CASE STUDY 4:

SCHULYKILL RIVER ADVENTUROUS ECOLOGY ASSEMBLAGE

INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE:

Open file in Adobe Professional (or other pdf viewing software)
and view the slides in ‘full-screen mode’ (or equivalent).
The previous (Melton) case study probably communicates something of the dispersed nature of an urban space assemblage (landscape assemblage).

This example mostly employs representations that my Option Studio students at the University of Pennsylvania produced, one of them in particular. I have found that students and others find that this example efficiently (in its previous form, at least) expresses something of how this particular landscape functions.

As with most of my design studios the students find it difficult to make the shift from just ‘organisation’ to both ‘organisation’ (which can carried out in the abstract space of representation) and ‘self-organisation’-involving-the-human-organism (landscape affects) in a way where engaging with the former is really working for the higher purpose of the latter.

Here the challenge was to get students to tip their formidable organisational power toward the manipulation of the middle, the manipulation of landscape affects. So, this case study aimed to use the available organisational style representations produced by the students for landscape affectual purposes. It is like the Melton example, and unlike the Federation Square and Royal Park examples, being an analysis of existing or found conditions. It is not a design project (though there was one that followed from this analysis).

As such, I believe it provides a reasonable account of something that this pre-existing landscape is already ‘doing’. In doing so it also illustrates that Nature determines and designers work with what Nature determines. Nature does not discriminate between ‘designed’ and ‘non-designed’ landscapes.

It gives some expression to the virtuality of this landscape. Are designer’s ‘strong enough’ (as Deleuze would say) to engage in what Nature does.
“What we term the machinic is precisely”
the “synthesis of heterogeneities as such”.
“Quiet heterogeneous”

[how do you see] “as wide as the sky?”

Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze
This example comes from a design studio I led at the University of Pennsylvania in 2003. This graduate level studio was exploring a vast (approximately 10 km long and 20km² in area) post-industrial and semi-abandoned landscape on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. Philadelphia was once an industrial powerhouse and this oil, manufacturing and shipping-oriented site was central to its place in the world.

This case study – attempting to communicate something of how this site already functioned - was originally published in Kerb: Journal of Landscape Architecture, with only one image. I have retained most of the text and something of the argument of that piece here. The images used here are, apart from Google Earth and other publicly available images, were originally produced by the students in the studio.
One of my students had presented a very extensive and energetic initial field investigation of the site. This included mappings of features, photographic recordings of things that interested him and accounts of the qualities of the site. He had also explored recent trends in recreation and found an identification in the literature by recreation thinkers of emerging desires for the not-so-packaged, for wildness or even the sublime. He also had a strong ecological interest. This site resonated strongly with such desires.
His hunch about the site was that it would make an ideal adventure park of some sort, and that his initial concept centred on the distribution of large-scaled ‘adventure’ equipment of various types across the site. Underneath his enthusiasm, however, was a dissatisfaction with his initial stated understanding of the site and his proposed direction. The desire it incited in him was not satisfied by the way he had consciously presented it or his planned response to it.
What was coming through constantly throughout his presentation and in other discussions with him, despite what he had visually presented or was even particularly conscious of, was that the site very strongly did something ‘too obvious’ for him to register. It got him...to explore, to move quickly, not really stopping anywhere, traversing a lot of ground to get to what might be the next place that might orient your further—to adventure, if you like. Involuntarily.
The site had also incited in him an interest in ecology. This landscape had its own rank wasteland ecology, a course thick mix of the original swamplands vegetation, previous settlement landscapes and various weed species in a thick and mixed distribution of mats and scatters spread throughout the abandoned and semi-abandoned sites and large-scaled land-uses, such as freeways, airports, caryards etc. Ecology seemed relevant to the adventurousness of this landscape.
How to account for such adventurousness, such adventuring? Such an accounting is the first part of the construction of the heterogeneous, the material of design. The resources for such an accounting were found in the form of an entry point through Al’s hunch and initial engagement. This movement is a (relatively) imperceptible geographical dynamism involving what seems to be beyond this movement – heterogeneous spatial-temporal relations and materials - potentialising and being part of this movement. A dynamism that you are part of that involves your relation to where you are and where you might be going in this geography
This required devices for seeing the relation to what might seem to be beyond. It also required devices for seeing the ‘too obvious’ of such movements i.e. using comparisons with related examples, other ‘middles’ within the ‘same’ system, to get you to see this movement more clearly and fully. Central was identifying the ‘vector’ that you would have to ‘be on’ to even be here – to be on this movement.
This has been a strongly deindustrialising zone in a strongly deindustrialising second fiddle city. Second to nearby New York. This landscape was focused around an ignored second-fiddle river, the Schuylkill. The Delaware on the other side of the city, was a much larger and functionally more important river that the city at least tried to front onto. This landscape was at a remove from the city. It was removed a number of times. The main relation of the central city to the site, for most, is probably to the south.

