

1.2 Mountains & Molehills

The Geological Party Line

1.2.1 - Architectural Landforms

The so-called ‘*geologic turn*’³, within architectural discourse, marks a decisive move away from the common trope of living, breathing, systems working hard to replicate the biological world. The pursuit of negentropic facades that huff and puff to save our ailing world has been sidelined in favour of a slower, co-evolutionary approach. An approach of ecological entanglement. The proliferation of artificial landform building takes the prevailing medium of parks and gardens as a recreational device, and raises the stakes to blur the line between the natural and the cultural.

The artificial landform paradigm; evidently discontent with mere natural metaphors, such as the romantic observation by Claude Lévi-Strauss of “sombre valleys, dotted with multicoloured cars looking like flowers” (1955, p.96) – seeks to physically simulate *nature*. Stan Allen, who is arguably the lead exponent of the movement, asserts this notion. Arguing that “[r]ather than loose metaphors, a new synthesis of architecture and landscape is needed” (2011, p.35). In his book, *Landform Building*, he covers a lot of ground on the many ways that architectural megaforms can impact the environment. Interestingly, he departs from the conventional party line of sustainability to assert that these artificial landforms “can suggest a productive new approach to sustainability and enhanced environmental performance in which architectural form – rather than technological fixes – can play an active role” (2011, p.35). Here, we see a very clear emphasis on the underlying aesthetic imperative.

As Steven Shaviro writes, “aesthetics exists in a special relationship to political economy, precisely because aesthetics is the one thing that cannot be reduced to political economy” (2013). Allen’s assertions of the latent power of geological aesthetics appears deeply anti-accelerationist⁴, insofar as it rejects the narrative of perpetual technological fixes in favour of a much slower participation with the environment. The formal geological qualities replace pure utility, anthropocentric determinism⁵, and quantitative justification⁶, all in an effort to become *natural*. At any rate, the staging of nature ultimately requires *technique* – and Stan Allen does not shy away from this apparent contradiction of terms; noting that the process “takes full advantage of the opportunities afforded by emerging fabrication, building, and envelope technologies to construct new, man-made environments” (2011, p.35). This skirts around nature’s immanent relationship with technology, and reinforces *techne* as an exclusively cultural process (more on this later).

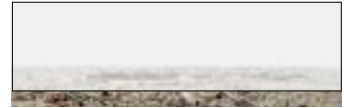
Contradictory or not, the problem does not necessarily lie in how the landform is made – but who it is made for. And unlike the speculative ‘*natural*’ world on which it models (which knows no audience) – the artificial landform is politicised from the outset. New topographies are invented, earth is excavated, and rocks are stacked. But the image of ‘*nature*’ is conceived through the inescapable lens of the human. The unavoidable hierarchy of things, whether it be overtly anthropocentric or ecocentric, is a product of cultivation. This is already abundantly clear, given the preoccupation with the mountain–range as the default synecdoche for the natural landscape.

Stan Allen unwittingly charts out this condition, presenting a wide range of mountain–like projects as embodiments of the ‘geologic turn’. Projects such as ‘*The Berg*’ (Tigges, 2009) –which is an unabashed proposal to build a giant mountain in the centre of Berlin. And, ‘*Mountain Dwellings*’, a project designed by Bjarke Ingels and JDS Architects – which looks less like a mountain, but does project the image of a mountain to evoke the *feeling* of a mountain (Allen’s earlier contempt for loose metaphors clearly lost here). To counter this apparent preoccupation with mountains, David Gissen does a good job at levelling the playing field to support other forms of geo–mimicry.

In his guest edit of the 2010 AD, ‘*Territory: Architecture Beyond Environment*’ (2010) – a wide range of territorial projects enter the fold as Gissen suggests a new role for architects, that explores the possibility of “an architecture that actively produces its external, environmental conditions” (2010, p.8). He appeals to the latent mediative qualities, calling for “a strategy of tinkering versus one of accommodation with, or refusal of, an external techno–natural environment” (2010, p.8).

That said – if the ‘*geologic turn*’ appears merely as a diluted environmental campaign in the wake of the *anthropocene* epoch, arriving at the very moment when we appear to have exacerbated the planet’s natural resources to the point of our own turbulent demise; it rises almost to the point of irony that our best solution is to tinker with scales, making molehills out of mountains whilst our dormant primacy unravels. If, however, the goal is to redress the balance and to decentralise the human in favour of an ecocentric future – or more radically – a completely flat ontology⁷ (DeLanda, 2013, p.47) that secretly revels in panpsychism; then more work must be done to understand the conditions required for rocks to live a more fulfilling existence⁸.

What is common in both scenarios is the theme of a *natural wilderness*. For the environmentalists, this perhaps involves a paradoxical ‘*cultivated*’ wilderness. For the closet–panpsychists; a *hyper* wilderness of sorts. If the ‘*geologic turn*’ wants to thrive in the post–anthropocene, it must find a middle ground between these two extremes: a co–curated wilderness, if such a thing can exist.



