

On Technology, Ecology, and Urbanism

John May

VERB > Standing atop rolling hills of grass, it's hard to believe that only a thin topsoil membrane separates Fresh Kills Park from its better known past as a 2200-acre trash heap. Capped and sealed like a Ziploc bag, the trash is held in a state of suspended animation, managed by methane flare stations and leachate treatment plants. "Where's the architecture in a place like Fresh Kills?" is the question that started it: a discussion about violence disguised as urbanism, lifestyles of excess, and technical prowess propagating environmental disasters. To detect and grasp the consequences of something as massive as Fresh Kills, with all its physical and moral runoff, John May digs into the history of the phenomenon and questions the very way in which we perceive and understand it.

VERB > *You argue in your essay that architects have had little to say about Fresh Kills. Why do you think this has been the case?*

MAY > ...little of *substance* to say, likely because the more you unpack a place like Fresh Kills, the more difficult it becomes to later repackage it in glossy optimism. No matter how sexy and natural it may appear in the various digital renderings, or how compelling its supposed rebirth may sound in the official statements, it is an absolutely horrible place, and it reveals horrible realities about our Modern American Lifestyles—realities that are only growing more pronounced.

The fact of the matter is that these realities are not easily overlooked. It takes effort to ignore them. Unfortunately, all too often architects play a central role this effort. Why do you think architectural competitions are held? Glance beneath nearly every major architectural competition and you will find a desire to recast the image of a particular place in the collective memory of a population. This is not to suggest that there is some sort of larger conspiracy at work, but rather that events such as the Fresh Kills competition are ultimately instruments for the extension of dominant moralities. Winning entries are always in total compliance with that morality. They ensure that the most powerful interests have the final say on the history of a particular location, and what lessons we may learn from those places.

So, for example, the Field Operations proposal is a carefully packaged document that, in many ways, reveals more about ourselves than it does about Fresh Kills. It is riddled with statements

that are sufficiently reductive so as to obscure the most painful details of Fresh Kill's history. It optimistically asserts that "only 45 percent of the site is landfill," while the other 55 percent has "remained creeks, wetlands, and open fields." Cause for celebration, no doubt. Unfortunately such a statement can only be made in the absence of any real understanding of the ecological feed-

VERB > For more information on the Fresh Kills competition sponsored by the City of New York: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/fkl/fkl2.shtml>

backs at play, as well as the very real and arguably insurmountable uncertainties that plague supposed technological "fixes" such as methane collection and leachate control, (or what the Field Operations document vaguely refers to as "in situ management over time"—a phrase that implies a degree of control and comprehension that, on my view, is nonexistent). Language of this sort, when set alongside a barrage of seemingly ordinary yet wholly fantastical Photoshop collages of upper-middle class recreational enjoyment, manufacture an air of inevitability regarding Fresh Kill's Glorious Rebirthing. The resulting proposal is, with all due respect to the obviously quite gifted protagonists, a lie. It is a remarkably compelling lie, beautifully rendered, but a lie nonetheless.

VERB > *How can architects and urban planners deal with phenomenon on a grand scale? Do you think that the strategy used at Fresh Kills, a "literal sweeping under the grass rug," is valid one?*

MAY > Certainly it is an effective strategy, in the short term. It placates the various interests—political, commercial, institutional—that lay powerful claims to places like Fresh Kills. Now obviously I find it an objectionable strategy in the case of Fresh Kills, but I think others should make up their own minds. More importantly, proposals like this demonstrate the need to revisit troubling questions surrounding large-scale territorial interventions.

The Fresh Kills document is essentially a territorial plan, and it is important to remember that planning has two general histories. One is an account of actions taken towards the preservation and maintenance of certain types of life. The other, sitting quietly astride, is a compilation of the death that makes possible the first. Planning is, first and foremost, violence. Just as everyone has killed in order to live, every plan kills in order to "work." Planning is the method by which modern violence is done; clean, unspoken, "just" violence. It is less an act of design than an act of war, less cooperation than conquest, less color and light than sound and fury. Planning is pataphysics: a science of imaginary solutions. It is the locus of faith in Modernity. The planner's social contract is the lie that is told in place of a truth that is either

unknown or unbearable; he continually makes promises that go awry, but all is forgiven so long as he continues to make promises. Planning ultimately finds its power in fear—a collective fear of the unknown, the uncertainties of the human condition. We have mortgaged our future by dreaming for so long now that somehow planning can protect us from these uncertainties, erase them. I think we have paid a high price for this dream.

