical, and not, maps of the entire national territory. The maps has the primary goal to answer at military needs
Figure 1: Analysis of the wasteland representation in the Ferraris Carte of Charleroi region. Source www.kbr.be. Elaboration made by the author.
Even the mapping study of the Austrian cadastre (1817) and the successive Napoleonic one\(^8\) (1852) emphasise wasteland as a sterile area, sandy site, or woodland with wild vegetation and stones not adapted to domestication. Specifically, in the French document it was called “Herm: Désigne un terrain inculte ou aride, friche et land vain”\(^9\); while in the Italian document it was denominated as “Zerbo: Terreno incolto o boschivo, che non è sterile ma produce qualche posco di erba o piante”\(^10\) (Ferrighi 2014). Consequently wasteland was considered an excess matter and material that is unruly and inappropriate.

The necessity for national cartographies, IGM and IGN\(^11\) maps, developed simultaneously with the major industrial and social transformation of the territories. Therefore the way in which wasteland was perceived, produced and mapped slowly shifted. For instance, the 1908 ING of Charleroi shows two kinds of wastelands: the tumulus or Terill, coal hills created from the industrial carbon residue, and the swampy areas. However, from a close reading of the map it is possible to observe the appearance of white surfaces in between buildings and infrastructure. These white areas are unmapped spaces without a specific value connotation; what Vasset, by observing these white lands in the contemporary IGN and verifying them in reality, describes as: mysterious spaces, space in transition, terrain illegally occupied, post-industrial sites, wild green areas (Vasset, 2007). Because of their unconventional nature and materials, even the modern cartographical maps are not able to classify and represent them as in the past.

After the ecological “revolution” of the ’70s and the industrial crises of the ’80s, western society reconsidered the importance of the ecological value of the wetlands and the unproductive green fields. Many philosophers and urban designers recognised the intrinsic value of wasteland, going beyond the technical descriptions. By studying waste space from different perspectives, they revealed new meanings and definitions: terrain vague (De Sola Morales, 1996), third landscape (Clèment, 2004), drosscape (Berger, 2006). In conclusion, the proposed cartographical chronicles have revealed hidden relations between the use of the land, the value of the space and its representations. Therefore, they highlight how the wasteland concepts changed during economic and cultural transformations, in which the necessity to convert and reuse the land emerged.

Are we in the same moment of change? By exploring contemporary wasteland dynamics, the second part of the paper reflects on possible recycle strategies. Mapping and a systemic design approach helped to address the wasteland problematic to a territorial perspective, considering wastelands part of a larger system rather than a collection of spaces.

2) **Leftover as a resource**

“The great landscape gardener, Lancelot Brown, when confronted with a client’s estate, did not say - what is your problem? He asked - what are the capabilities of this piece of land?” (Thompson, 1981).  

---

\(^8\) The Napoleonic Cadastre applies to all urban and rural properties (built or not). The literal information is strictly linked to the geographical one. A plot is defined as an entity linked to an owner and to a fiscal division, following the Napoleonic concept. Basically, the cadastre has a fiscal, an informative and a certain probative function. It was the first document that unifies the different local systems into one common European cadastre, an important consequence of which was to unify territorial representations and codifications.

\(^9\) http://www.etymologieoccitane.fr/2011/06/herm-erm/

\(^10\) Unknown author, from “Istruzioni generali della congregazione del censo” Biblioteca Pontificia, 1823

\(^11\) Istituto Geografico Milatere (IGM) and National Geographic Institute (NGI) are the national agency of respectively, of Italy and Belgium. They produce different series of national topographical, and not, maps of the entire national territory. The maps has the primary goal to answer at military needs.
The understanding of the contemporary forms of wastelands and their possible reclamations begin with the triptych of visual constructions: original maps, systemic readings and design approaches. Each series is based on the assumption that contemporary wastelands are complex elements, which is going further than the definition of brown-fields and post-industrial sites.

**Original maps**

The construction of interpretative maps is based on direct observations and surveys of a portion measuring 30 km by 30 km of the Charleroi region and the Veneto Central area. The different scales analyses, from a series of measured spaces of 1km by 1km, to a territorial scale, highlight the heterogeneous collection of spaces. Even if they are diverse in location, material and form, they can all fit inside a similar wasteland concept. This issue imposes a different classification construction. Consequently the research developed a specific taxonomy in order to elaborate original cartographies.

According to this waste urban code, two series of maps, one for each territory, were produced. Therefore the following maps emphasise the macro and micro forms of wastelands recognizable in Europe: the large industrial platforms and infrastructures of the Charleroi region and the tiny dispersed elements of the Veneto region. Finally the intrinsic nature and the territorial distribution of the revealed waste landscapes obliged the research to develop different reclamation approaches.

