The Ethics of Place-Making: *How Landscapes Lie*

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Expertise in the 'Nature-isation' of urban environments marks an important shift in 21st Century urbanism. In a scramble to rebrand urban design as "sustainable" and "green", Landscape Architects have attempted to claim the territory wholesale, pointing to a clear link between "Landscape" and "Nature". Yet, John May's (2008) critique of a major contemporary project of landscape architecture, *Fresh Kills Park*, is a significant challenge to this claim. Here, May contests the underpinning values of design in the context of a hidden social and political ideology.

The Fresh Kills landfill, on Staten Island, NY, was sited on a lowland estuary of the Arthur Kill tidal strait. It was secured for easy access, approximately 25km from Lower Manhattan. Despite covering a massive 890ha at the edge of a sensitive estuarine ecosystem, the landfill was neither planned nor prepared as a waste site. Fresh Kills was commissioned in 1947, and closed in 2001, and received up to 29,000-tonnes of garbage per day at its peak. It was finally "capped" using a standard cap-and-seal technique (NY Parks, 2013). In his critique, May (2013) quickly acknowledges that cap-and-seal technology is unproven and even disputed by some specialist engineers; There is a real possibility that the practice may worsen the already problematic methane-leachate cycle given the breakdown and admixture of unknown materials within a sealed environment. The final closure of Fresh Kills was publicised through a design competition that aimed to reimagine the landfill as a vast new public open space and park, in-keeping with restrictions against building on capped waste sites.

In 2003, the transformation of Fresh Kills from a 150million tonne landfill into an iconic public wilderness looked to mark a turning-point for ecological design. James Corner led *Field Operation's* winning bid for the project, and had earlier confronted the failure of planning to attend to complex and emergent landscape processes. Fresh Kills Park would demonstrate a new model for design oriented toward open ecological systems. The outcome has a somewhat split reality. Fresh Kills continues as an exemplar for Landscape Architecture practice over a decade later, yet the site continues to release 30 million ft^3 methane and 200,000 gallons of leachate *per day* into the local estuarine environment. (May, 2008) While the project achieves a believable vision of "Nature", May points to the serious long-term ethical and environmental consequences of re-imagining and thereby re-placing a cultural history of waste with the lived-experience of 'Nature'.

James Corner: Measuring A Fluid Landscape

Corner's (1999; 1999a) earlier propositions on contextually and ecologically driven design analysis offered a mapping process to engage the hidden realities of complex open systems. In so doing, he claimed to reject the dominant form of prediction-oriented plan-making, opting instead to trace the qualities of emergent order to guide the design and planning process. This distinction between 'plan' and 'map' would define Corner's practice. Corner's (1999) approach to 'draw out' the dynamics of landscape change, represented a well documented alternative to mainstream reductionism, still prevalent in the fields of planning and ecology – as evidenced in a 2011 special edition of *Transport Planning Review (TPR),* dedicated to the still-present reductionism of planning (Balducci, et al., 2011), and the *British Ecological Society* (2013) claim that "a better understanding of ecological systems will allow society to predict the consequences of human activity on the environment."

Corner (1999a) first attacked the generally assumed position "that if the survey is quantitative, objective, and rational, it is also true and neutral, thereby helping to legitimize and enact future plans and decisions." (215) He held that complexity, and even the often side-lined political contentions of environmental design, could provide strategic and inventive opportunities "not widely recognized in the urban design and planning arts." (215) To

achieve this Corner proposed a radical linking of analytical expertise with heuristic design practice through a technique of analysis he called the "unfolding agency of mapping" (214). The technique aimed to provide "designers and planners greater efficacy in intervening in spatial and social processes" (214), and did so in clear opposition to the assertion that predictability is a requirement of professional practice.

For his part, Corner has cleared substantial ground for the engagement between practice and theory in landscape architecture. However, a critique of the ends and means of Corner's process is still valuable for landscape architects focused on interventions in complex urban spaces.