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Heading south you quickly pass out of the very middle class and white central city area of the old grid and move, with expectation, ‘south of South’. To cross south over South Street, for most middle class people, meant crossing almost immediately into what was perceived as a dangerous zone where the street trees disappeared and houses were often burnt out. The land values dropped markedly and progressively for each street the further south you travelled. This particular landscape was very south of south, and also west of south of south, being also cut off by major linear infrastructures from residential areas. This landscape was effectively invisible, or very removed, from middle class consciousness and physically removed from everyone else.

Such removal potentialises. Each part in time and space plays a certain function in this dynamism
The site is strongly differentiated. Just as the city is highly differentiated socially-spatially, the site has its own order of differentiation, horizontally and vertically, much more rich than cadastral boundaries. Such differentiation is part of an economy or ecology of differentiation. The very real gradients and divisions only become differentiations through how vectors connect to them and bring them to life, get them to play a function in the dynamisms that these heterogeneous assemblages produce or are.
The whole site is criss-crossed with, usually raised, living and dead linear infrastructures, large pads of oil refinery lands, a filigree of security fencelines, abandoned buildings and sites and seemingly redundant road ‘systems’ at ground level. Various size patches and lines of vegetation also spread themselves across the valley-plain. Large abandoned docking areas cut perpendicular to the river. Drains and the many low areas that managed to avoid being filled in to make building foundations during the long history of industrialisation are now wet ex-swamp patches of inaccessibility, and are associated with their own hybrid organic and vegetative life.
The dominant linear infrastructures

How the infrastructure moves around and cuts across the valley and flood plane

Flood zones
The site and the built fabric of the city

Functioning industrial land uses

Industrial land-uses
The not so-obvious plateaus created by industrial land uses colonising the site

How various industrial land uses have transformed the river flat and produced a highly differentiated wetting and drying ground surface

An ecology of vacant land
Rivers naturally set up asymmetries of potential up and down-streams. The particular nature of the asymmetry is only actualised depending on the particular vector you might ‘be on’. Desire is the connection of the particular asymmetry of this vector to the particular asymmetry of the landscape. Here, downstream incites a desire for wildness—where desire is an involuntary wildness-movement, which continues to unfold through the movement. The nature of such movement only became obvious to us through the act of comparing a range of situations along the length of the site. Only concretely and relatively.
As you move down the river corridor the form of the river gradually shifts from being a relatively intimate cross section where you could yell to someone on an opposing side and look down upon the river 15 meters below you, to a vast flat ex-swampland where the edges seem to become irrelevant and the bigness of the sky dominates. The move downstream, on the more accessible western side, is a move from something like the picturesque urbanity of the ‘proper’ section of the river near the city to the pretty much uninhabited raw wildness of what is effectively a vast peninsula that all roads seem to defer from - and where the meeting of the rivers and wildness itself might be the only real destinations.
Looking at maps gives you very limited relation to how asymmetry functions in this site. To be more adequate to what a particular part of this site is doing it is useful to consider what happens as you move downstream.

The speed and nature of such movement varies with where you are along the river, with vastness, distances to cover, texture etc. Only from within the middle (Deleuze and Guattari) was the life of the particular movement able to be connected to, maybe. This was connection to the too obvious. In connecting it became super-obvious. Such a connection then makes the relevant relations responsible for such movement identifiable.

This adventuring has a certain directional tendency.
A shift downstream is also parallel to a shift in the sorts of infrastructure that are encountered as you proceed downstream. At the city the bridges are traditional bridges departing from high on a bank to high on an opposite bank not far away. The bridges shift typology and scale to suit the change of conditions as you move downstream. The various combinations of existing conditions and bridge types transforms the whole geography and the functioning of the ground associated or under the bridges.

bridge #1 (at the city)
Adjacent to the bridge in ‘Forgotten Bottom’ the world slows down. You have slipped away from the city. You walk slowly, stopping, almost garden-like, looking at the ground, the signs of life and history on this warm, still, contained surface.
An important differentiation occurs at the point in this landscape where bridges, of whatever sort, come back down to earth. It is here that a division is set-up between a more functional world of everyday life and a less functional ‘backwater’ world closer to the river. This is not unique to this site, but the way that it is, its particular asymmetry, is. The difference between up and down is connected to and potentialised by that between:

- wet and dry,
- thicker vegetation and less thick vegetation,
- movement and slowness-stillness,
- functional-destination and non-functional destination,
- longer views out and closer views in,
- vehicles and bodies, more and less surveillance etc.

The differences becomes the difference between a part-of-the-system-functional-proper-dry-vehicular-movement and (seemingly) out-of-the-system-non-functional-improper-wetter-backwater-and more bodily-slowness….