Observations and mapping constructions of the different dross spaces are not sufficient to imagine new life cycles for the waste landscapes. Moreover, the risk is to develop “ad hoc” reclamation strategies, or to enforce speculative reuse logics, losing a territorial perspective (Van Dyck, & Verhestsel, 2007). Therefore the research constructs territorial cartographic readings for each territory, ordered in two thematic groups: physical environment (geological, hydrogeological and ecological system) and infrastructural networks (mobility and energy system). Every series of maps has been overlapped with the wasteland cartographies. The construction begins with a set of maps showing how the physical and the geological environment determined the location of the waste landscape. Finally, the overlay of the waste landscape map and

---

12 The selection of the territorial frame (30x30 km) is based on the physical dimension of the Veneto central area, as the portion of the territory located between the province of Treviso, Castelfranco, Padua and Venice.

13 The selection of the territorial frame (30x30 km) is based on the physical dimension of the Veneto central area, as the portion of the territory located between the province of Treviso, Castelfranco, Padua and Venice.
the infrastructural system emphasise the strong connection between marginal wasteland and urban expansion. This applied systemic approach has revealed hidden relations between the hydrological network and the waste dynamics. For instance, juxtapositions between water risk areas and green wastelands often appear, revealing an opportunity to solve the water management problem. Furthermore, overlapping wasteland structures with the ecological ones has disclosed how the waste landscape is a rich environment from the biological perspective. In the Charleroi case, for instance, fifty years of abandonment have permitted the creation of a new ecological layer, shifting the view of a polluted space into a different form of public space. This metamorphosis permits a new appropriation of the space by the inhabitants, confirming that what is “waste” is just a matter of cultural values (Clement, 2004). Finally, the overlay of the waste landscape with the infrastructure systems has emphasised the opportunity to improve mobility connections, or new energy networks.

**Design approaches**

The new relations, revealed by a systemic reading, allow for new cycles of wasteland territories. In projecting the wastelands as a recycle model for the future, the strategy consists of working on the strength and the necessity of the territory, and waste space possibility and materials. Therefore, the design studio was the perfect occasion to test some design hypotheses. The case studies were selected according to their paradigmatic role for the system in which they exist. In this paper, we propose the example of the design approaches applied in Camposampiero, situated at the centre of the Veneto region.

The first recognisable system is related to the floodable landscape and its conditions for the urban fabric. It is located between the upstream forest and the downstream floodplain, a point of interaction with regional infrastructure, urban fabric and underused green field. The project constructs alternative strategies for the water drainage system that is now mainly piped. By creating retention areas on underused plots, the project provides more floodable spaces to be stored for a longer time and to slow down floods in the long run. The room for the water permits a future infiltration of green systems, ecological corridors and a series of public space along the river.

The second design experiment case study deals with an abandoned/underused industrial area located between two heavy infrastructures in a floodable zone. This means that water is the primary element shaping the recycle project; therefore urban and industrial settlements should be adapted in order to work with the water and to contribute to the energy production. The first strategy was to transform green fields in between industrial buildings into open water basins. Secondly, a system of slopes and ditches were created to collect the water flows from the oversized parking lots into the new basins. In this way, the collected water can be used during the dry season for irrigation purposes. The project area is being studied in two scales; at the territorial scale, defining a water management strategy for the vast agricultural lands, and at the local scale, where residential and industrial settlements form synergies towards a sustainable economy and energy production system. Therefore the roofs of vacant buildings and underused asphalt surfaces are recycled to host solar panels in order to produce green energy. This operation was possible because of the logistic location; the presences of electricity corridors make this area a strategic location for energy

---

14 The paper referred to student design studio, guided by Prof. B. Secchi, Prof. P. Viganò, tutored by C. Furlan and A. Curtoni. The studio involved international designers participating at the European postgraduate master in Urbanism, during the Fall semester 2013.
production. Oversized parking lots were transformed into small public spaces in order to promote the social interaction between the workers.

The design proposals, still in the experimental phase, try to demonstrate how, with small interventions within a systemic design approach, to shift wasteland value, and that it can be re-used as a resource for territorial necessities.

**Conclusions**

Reflecting on wasteland dynamics, with the awareness of the on-going change in contemporary European territories, this paper reflected upon wasteland, and waste in general, as a cultural construction. Firstly, the cartographical study holds out the metamorphosis of the wasteland perception, describing not only the spatial value transformation but understanding the processes whereby spatial value is constantly being creating and destroyed (Thompson, 1981). Secondly, the paper points out how the technological evolution is developing in a linear perspective, in which waste is a natural result of an irreversible process. Nevertheless in opposition to this development, there is a natural transformation that is clearly not linear, but cyclical, in which waste has been reused (Belanger, 2007). For this reason, a systemic design and mapping can help designers image a new life cycle for the waste landscape, avoiding speculative appropriation by observing the entire territorial dynamics. There is not a simple solution to define how to recycle these spaces or this system of spaces. Perhaps the way lies in a constant search, continually questioning the territories under observation and applying our interdisciplinary tools of knowledge.
Figure 2: Analysis of the wasteland representation in the IGN of Charleroi region, 1908. Source: Royal National Library Brussels. Elaboration and interpretation made by the author.
Figure 3: Taxonomy of wastelands. Elaboration made by the author referring to the work of De Carli, 2012.
Figure 4: Contemporary waste landscape. Veneto Region and Charleroi region (30 x 30 km). Elaboration made by the author.
Figure 5: Juxtaposition of the Walloon dross landscape and the geological conditions. Elaboration made by the author.
Figure 6: Design strategies. Elaboration made by Emu Students, Fall semester, 2013, guided by Secchi B., Viganò P., Cecilia F., Andrea C.
Figure 7: Design strategies. Elaboration made by Emu Students, Fall semester, 2013, guided by Secchi B, Viganò P., Cecilia F., Andrea C.
References