John May: Virilio and the Nature of Urbanism

John May's (2008) critique of Fresh Kills outlined how projects become the "instruments for the extension of dominant moralities." (103) May specifically attacks the way technology and representation are used to deploy a logic that allows shallow simplicity to dominate complex processes. Despite Corner's differentiation between mapping and planning, May suggests that Fresh Kills only succeeds in producing another "territorial plan" that eschews the still deeper context of ethical and political practice. From this deeper, perhaps 'cultural' view, waste is externalised and unaccounted for in acts and practices of everyday life. It is only at some juncture, such as the capacity of a landfill or failure of garbage collection, that the problem of waste becomes evident. At such a juncture, the problem is regarded as an unforeseeable outcome, typical a fault, error or mismanagement that can be corrected through improved planning. Given the apparent suddenness of such events, only limited remedial options can be considered. From this view, *Fresh Kills Park* was a impressive solution to a historical problem of waste. That the site was so easily transformed into a verdant wilderness was a testament to human progress and achievement; With 'Nature recovered, the error of a previous century was corrected.

For May, Fresh Kills represents the rational outcome of a particular logic and ethic. Here, environmental *expertise* operates as a new 'tool' capable of *covering up* the disquieting parts of contemporary socio-political logic. The ultimate success of the project is marked with a re-writing of history. The site is no longer a cultural marker for the consumption of poor-quality, temporary goods that are cheaper to discard than to replace, care for, or repair. This re-making of place, defines a culture in which a toxic landfills are not a societal problem, but in fact offer a glorious potential for re-orienting "Nature" in the service of future urban needs.

May (2008) underscores the idea that environmental design is necessarily ethical and political in practice; That a designer's response to environmental issues is a concretised ethic. Fresh Kills, then, has a particular ethical strategy: It consents to, and supports the political, commercial, and institutional interests, and it reifies cliché beliefs with the promise of ambiguous notions like "Sustainability" and "Nature". The ethics remain one of separation between society and environment – the old dispute and dislocation of "Man" and "Nature" – despite the jargonised, discipline-specific language.

To contrast and underline our enculturation under this view, May draws on Virilio's observation that *the invention of a thing is simultaneously the invention of its accident and end*. In this relationship, present and future states are imagined locked together in a virtual and co-incident space: New objects are "always-already" broken; The end-state of rust, decomposition, perpetual storage, gasification, or pollution is always-already a part of a primary constitution. While a landfill is rarely a part of the urban imagination, discarded plastic bottles in fact connect toxic land, leaching Bisphenol-A, future-unknown potent admixtures of chemicals, and the particulate pollution of waterways. In Tim Morton's (2011) terms, a "hyper-object" that unifies and connects causes and effects, and shatter any semblance of our mainstream reductive frames of reference.

Philosopher and urban theorist, Henri Lefebvre (1970/2003) also describes the central problem of urbanism as of having to investigate or invest in futures that are unknowable. For Lefebvre, the urban is a *blind field*, where the nature of unpredictability is compounded, *first*, by the complex urban condition, which defies reduction, and *second*, by dominant ideologies that obscure visible trajectories toward distant future states. *Blind fields* are "not merely dark and uncertain" but blind in the sense of having "a blind spot on the retina" (29). Virilio's observation serves a similar logic to Lefebvre's *blind fields.* One can imagine only those things we already know to exist, and cannot imagine possible variations, mutations, innovations or discoveries. We cannot know what we do not yet know (May, 2008; Taleb, 2007). When we choose to simplify a complex network of interactions, we substantially misrepresent both causes and effects. In this way, accidents become unexpected disruptions to the natural 'working' of things, separated from the formal reality of a place or object. Further, this separation leads us to consider technology with a chronic optimism. Where a product fails, we expect 'advancing' technology to both resolve and replace the unforeseen failure.

