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The Bothy Museum of Landscape Stories

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Network Ecologies: Exploring Relations Between Environmental Art, Science & Activism,  
June 4-6th 2015

Theme: Site specificity and the importance of locality and place in shaping the  
environmental imagination.

## **The Bothy Museum of Landscape Stories**

### **Story One.**

#### **New Modernism in an Old Land.**

Architects are dreadful at responding to the context of their projects. (I'm allowed to say that – I'm an architect. ) They impose their creation on the site, perhaps decorating the bit left over round the edge with a garnish of planting. They fail to engage with the Genius Loci – the Spirit of the Place.

Rather, they like to develop an architecture of theory; an exploration of plane, space and light. In an Epoch dominated by modernism and production, architecture becomes an essay in Zeitgeist – the Spirit of the Time.

Lately, an elegant and appropriate architecture has emerged in the rural West of Scotland. At the forefront are accomplished architects, such as Dualchas, and Rural Design Architects, who design intelligent, modern houses that understand the vernacular building of the region, and use its forms and materials. However, their relationship to the Landscape remains a modernist denial of context.

Typically, the buildings float as a compositional 'figure' over their 'ground'. The land may be scraped to a flat, convenient and suburban plane in the immediate environs of the house: some gravel to park on; a lawn; a deck. The palimpsest, the layered narrative that was the landscape becomes a compositional background to the Architectural Figure, its Local Distinctiveness, its meaning, erased.

So my research practice springs from my delight in the narrative of places, the palimpsest laid down in a landscape, with richness in every scale and aspect. – geology, human, process, history, natural history, agriculture, industry...

...and in my frustration in the difficulty that modernism, even this beautiful, wise, humble new Scottish modernism, the difficulty it has in accommodating the richness and narrative and distinctiveness of the Land.

An inspiring attempt to curate some of this Local Distinctiveness has been made by Sue Clifford and Angela King of Common Ground, notably in their 'England in Particular.' The architect Ted Cullinan provided a clue when talking about his visitors centre for Fountains Abbey. He described a modernist approach to the architecture, which 'makes an offering' to the vernacular context.

It is very early days for me and I have not yet formed a cohesive direction to my research practice. The curation of certain museums, none more so than the extraordinary Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, provides such an astonishing richness of narrative, that the idea of a Museum of Landscape Stories, whether it be physical or virtual, temporary or permanent, seemed a good receptacle for my disparate explorations to start with.

And a bothy museum because a bothy is in the landscape, of the landscape, and in this case, about the landscape. I hope, as I tell you some of the stories that are currently interesting me, you will find the connections.

## **Story Two:**

### **Deep mapping and Shallow Mapping**

Alberti, Durer and the Draughtsman

Along with first setting out the rules of perspective, as a means of providing an 'objective' representation, of the world which surrounded him, the architect Leon Battista Alberti is often credited with the invention of modern measured mapping. Central to his technique was devising an instrument to maintain a level, a horizon.

Albrecht Durer drew his draughtsman in the act of using techniques probably derived from Alberti's work. The draughtsman is drawing a female nude; however, the resonance, the voluptuous continuity of the woman's body and the landscape beyond, is clear. Landscape is frequently represented as female. In the drawing, we can see the perspective, we can see the gridding of the view of the woman as a means of managing and controlling, and the translation to two dimensional paper, prescient of a modern ordnance survey map. We can see the draughtsman fixing his beady eye on the female landscape, the monumental phallus of his eye piece sprouting from the drawn ground as he focuses on the figure, attempting to 'know' her by the act of measuring.

Alberti's rational techniques, in their quest for accuracy, reduce the landscape to measurement; as David Leatherbarrow observes in 'Uncommon Ground' to a relationship

between the observer and the object, and losing all the narrative of the landscape in between the two.

In 'Desert Notes' and 'River Notes', Barry Lopez, an author of exceptional attention to detail of the environment, writes of the failure of measurement and maps to supply knowledge of a landscape.

William Least Heat Moon, another environmental writer, and the contemporary of Lopez, wrote a melancholy but restorative book called *Blue Highways*, in 1982. He tells the story of travelling America's blue highways (the minor roads marked on the Rand McNally atlas in blue) seeking resolution and renewal after his relationship breaks down, and he loses his job.

In a later book, *PraeryErth* (1991) he originates the methodology known as Deep Mapping; an intensive, multi-layered and perhaps multimedia examination of a small region, which is gaining recognition as a method of geographic/cultural analysis.

But have I been talking maps down? They are wonderful. They are full of stories.

Sometimes the stories are hidden.

There exists a profession of Map Spoilers. Their work is to preserve the copyright of the map company. Suppose a rival company copied a map in a different graphic style, with different colours and fonts, but without doing the survey work. The map spoilers work small, carefully uncrucial, but deliberate 'mistakes' into the map; perhaps an extra crag on a hill side, or an extra bend in a small river. They carefully record the location and nature of these fictitious landscapes. When these mistakes are copied on another map, they can cry 'foul' and seek recompense...

But we trust maps. When we are out in the hills, and the weather closes in, and our perception... slides in the fog or the snow, we know we must trust the accurate, reliable, truth of the map. And so, that part of the landscape which lies under the authoritative veil of the true map, yet, errs through the work of the map spoiler, surely that small uncrucial landscape must be the fiction?