Corò, Giancarlo. *Scenari e territori per un nuovo sviluppo del Nord est. in Bertagna*. 2013


Linebaugh, PT *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009

Neeson, Jeannette M. *Commoners: Common Right. Enclosure and Social Change in England*, 170041820, 1993


Cecilia is an architect and urban designers. She graduated from IUAV in 2010 within a design thesis on resilient strategies on climate change. She followed the EMU European postgraduate master in urbanism, between the University IUAV of Venice and KU Leuven University (BE). From January 2013 she currently enrolled in the Doctoral School of Venice and KU Leuven, following a joint PhD program between the two athenaeums, under the supervision of Prof. Bruno De Meulder and Prof. Paola Viganò, as well as being part of an independent young design office, Buro Brak which worked on several international design competitions. She is currently the EMU tutor in IUAV of Venice, tutor of some undergraduate thesis and she also is involved in the research Unite “The New Urban Question” department Culture del Progetto (IUAV Venice).
Building a Common World? Understanding Architecture as World-making and Reconsidering Relationality through the Philosophy of Luce Irigaray

Andrea WHEELER

Iowa State University, Department of Architecture, Ames, IA USA

Green and Sustainable Architecture

Adopting the philosophy of Luce Irigaray, who has proposed a radical sharing to address current ethical and environmental issues, I argue in this paper that sustainable architectural practices that are currently dominated by a discourse of comparing energy performances of buildings and of abstract certification or rating tools, each of which can be easily manipulated to serve the purposes of gain, need to connect with feminist perspectives. I argue that the ethical perspective of Irigaray’s work suggests a conceptual reorientation for sustainable design, one that addresses behavioral change as a question of radically different living in relation; and preserving materials resources as a recognition of an elementally shared world. This notion of sharing as the inspiration for architecture begins with rebuilding the relationship between woman and man. That we could start to build in ways that recognize a shared world, that we could imagine a possible future that is ecologically responsible and just, is an architectural as much as a philosophical question.

Key to an understanding of how we might respond to architecture’s environmental problems is the deeply philosophical question of what it means to be alive and to live. Irigaray offers both a criticism of cultural traditions and a provocation to build something new – both in terms of subjectivity and lived built environment. In this paper, I will explore an ecological engagement in Irigaray’s most recent work, examine the common world theme of sustainable development, and propose a conversation to take place between feminist philosophy and architecture’s ecological concerns.

Keywords: Sustainable, Architecture, Ecologies, Human relationships
Introduction

Building a common world or building a shared world? Two different perspectives, the first in common use within the discourse of sustainable development in Our Common Future (1987) or the Common Cause Handbook (2011), for example; and the second adopted from the philosophy of Luce Irigaray, proposing a completely different conceptual orientation to the problem of sustainable living. The latter places our understanding of ourselves at the heart of the problem. It is a more radical perspective on a sustainable living than that offered by social scientists, policy makers, architectural technologists or theorists, even by those within deep ecology, eco-feminism or green socialist movements. It is a profoundly sophisticated view of human liberation: as women’s liberation, where liberation means freeing oneself to become in relation; liberation in sexuate difference. It is the sexuation of living, Irigaray argues, that is key to an ecological ethics (Irigaray 2015 103).

Reducing our environmental impact in the world cannot be solved simply by raising awareness of our consumption habits. We need new dialogues to explore how we can realistically and effectively reduce our impact on the earth and live in less exploitative relationships: a larger conceptual orientation towards sustainable architecture is required (Muller 2014, 6). We need ways of thinking and being that can not only imagine the possibilities of an ecologically responsible future but can begin to realize them. Adopting the philosophy of Luce Irigaray is such an approach. The philosophical problem of sharing and of building a new world is discussed in some of her most recent and forthcoming works: Sharing the World (2010); “Starting from Ourselves as Living Beings” and “Cultivating a Living Belonging” both in a special edition of the Journal of British Phenomenology (2015); and her edited collection of student essays Teaching II. Building a New World (2015).