1.3 The Nature, Culture Continuum

The Nature of Contemporary Architecture

1.3.1 - *The Noumenon*

If the ultimate goal of the '*geologic turn*' is to re-embrace nature beyond pure utility – we must first address what this decidedly '*undesigned*' wilderness is. The natural wilderness is not a static cartography, nor is it a diagram of entropic flows and laws (Bennett, 2009). There is no fixed point in time of natural correctness – nor has there ever been a perfect utopian harmony shared by all organic and inorganic matter, prior to the emergence of culture and the *anthropocene* epoch. As the animated Slavoj Žižek notes, “the image of nature that we spontaneously accept; nature as a balanced, harmonised, circulation which is then destroyed through excessive human agency – that nature doesn't exist!” (Žižek, 2011).

The conservation (or construction) of natural geological features – of rolling hills and glacial sheets – is a conservation of the *phenomenon* of nature; not *nature*. And despite efforts to conserve and classify the natural world through scientific correlation – a dynamic and vibrant natural wilderness thrives within our deeply anthropocised geosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere, and biosphere. In order to move away from the grand narratives of '*nature*' as being in opposition with '*culture*', and of '*culture*' destroying '*nature*' – as though they were somehow mutually impenetrable spheres – the first step must surely be to decentralise the human as the protagonist and investigate the relationship between the extremes of '*nature*' and '*culture*' beyond pure phenomenology⁹.

The notion of an underlying *natural* wilderness, entirely distinct from its phenomenological attributes, was originally conceived in metaphysical terms by Immanuel Kant as the '*noumenon*'¹⁰. The noumenon is generally conceived as the opposite of the phenomenon, insofar as it describes an object's discrete qualities that are removed from direct human perception; as Kant termed, the “Thing-in-itself” (1783). More recently, the philosophical doctrines of Speculative Realism¹¹, Vital Materialism¹², and Object-Oriented Ontology¹³ (*OOO*), are re-examining the essence of the noumena. The two lead exponents of *OOO* philosophy, Levi Bryant and Graham Harman, claim that the object (for the purposes of this investigation, the object is the '*natural wilderness*') is reduced in the hard sciences¹⁴ to its component parts. For the natural wilderness: this amounts to a mere conglomeration of mountains, rain, atoms, forces, networks. For Harman, this line of reasoning '*undermines*'¹⁵ the object; as it fails to account for the fact that complex objects regularly change their fundamental parts (Harman, 2014). For example, the identity of London's '*Green Belt*' in 2018,

is conceivably the same as the 'Green Belt' in 2017 – despite its land expansion and aesthetic changes due to seasonal forces. Parallel to this, Harman also claims that we see a reversal of 'undermining' in the soft sciences¹⁶; as a tendency toward 'overmining'¹⁷ objects. This is the tendency to place unnecessary emphasis on what the object does and its overall affect – physically, spiritually, or otherwise. Linguistically, at least, this argument holds weight. So how can the natural wilderness be explained without undermining, overmining, or duomining¹⁸? And how can these philosophical doctrines provide more than a definitional game to support the practice of Architecture (Bratton, 2015)? *OOO's* alluring denunciation of dichotomies is certainly important for our perception of the natural wilderness, and perhaps in turn, for architecture – as it dislodges a tendency towards the human scale. It also challenges anthropocentric tendencies to view nature in purely quantitative terms to justify cultural proclivities – as elements of nature (and architecture) always remain discrete. The key for architects is not so much in the impossible pursuit of nature's noumenal qualities – but in the reframing of objects at smaller and larger scales (i.e the details, patterns, and territories). To deduce from this – the natural wilderness is therefore an object at any scale that is autonomous of governance. This is by no means limited to human governance. As a pigeon's natural wilderness differs from a paper bag's.

1.2.2 – *On Being Native*

To bring this theory into perspective; before the emergence of the Holocene epoch, around 11,700 years ago (Zimmermann, 2017), glaciers covered large parts of the planet in what would later be described by our species as the latest Ice Age of the Pleistocene epoch. Highly sophisticated taxonomies and cartographies of the ground beneath us have enabled deep time to be quantified – broken down into fathomable aeons – and anthropomorphised. The now-famous *Norber Erratics*¹⁹; a series of foreign geological features in Yorkshire, England – that arrived via a mass glaciation event – provide us with evidence of the sheer scale and volatility of this late Ice Age. These giant, stubborn residues of epochs' now consigned to *natural* history, lay eerily on the earth's surface amongst the '*native*' current geology. Almost in a state of waiting; as a silent reminder that we are mere coinhabitants on this planet. A fleeting feature of another epoch, predestined to the fate of a thin line of stratum.

The Erratics are wrapped in data and phenomenological qualities, and deductions and symbolisms are made – but certain facets of these rocks remain withdrawn from us. No amount of quantitative knowledge can exhaust their properties, therefore any claims of sovereignty or certainty are inherently flawed from the outset. Thus, the word '*native*' within the context of geology begins to reveal its hand as an attempt to induce hierarchy and anthropomorphise the inanimate. Unlike the clean