And the style of this backwater movement depends on where you are along the river.
This zone is more suited to the movement of vehicles. On foot you are anxiously in the open seeking out places to escape the surveillance of the bridge.
The last ‘bridge’ before you reach the confluence of the rivers is the Delaware Expressway. It does not cross the river so much as the river incidentally passes below it.
Such an engineering feat is matched below by the highly engineered construction below – a 3 square km basin constructed like a giant bath to contain mud pumped out of the river.
This extreme landscape has a scale which was not designed for human occupation. It has its own rank ecology of weed species and the heat, moisture and insects make this hostile place very difficult to be in.
Views of Mud Island
weed ecology
Attempting to move through the difficult steamy Mud Island Phragmites ecology.
Between the very high Bridge #6 and the extreme Mud Island is another world of many worlds. On an adventuring vector this zone seems on-the-way to the confluence of the rivers and Mud Island.
This landscape is still vast. If you found yourself here the scale of the bridge, the scale of the landscape and the amount of investment required to traverse it registers how incidental you and your movements

If you found yourself here you would most likely be moving and trying to orient yourself in this almost randomly cut-up and very asymmetrical landscape. On the ground the river bends, the flatness and the infrastructures, lack-of-access and an effective immersion down within the vegetative layer, produce a perpetual disorientation in such movement. A movement of potential orientating. A movement which keeps coming upon variety, mystery, richness and the unexpected.
Rail and oil infrastructures, flood embankments and remnant ecologies block access to most of the river edge. The road structure allows you to move toward the river. However, your path is almost invariably blocked, and so you turn and move parallel to the river, and then again, turn toward the river and are again blocked etc.
You are drawn to the next intersection seeking the water, only to be drawn to another section of road all the time from within this mysterious vegetative layer—a sort of highly asymmetrical maze movement.
This suggests a network of adventuring across a zone. A zone of adventuring. Zig-zaggingly heading toward the Schuylkill and then toward the Delaware then back toward the Schuylkill... loosely toward the confluence of these two rivers.
This backwater territory has a zig-zag adventuring structure of desire. The material of design would be this adventuring. The means are heterogenous. The heterogeneous is a processor of adventuring.
Whilst the site is in its own way removed from the city it is simultaneously visually close to the city, thus intensifying the raw wildness and otherworldliness of this landscape. The vegetative mats and scatters collapse together to form their own horizon, and often cut out the middle ground (as do the huge tank farms) so that there is the occasional strong contrast to the shiny city skyline through or over the vegetation.
The disorienting movement within the vegetation contrasts markedly to the orientating view that you get when you are, occasionally, able to stand on tall soil dumps or remnant infrastructures that happen to raise you above the canopy. At such points the tops of the canopies collapse together to form a continuous flat sea of green that obscures everything within it and registers, really for the first time, the whole of the vast, wild and mysterious flatness of this ex-swampland against the sky and skyline, as well as registering in reverse the vastness of the mysterious zone down below the canopy and the contrast between the two. Such view opportunities are surprise pauses or destinations-to-be-discovered, and in concert with the zig-zagging, function to intensify the perpetuality of the adventuring movement.
If you happen to be on the right vector to find yourself here, and anyone who has gone to
the significant trouble of finding themselves here most likely would be, you will then be on
an ecologically-adventurous vector
which is not produced by, but integrates, the heterogeneous relations
mentioned above in a dynamism which produces this movement.
Each dimension functions only as to how it is integrated by this vector.
The ecology is no longer, and never was, just organic, but adventurous – like all of the other dimensions of this integration - functioning in terms of this movement, simultaneously, as a heterogeneous assemblage. This adventurousness is a heterogeneously precise selection across the world in a manner that can only be discovered. Discovery is feeding back into this anonymous involuntary asubjective movement. The ecology truly comes to life, an adventurous ecology that you are part of.
I believe this example to be useful for a number of purposes. These include:

- Communicating something of how the heterogeneity of the landscape functions;
- Being an example of ‘expression’ - it reproduces the sensations of the involuntary experience of this landscape – the sensation of an autonomous landscape ‘doing’);
- Economically illustrating the bodily-physicality of this landscape and landscape affect;
- Being an example that shows the difference between a non-expressive account of the landscape (Al’s initial obsessions were focused on the physical and felt qualities and his hunch didn’t feel right to him.) and an expressive account (the adventurous nature of this ecology, this movement);
- Economically getting to something of the singularity of this movement, this ecology. It is not me or the student who ‘does something’ (in the real sense) here. The landscape and the ecology ‘do something’ that myself or the student are part of. The City or Nature are producing this anonymous ‘doing’. In this regards the case study starts to get at the autonomy of affect, that which we get taken away by. We don’t watch films for consciousness. It is the involuntary functioning of a film or a city or love that we get taken away by. We might start to be conscious of these. Consciousness is only joyful itself for how it connects to the involuntary. Landscape affects are about pure joy in this regards, where joy is as Spinoza poses: where we are empowered, liberated. A sad, disempowered, ‘man’ is disconnected from their joy, the joy of Nature. A sad landscape architect would be disconnected from what this landscape is doing.
- It communicates something of the ‘structure’ of this landscape: an ‘intensive structure’ not a physical structure, but an intensive structure that is constructed of very concrete relations in time and space.
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