Luce Irigaray is not, however, only a philosopher of environmental ethics; she is also a celebrated French philosopher and feminist theorist who has argued for the recognition of sexuate difference from the late 1970s onwards. Notably, she states that this relationship between man and woman who are both equal and different must shape our understanding of what it means to be in the world, to be alive, and to live. This distinguishes her from any other environmental philosopher. In an article in The Guardian newspaper, for example, she argues that air pollution should be considered a crime against humanity as it represents a profound assault upon our life and freedom (Irigaray and Marder 2014). However, this is not an article about the problems of air pollution, or simply a criticism of a discourse obsessed by number and measurement. It is the very notions of how we understand both life and our freedom to live, within an environment polluted by mankind that she exposes in this article. She writes:

Today we live in a world so complicated and, moreover, organised so differently according to the cultures we belong to, that encountering each other as humans has become almost impossible. However, instead of asking what it means to be human, alleged experts in various domains discuss at great length how to establish coexistence among people […] these experts in peace stray far from a solution, getting lost in technical detail without considering the universal sharing of life, from which we could start again. (Irigaray and Marder 2014a)

Irigaray’s criticism of technology is certainly significant, as is her critical and affectionate engagement with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger in The Forgetting of Air with Martin Heidegger. A concern for air quality and attending to air pollution should, as she argues, be a greater concern for environmentalists than it currently is. Air provides us
with life, she states; it is an element we share: it is not a resource that can be
posse ssed—neither bought nor sold—but its value and necessity are forgotten within
Western cultural traditions and among its philosophers. Our relationship with it
reconnects us to a recognition of what it means to be alive.

The article "Without Clean Air, We Have Nothing" was written with Michael Marder, a
philosopher known for his work on plant ethics and who has argued for a
reconsideration of the intelligence with which plants engage with their environments
and each other. This behaviour is not akin to machines, a common misunderstanding,
he suggests; rather, plants have life and intelligence albeit perhaps not consciousness
(Marder 2012). Irigaray furthers this discussion, stating that plants enhance human
living and preserve our being in the world, our being in relation. And, whilst plants
contribute to the recognition of our freedom to become, we have a responsibility to
them. "The lesson taught by plants is that sharing life augments and enhances the
sphere of the living, while dividing life into so-called natural or human resources
diminishes it," Irigaray writes, and

We must come to view the air, the plants and ourselves as the contributors to the
preservation of life and growth, rather than a mesh of quantifiable objects or
productive potentialities at our disposal. Perhaps then we would finally begin to
live, rather than being concerned with bare survival. (Irigaray and Marder 2014a)

Marder’s work on plant ethics is critical and provocative; he describes his work as a
project of plant liberation, where plants could be what they are. He writes:

Positively understood, the project of plant liberation would allow plants to be what
they are and to realize their potentialities, often in the context of cross-kingdoms
c o-evolution. Inasmuch as humans and animals share the vegetal soul with plants,
the potentialities of the latter are also ours, though often it is virtually impossible to
recognize them as such. (Marder 2012)

The philosophical problem of an ethic regarding a living (plant) community to whom we
are dependent for our life but whom we refuse to recognize, corresponds with some of
the earliest questions raised by the work of Irigaray to find ways of being-in-relation
between cultures or worlds.

In “Starting from Ourselves as Living Beings”, Irigaray argues that the environmental
movement and its ethics risk replacing a relationship of exploitation with an equally
dominating ethics of care; and environmentalism must question the cultural traditions
that have shaped understandings of nature and of our relationship with the plant and
animal worlds. She writes, “…just as the Western man pretended to dominate nature,
to subject it to a culture presumed to be of higher value in relation to nature, today he
intends to care for nature” (Irigaray 2015 101). Such an ecological perspective raises
the question of what it means to be living in community with those with whom we share
our life. And an ecological ethics begins, she argues, with a faithfulness to our sexuate
living and to our sexuate belonging. Living, and being-alive, and to be fully living and
sexuately embodied, are key themes in her ecological writings.

For Irigaray, that we understand our relationship with nature, with the world, only as
mediated by culture, that we have been so well educated to limit our understanding of
what our relationship is, and ever could be, and that we could possibly conceive of
ourselves as anything other than neutral beings, has contributed to a difficulty in
building both sexuately embodied and ethical relationships. As she writes,

We get in touch with the world, with the other, with ourselves according to learned
codes, but not starting from original impulses, attractions or sympathies that have
been educated towards respect for our own life, that for our environments and that for other living beings. (Irigaray 2015 101)

The result is a perversion of our world, human beings cut off from themselves—one part uneducated nature and another subject to abstract and arbitrary laws (Irigaray 2015 101). A reconnection with the elemental, a protection of the air and plant life, would then become design objectives not for the purposes of meeting abstract targets, within systems whose purpose is only to designate a building “sustainable” (a description so empty of meaning), but rather approaches providing opportunities for different ways of living and being-together, thus allowing a liberated life to exist and develop.