### **Story Three.**

#### **Paffard Keatinge Clay in the desert**

In 1785, under the Land Ordinance, in order to facilitate the control and settlement of 'the Western Territories,' the majority of the US was gridded with a nominal 1 mile grid, which was grouped into townships, and subdivided into sections, quarter sections, (160 acres – a Homestead) and quarter quarter sections (40 acres and a mule)

In the early 1950s, the young English architect, Paffard Keatinge Clay, travelled out into the Arizona desert, with the intention of taking advantage of the Homestead Act.

Clay registered a temporary claim in the Arizona desert. If he lived there for a certain length of time, and established the minimum requirements for dwelling as recognised by the State, the homestead would be his.

After camping on the site, his first act of permanent dwelling was to cast a level slab of concrete, 20 feet square, to give himself a 'place to sweep clean' and 'something to measure the horizon by'.

After a while, he cast a column at each corner, to support a second square of concrete, raised to the tip of his fingers above the first. This gave him protection from the vast sky.

This experiment in dwelling, with no enclosing walls, and space, occupation, activity defined only by horizontal surface, is perhaps the fullest exploration of the idea of universal space possible in a dwelling. This is an idea important to mid century modernism, particularly in the US. It is, as David Leatherbarrow argues, very different from the sculptural definition of space by walls and facades, by enclosure, which we are familiar with, and we see in European modernism, notably that of Le Corbusier.

Clay's experiment did not meet the State definition of a minimum dwelling, however, and he had to relinquish his homestead.

## **Story Four.**

### **Paffard Keatinge Clay in California**

Clay is one of the best connected architects modernism has known. He worked for Le Corbusier, and for Frank Lloyd Wright, and was friends with Mies van de Rohe, Charles and Ray Eames, Richard Neutra, and others.

The concept of universal space was manipulated by Neutra, with particular expertise. Walls largely disappeared, or were separated from floor and ceiling on pedestals or shadow gaps. As space flowed through and around the dwelling, activities became defined by horizontal planes, or surfaces, or terrains, or *stages*, sometimes with just a change of surface texture, to define zones of activity, aided by the trappings or set dressing, or props required.

In his discussion of Neutra's work, David Leatherbarrow also alludes to Neutra's frequent posing in photographs of his work in a prone position, the melancholy posture of death, when we enter infinite space.

Although his most major works are clearly Corbusian in approach, Clay's own house, poised precipitously over the slopes of Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, California, shows the critical influence of these great modernist architects.

It is also a virtuoso demonstration of elegant post tensioning of concrete, and is tied back to the hillside to prevent it tumbling down into the valley bottom; a very real possibility within a mile or two of the San Andreas fault. It is, thirdly, clearly a sophisticated development of the purity of the Arizona Homestead platform, again striving for unencumbered, flowing universal space.

The floor and roof of the Tamalpais pavilion are strongly expressed post tensioned concrete slabs, on fin columns. The only enclosure against the weather is glass, however, and the slabs extend beyond the glass as balconies, reaching out into, or over the landscape, perfect universal space. In fact the balconies originally had no balustrade, making the flowing connection even stronger. Together with clinging to the hillside over the San Andreas fault, this makes almost tangible the tantalising, terrifying possibility of joining infinite space.

## **Story Five.**

### **David Scott and the Hermits Castle**

There is, on the remote coast of Assynt, a tiny and extraordinary building, brutally modern, which presents itself as an element of the landscape quite completely.



Not only does its form clearly reflect the rocks in which it is rooted, but it grasps the rock which forms its floor with concrete made with sand and shingle from the beach.

In 1955, about the same time as Paffard Keatinge Clay was experimenting with minimal dwelling in the Arizona desert, another young Englishman, David *Scott*, left his home in Norwich, in something of a mental turmoil, and travelled to Achmelvich, in the far North West of Scotland. Here, right out on the rocks next to the sea, he built formwork, mixed concrete with beach sand and shingle as aggregate, and made, over the course of six months, a dolls house of brutalism. When complete, he stayed in the tiny dwelling for one weekend, and then left, never to return.

Rather than the open 'universal space' of Clays minimal dwelling, Scotts tiny bothy, barely space enough for a single bed and a hearth, is a tight, enclosed fortress and a hermits cell, defensive, isolated. It grips the rocks like a clenched fist. It declares Corbusiean sensibilities in its sculpture, rather than the Wrightian/Miesian planes of Clay's platform. Its strength and containment respond appropriately to the ferocious exposure of the location, which would never permit the luxury of Clay's open stage 'performance' living.

The Hermit's Castle, declares in form and name, antithetical archetypes of Scottish architecture in the wilderness: the Castle and the Bothy.

It has been beautifully depicted in the film by Bobby Niven, who also initiated the Bothy Project, providing a network of small scale, off grid art residency spaces.

Taking the Hermits Castle as a touchstone, My research practice will attempt to find a synthesis of Zeitgeist and Genius Loci in the dialogue between architecture and land, through the (perhaps moving) vehicle of The Bothy Museum of Landscape Stories.