For May (2008) this problem is at the heart of the current ethical dilemma of our society. Fresh Kills brought forward a certain bio-technological solution that combined aspects of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) with Emergent Ecosystem Science, to provide visionary design that would resolve and replace the failures of a society that produced waste at a sublime scale. This technological fix allows society to continue headlong into the breach of our current mode of cultural production. For May, designers become a 'tool' to re-place the logical outcomes of this ethic. The designer's "expertise" becomes the means for political manoeuvring. By their work, they comply with a method of planning "by which modern violence is done" (May, 2008: 105).

While Corner's engagement at Fresh Kills was understood to reflect a positive shift in contemporary environmental design given its attempt to reveal the hidden exchange between the non-linear method of design and the invisible and fluid processes of ecology, there is still a deeper assumption at play in the ethics of a culture. While Corner claimed mapping as a way to avoid the failure of centralised planning, Fresh Kills provides support for a long-term political ethic that doesn't align with this long-term environmental ethic.

How to Cope With Blindness

Certainly, the additional layer of complexity must concern designers who have an imperative toward action in the business of environmental design. Corner's (1999a) propositions were initially intended to support design in "a world where it is becoming increasingly difficult to both *imagine* and actually to *create* anything outside of the normative" (214). He recognised the need for critical experimentation with alternative forms of analysis, and that this need "remains largely underdeveloped if not significantly repressed." (216) Corner also notes that "[m]apping is never neutral, passive or without consequence" (216), and in this, should be credited for taking several bold steps forward in testing theory in practice. Still, the critical issue of how to codify mapping as a practice that links the ethics of politics and society with design practice needs further attention.

To suggest a definitive way forward is to potentially fall into the trap set out by Lefebvre's *blind field.* However, there does appear to be some semblance of a path cut in other disciplines that draw similar conclusions (Taleb, 2012; Balducci, et al., 2011; Morton, 2011; Castells, 2000; Latour, 2006; Hartley, et al., 2005; Massey, 2005; Hoang and Antoncic, 2003; Graham and Marvin, 2001; Jacobs, 2000) But there is a problem here too: Despite some interest in cross-disciplinarity, to suggest an actual breach of disciplinary practice often incurs a strong reaction of what *is* and what *is not* landscape architecture. While disciplines are exclusive in order to support some primary set of assumptions and objectives, this myopic approach is often a barrier to new forms of shared knowledge (Hartley, 2005; Hoang and Antoncic, 2003; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002). It remains a clear

concern that even closely related fields still define restrictive boundaries (Jack, Rose and Johnston, 2009), and that the resulting silos may fail to serve the demand for knowledge innovation (Landry, 2005; Lessig, 2005).

As a final point of departure for landscape research, understanding urbanism may benefit from a praxeological approach that is primarily interested in *purposeful human action in the face of uncertainty*. Praxeology is manifest as an underpinning logic for economic reasoning, giving focus to human action in open, vastly distributed, and differentiated networks of exchange (Hoppe, 2011). This logic could easily find extension into landscape architecture processes, and in this way, the ethics of human action, the production of human dwelling, and the long-term quality of ecological-environmental systems might be co-located within one networked-field of interdisciplinary research. This formulation would also see urbanism better aligned to entrepreneurial practices than to central planning. Entrepreneurial strategy aims at legitimate risk-based behaviour that cannot disguise the actions of political influence. Jane Jacobs (2000) makes this link to describe how the apparent chaos of cities can be defined as a complex and highly developed form of order. For Jacobs, natural and economic systems share self-similar attributes, and those intervening in these processes – designer or entrepreneur – must negotiate in a similar state of uncertainty. To explore this area, we need to broaden the scope of research to encompass those projects where planning, economics, and design cross paths. In this context, landscape architecture needs a counterpoint thought-style to the traditional central planning dogma that territorialises space, and tends to re-place the undesirable outcomes of its own logic.

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