Luce Irigaray became noticed as a feminist philosopher with the initial self-publication of her doctoral thesis, Speculum of the other: woman which criticized the Western tradition for its lack of any real attention to the experience of woman. Her motive, as she describes in an interview, was to leave a culture of a single subject, where, she argued, “thinking, loving and even living were not possible for me” (cited in Wheeler 2008, 57) and uncover the reality of a feminine subjectivity. Her first books, she argues, testify to a confrontation with a monosexuate culture; in particular, the traditions of philosophy and psychoanalysis in Speculum and This Sex Which Is Not One (and later in The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger) reveal the unsuitability of these models to meet, as she states, her desire for living, loving and thinking (Irigaray cited in Wheeler 2008, 57-58). Nevertheless, remaining within attitudes of criticism, she recalls, did not satisfy:

I knew that my way of loving and thinking was mistaken and I had thus to discover how to live, love and think after leaving a monosexuate culture. The unfolding of my work bears witness to this quest. I sought new mediations to differ from the so-called neutral culture in which I was merged – be they genealogy, language, law, religion [and architecture as is suggested further on in this interview]. These mediations were a means of differentiating myself without remaining only in a critical attitude. They represented a positive means of going along my own path. (Irigaray cited in Wheeler 2008, 58)

The subsequent development of her work has been a project to find correspondences, bridges, and mediations between paths or worlds. Being in the world, being upon the earth, being-in-relation whilst recognizing sexuate belonging— these are what is meant by both living and liberation in her work.

Hence, Irigaray’s writing deals with the question of women’s liberation through a concern for the liberation of woman and man in a recognition of a sexuate relationality: a sexuate way of being in relation. This notion of sexuate difference distinguishes her philosophy from others. She writes: “I had to start from sexuate difference, that is to say from the most basic and universal difference, a difference founded both in nature and in culture and which crosses all history(ies), tradition(s) and people(s)” (Irigaray cited in Wheeler 2008, 58). Sexuate difference, she argues, is the most basic and universal difference and this difference is the first biodiversity that we must take into account (Irigaray 2015, 103).

This is not the difference as suggested by other French feminists or philosophers of difference. Promoting the inclusion of sexual difference, often presented positively in terms of diversity, as she argues, does not include any questioning of whether within our current cultural traditions a hospitality towards the other, a correspondence, or a speaking-with is possible. And whilst a feminine subjectivity is not yet recognized in
our current cultural conditions neither is a proper relationship with other living beings; as Irigaray states,

To promote only diversity, as it is often the case in our times, runs the risk of remaining in an unchanged horizon with regard to the relations with the other(s). We then entrust this problem to customs, moral rules or religious feeling without questioning our culture about its capability of meeting with the other as such. (Irigaray cited in Wheeler 2008, 54)

While the philosophy of Irigaray is known by architectural theorists, it has not yet been significantly included in conversations on sustainable architecture, and her recent work on ecology, so relevant to architecture, has not yet been cited. The dominance of a technical perspective—of model-predicted energy performance and an over confidence in innovative materials and assemblies—is a symptom of a cultural problem but it is not the only criticism of the architectural profession’s approach to sustainable design that needs to be raised. When Irigaray is cited, any commitment to her work is limited, and her architectural writings have been largely dismissed (Rawes 2007). The significance of her work, nevertheless, is to radically open the possibility of new ways of living in relation and to provide some inspiration, some energy, for a future co-inhabited world where nascent relationalities are nurtured by designed environments. This is sustainable design as a profoundly different ethics to that currently described in literature and distinct from any expression of a need for a common vision.

The notion of a shared world takes the underlying feminist philosophical background to a completely different place. This being-in-relation is characterized by the need to return to ourselves, to preserve an integrity, and to start from ourselves as living beings. As an ecology, it is to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the life and freedom the natural world gives us: to return to physis – nature as growth – and to the roots of that growth:

After much energy has gone into deconstructing the contrived opposition between “nature” and “culture,” now is the time to return to physis after deconstruction and to affirm its burgeoning emergence that offers an unacknowledged model for the thinking of being as a tireless giving of itself. And to return to plants, the growing beings par excellence, the metonymies of this emergence (Marder and Irigaray, 2014c)

Hence, what it might mean to be alive, to live, to recognize a natural sexed belonging (remembering that both nature and sexual difference are profoundly reconsidered through this perspective) and to build structures and forms to nurture this belonging is the critical question that Irigaray’s philosophy offers architecture.

In “Starting from Ourselves as Living Beings” the impulse to create territory to define our own space, to protect national boundaries, is discussed as a cultural rather than a “natural” act and it is the question of desire, somewhat overlooked in the discourse of sustainable living, that emerges

As plants or animals sometimes fight over the territory essential to their subsistence and their growth, humans fight over the cultural universe that they have constructed when they have not succeeded in inhabiting themselves and coexisting as living beings. They struggle for their survival through cultural substitutes because they have not created, amongst themselves, links that can provide them with an additional life rather than a death threat. This building of space and places thanks to the relations of desire between us is still lacking. It
would be useful if ecology were to care about this instead of going no further than being concerned only about our needs (Irigay 2015a, 105).

This is the radicalizing of our relationship with nature as emergence, as energy, as a force for change. For sustainable architecture, if only a first step, it allows us to critically engage with technical tools and universal methods that appear to be dominating the conversation.

**Sustainable architecture and a shared world**

Architecture 2030 presents a palette of potential design actions that, when used together, can build a sustainable environment. Organized in terms of "swatches", as different design approaches and scales of the problem—region, city, district, site—individual designers choose their own swatches and develop their own designs, and a certain level of critical thinking by the designer is removed from the process. Nevertheless, individualism is built into the system because participants have the opportunity not only to create one's own palette but also to further develop the palette through individual solutions. This is a sustainable design tool for good practice. The aim of Architecture 2030’s creator, Edward Mazria, is a shared vision (by which he means a common vision) which can gain the support of existing institutional bodies and government departments.

Roger Platt, President of the Green Building Council, has discussed the limitations of the LEED rating tool in response to its critics, suggesting the inclusion of the additional factors of social equity, building performance and wellbeing (Platt 2014). However, the tool as currently designed cannot properly respond to these categories. Whilst LEED aims to measure the provision of a number of design considerations within certain categories which together contribute to a sustainability design, the question of how it would be possible to measure social equity within such a framework is a problem for the future development of the LEED tool. Similarly, the question of actual building performance sheds light only on the superficiality of the method, as the question of wellbeing is too subjective for any tool that categorizes components of a sustainable building in order to provide a rating. Thus, while the questions raised are ultimately valuable, they merely draw attention to the inadequacies of such tools.

Jason McClennan’s Living Building Challenge is a criticism of LEED but the high standards presented makes it difficult to achieve within existing building regulations. To build in this way is currently both economically and legally inviable, as buildings promoted as meeting these standards had waivers in terms of building codes and significant financial support. The method is extreme in comparison to LEED (and was developed as a criticism), yet the approach could be developed to suggest something much more radical: a living building could mean a living dwelling.

Bjark Ingels calls for "worldcraft", arguing that architecture is the art and science of accommodating life, a statement reflecting an architecture adopting Irigaray’s philosophy. He states that, as such, architects are given power to create the world they would like to live in. Furthermore, he calls for architects to care about the dreams and desires of others, and to use these as the driving force for their own architecture. We have a responsibility as architects, he argues, to create a world and we need to decide as a species how we will use this societally important cultural product of architecture; that is, how we will deploy it to construct the world we want to live in. However, working together towards a democratically envisioned future:and
evoking a participatory ecological architecture does not address any innovation in relationality. None of these propositions, however, suggest anything that aims to solve problems—ecological and human—that have been caused by an error in relationship. Each assumes this problem of relationship, whether between human beings and plants, animals, natural and man-made resources, and other human beings, is a new way of working or building, in a similar (albeit environmentally friendly) or same world.

A common world or a shared world?

The social sciences and humanities are by and large missing from environmental discourses and the dominant discourse. This has been challenged as contributing to the “...post-political Anthropocene narrative dominated by the natural sciences and focused on environmental rather than social change” (Lövbrand, E., et al. 2015, 212).

The pressing task, the authors of this paper state, is how we collectively makes sense of and respond to a changing environment: “Rather than accepting the world as we find it, work in this field prompt scholars to reflect upon the ideas, norms and power relations that make up the world and to imagine it anew” (212).

Mike Hulme, one of the authors, has similarly, and separately, called for climate change to be subjected to a cultural analysis. We have to recognize, he states, that climate change has different meanings for different peoples, and different cultures. He argues against the tendency within policy literature to propose the need for one global understanding of one global climate, but instead that climate change is lived in place. Thus, he does not recognize the world of climate change as singular. Nevertheless, whilst climate change is neither “visible” nor “invisible” (Hulme 2015); it is made visible by culture(s) and by artistic practices. This for Hulme is the understanding of our condition that we need to cultivate to counter the desire for a singular perspective.

The idea that gender is a cultural construction and we are neutral individuals – neutral in our relationships, neutral in our being-in-the world, that we could inhabit a singular and common world, shapes the discourse of sustainable development. However, for Irigaray, if we believe that we are neutral individuals, we deny an embodied and importantly sexed subjectivity: we negate life and in so doing we cannot behave in an ecological way (Irigaray 2015, 103). She writes that this way of thinking and behaving has now trapped us in exploitative relationships with other living beings:

...such a conception of human identity inspired much of our thoughts, of our moral standards, of our social and political rules. It, then, transforms humanity into a universe foreign to life itself, which intends to subject life to our own making, and ends in an exhaustion of its resources including those of human life. (Irigaray 2015, 103)

For Irigaray, the problem is to design not for a single or common world, but rather Irigaray for a shared world. This means questioning together what it means to be a living being, not just a consumer. Questioning what being-in-relation and what desire mean in our current cultural traditions. Asking ourselves to think about those we love and the future we would like for ourselves and for them – and making these questions the beginnings of our planning consultations and co-design practices. Asking ourselves, can we preserve a healthy natural environment? And what does it mean for us to live contemporary lives, what new values are needed? Moreover, it means developing our relationships with one other especially with those people who belong to other cultures and traditions. All these questions must motivate the political action we need to build
not simply a plural understanding of our world or to build within a recognition of the value of many different values and perspective but to build a shared world (Marder and Irigaray, 2014b). These questions for a democratic future are also the questions for architecture.

Hence sharing the world for Irigaray means building new ways of expression, of speaking and this includes designing, creating new artefacts and aesthetics and evoking dwellings with the other in mind. She notes that,

Living is originary being in relation(s), particularly with the other. We always fail to this being-in-relation because we confuse this with dwelling in a same world, with sharing a common world. But this does not take into consideration the possible diversity of the worlds and, first of all, the difference between the world of a man and that of a woman, their different ways of dwelling. (Irigaray cited in Wheeler 2008, 55-56)

The problem of how to compose a common world has been a recent design concern of Bruno Latour. The ecological problem, he argues, demands a response in terms of design. A common world—one that we can inhabit in a peaceful way without exterminating each other—is nevertheless an overwhelming question (Latour 2014). Climate change presents a sense of obligation, he writes, but at the same time a confusion. Whilst the Anthropocene (the name given by geologists to our world’s present nature) has as one of its symptoms a human disconnection with nature, the guilt evoked prevents a proper relationship; it prevents reconnection. Even the experience of the sublime in nature, Latour (2011) argues, is prohibited. Hence, we become prisoners of this present conceptual orientation. At this scale, we have no meaningful sense of ourselves as a collective entity, no sense of sharing a collective responsibility or even of sharing one human species—we become paralysed, unable to respond, unable to recognize the value of our actions. Our ecological understanding of the world, as described by climate change scientists, is quite different from our everyday experience. As Latour notes,

One of the reasons why we feel so powerless when asked to be concerned by ecological crisis, the reason why I, to begin with, feel so powerless, is because of the total disconnect between the range, nature, and scale of the phenomena and the set of emotions, habits of thoughts, and feelings that would be necessary to handle those crises—not even to act in response to them, but simply to give them more than a passing ear. (Latour 2011, 2)

The call for a psychoanalytic perspective on the problem of sustainable development has been made (Robbins & Moore 2013); but this is already taking place within the feminist discourse and moreover in a way critical of the limiting presumptions of psychoanalytic theory on the environmental problem. Sustainability is a question of how we live and of how we can live together. It is one of human relationship and of what those relationships mean. However, no ordinary relationship is suggested in Irigaray’s philosophy and not one that conforms to the theories of Jacques Lacan. Sexuate difference is a key term for her: it allows an understanding of difference that creatively resolves the distinction between nature and culture. With this conceptual understanding of relationality, sustainable architecture becomes a place for the protection and nurturing of new ways of living; it presents the question of new ways of becoming.

Hence this is not simply a return to past architects’ conversations with philosophy, nor is it simply an expression of support for a phenomenological reawakening in architecture (Borch 2014). This relationality is not akin to any of those commonly described, even within the phenomenological tradition. Resisting participation in the
exploitation of the earth’s resources means changing our modes of relationality, long enabled and fostered by societies, and cultivating new relationships, starting with those between women and men. We cannot share the world and its resources, she argues, until we properly conceive our relationship with the world (Irigaray 2008).

Irigaray has commented directly on the role of architecture in building a shared world, in that, “Without doubt, architects have given no thought as to how to articulate one’s own world and the closeness with the other. They have not asked themselves how to harmonize subsistence, each one’s becoming, and a relationship with the other that respects everyone” (Irigaray 2004b, 124). The character of architecture as bringing new possibilities for living and dwelling into being has to be recognized; and we need to invoke a critical understanding of its history (Schneekloth 1998). Although theorists have described Irigaray’s philosophy as utopian, it is not a vision that destroys the old along the way; rather, it is an invitation to a reciprocal correspondence. The important questions here are how the two privileged dimensions that, in Irigaray’s theory, would allow us to build a shared world—our relationships with nature and with a sexuate other—might change architectural practices now. What does this approach mean as a criticism of the tools of sustainable design, and what could it mean for building a shared world through the cultural medium of architecture? Several conversations current in architectural theory are relevant to this point. These include established themes focussed on ecologies, emotions (or affect), politics and performance. Each has a relationship with the question of building a shared world. For example, within a contemporary dialogue on space and emotion, and from a philosophical perspective, Peter Zumthor states: “I believe that human effort can bring a work of art, a novel, a poem or a string quartet to life. When it succeeds this creates a separate world, a cosmos, and this gives rise to a particular understanding, an emotion that forms a whole. It provides freedom. This is a fine definition of architecture” (Zumthor 2007). Likewise, Juhani Pallasma (2014) argues that this creation of emotion and the connection of body, existence and atmosphere offer hope for the future. However, through the philosophy of Irigaray, both the provision of freedom and the question of feeling are reconsidered, and no longer inside or through a single world (Irigaray 2015). This is a profoundly different discourse of phenomenology in architecture to that of Zumthor or Pallasma.

In her writing on architecture, Irigaray argues that a connection with the natural must be maintained within a dwelling. The natural elements are those we all share, she writes, without having to subject ourselves to any imposition of stereotyping differences. Man has appropriated nature, but, she states, that nature as physis and the natural elements “…could be used as a space of meeting between all living beings, between all that exists” (Irigaray 2008, 66). Dwelling evokes a free space of emergence between two, nurtured by nature; dwelling becomes a natural belonging (Irigaray, 2015c); and a distinction from the philosophy of the common of Arendt. The house could, for instance, function to protect the individual not only physically but psychologically, “enabling the human subject to subsist, exist, and to be, while most often being two, or more than two” (Irigaray 2004a, 123). The purpose of architecture thus becomes deeply connected to supporting the human in his or her being two or more than two, and how we can live together in this way giving life and freedom to oneself or the other, is the question of sustainable design.

The ethics of sexuate difference that I endeavour to construct cannot amount to a part of a traditional philosophical system, but forces us to adopt another way of thinking and behaving, especially in our relations with ourselves, with the other(s), and with the environment. It no longer permits us to deal with life and living beings
only through concepts, ideas, or imperatives foreign to them, but compels us to cultivate life itself towards its preservation, its growth and its sharing (Irigaray 2015c).

To think about what it really means to be alive, and what it could mean to be alive, and in relationship with other living beings – to see, to touch, to speak, to breath, to find our natural belonging – starting from ourselves – also means returning to ourselves to protect our differences in a world that seeks singular and common solutions. This is why architecture is so important, why the question of dwelling is so valuable to the ecological problem. Providing places of refuge would mean being able to resist being subject to cultural definitions of what it means to be living that waste not only energy, and materials but lives. Space to shelter new ways of living, nascent relationalities nurtured by designed environments is unmaking waste at its most profound.

References


Hulme, M. 2015. “Climate Change, One or Many” Keynote lecture, 13th Nordic Environmental Sciences Conference, Trondheim, Norway, 9th – 11th June 2015


Available at: http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/08/is-plant-liberation-on-the-menu/?_r=0


Andrea Wheeler is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture at Iowa State University, where she contributes to the technical lecture series and is a studio instructor. She graduated in Architecture from Oxford Brookes University in 1994, gained an MPhil from the School of Mechanical Engineering in 1998 and was awarded a PhD from the University of Nottingham in 2005. In 2007, she was awarded a prestigious three-year UKERC/ESRC fellowship award to examine sustainable schools and she has subsequently worked as a research fellow for policy makers in a central UK government research unit within Defra in Westminster, London.

Acknowledgments

This work is supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant Number EPS-1101284. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in
this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.
Public Space for Ambiguous Times: Where the market meets the street and then something else may happen

Gini LEE

University of Melbourne, Australia

Landscape architecture

Appropriation and repurposing of existing models of space and event are critical to future imagining of new public spaces if we are to adopt a conservative response to design in the public realm. Taking on board the concept of postproduction as a recycling practice where ‘works are created on the basis of pre-existing works…’ and that they ‘contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work’ (Bourriaud 2002, 12), this paper seeks out sites and networks of re-invention that demonstrate how re-envisioning existing spaces and their programs results in resilient, mobile and economical places for the everyday.

Zones of activity (Bourriaud 2002, 18) enable programming of existing situations and forms by insertion of new activities and systems that may be temporary or transient but nonetheless endure over time. Embodied in the emblematic space of postproduction, one such zone is the street market as a place of endless opportunity. In the market ordered disorder creates a multiplicity of spatial pathways through commercial exchange negotiations; such situations have been operating for millennia but are perhaps not regarded as critical public space. A case in point is a local street market in Istanbul, which is only temporarily marked. This laneway fruit and vegetable market is subject to constant setting up and taking down of wooden trestles that were consecutively useful table objects and ephemeral textural walls; everyday installations marking opening and closure, and promising activity at other times. The event space of this market operates in continuous negotiation with the street, the locals and the tourists; an aesthetic that speaks of recycling and transitory exchange. The organisational structure appears to reside in the concert between the daily/weekly schedule, the composition of trestles, and the seasonality of the produce. This space is not designed and it is located in a space that is designated as something else - a fugitive space that allows endless configuration and a multiplicity of uses. When the market is in operation, the routines of the street are superseded and new negotiations occur; in effect this public street space is appropriated and put to work as a place of exchange, and just as succinctly, at the appropriate time, is re-appropriated as a thoroughfare, and simultaneously as a social space to set up a chair to watch, drink or meet.

This foundational situation is an inventive and serendipitous curatorial program where multidimensional relationships operate between the animate and the inanimate in public space. Recently, design practices such as muf architects’ Hackney Wick Arts Strategy in London and event and occupation programs such as Parklets in San Francisco are in the business of repurposing existing public space through inventive curation. These discursive approaches acknowledge that urban strategies employ network systems to curate space and event across the fabric of the city.

Keywords: public space; zones of activity; landscape design