VERB > *Is it possible to reconcile the contradiction between the "beauty" and harmony of the new proposed park persona of Fresh Kills and your statements that "planning is first and foremost, violence?"*

MAY > I can provide an endless litany of social and ecological nightmares wrought by the most celebrated large-scale plans, each one hailed, upon completion, as a resounding success. Planning's past is dominated by tales of its supreme impotence in the face of nature. But you'll not attend any class lecture discussing the hauntingly absurd condition of the Aral Sea; or journals addressing the relationship between successive planned alterations of the hydrological processes in the lower Mississippi Delta and the human tragedies that followed Hurricane Katrina; or conferences on the gradual, planned erasure of spaces of anonymity and the consequences of such losses.

Planners seem content to leave these issues for the historians to sort out. What you'll find is a continued indoctrination into the vagaries of managerial discourse, the first rule of which is that everything in life must be defined as a problem in need of solution. Were that such solutions existed. Meanwhile urban microclimates are exacerbating the effects of microscopic pollutants in billions of lungs. Meanwhile septic tanks are leaking into groundwater, into streams that find their way to the coast, where they determine degraded marine ecosystems. Meanwhile urban building systems are responsible for nearly three-fourths of the greenhouse gases emitted by the developed world.

VERB > *Your essay on Fresh Kills deals with the potentially eviscerating character of architecture. Is there an alternative? How realistic is it to assume that we, as architects or planners, limit themselves to the small scale, affecting the environment one brick at a time?*

MAY > I don't imagine that planners and architects will simply stop executing large-scale interventions, though it would be a good first step. And I'm not suggesting that were the profession to disappear that these issues would disappear, or that I have the answer to

this intractable situation. Most importantly, I'm not laying the blame solely at the planner's door; we have all played our part in this way of life, we have all *wanted* it on some level. I'm simply suggesting that we should begin to discuss it and work on it, rather than continue to live a lie. These questions do not have easy answers, but if one can demonstrate the operations at work in a dominant morality it may go far in describing the peculiar scaffold that engenders our continued faith in the practice.

VERB > *Architects are progressively extending the scope of their work into the field of urbanism. What do you think of this phenomenon?*

MAY > In a general sense, it is undeniable that architects increasingly see themselves as also practicing a kind of urbanism—a strategy that certainly rests in a specific definition of the concept of urbanism. This notion has occupied the vacuum left by the obvious failings of modern planning. I think that some time ago architects found themselves trapped between on the one hand the undeniable fact that the architect is an increasingly irrelevant force in the production of the built environment, and on the other, the overwhelming desire to assert the ego through the practice of architecture. This is not an easy dilemma to resolve. The high modernist solution was to become an urban planner, but the current answer is to insist that architecture become this vaguely defined thing we call “urbanism,” primarily through its scale—its “bigness”—but also through apparently detailed connections to the functions of daily urban life, or a mutable ground plane, or, in the case of New Urbanism, a symbolic return to the aesthetic norms of a past that never existed. I think that despite its near-universality in the academy, the jury is still very much out on whether or not this aspiring urbanism is a possible strategy in architecture, and we certainly have not adequately understood the consequences of adopting this attitude. Nonetheless, it seems undeniable that, as a discipline, architecture has made a (rather tentative) quantitative scalar leap, after having scaled back its ambitions during the 1970s and 1980s.

What concerns me is that this strategy has been accompanied by a rather dangerous agnosticism towards neoliberal capitalism, or at least for the types of existence it brings forward. It has been quite enthusiastically taken up by a generation of students who seem largely unaware of the fact that mass extraction, production and consumption may actually be problematic. Consequently, what passes as urbanist thought today is so behaved, so silent. It ignores destruction that has been fashionably dressed up as improvement, and fails to lash out at violence that calls itself beauty. At best

it might make some lame overtures to “green technology” and “sustainability.”

VERB > *Are you suspicious of the term “sustainability?” Do you consider the recent emergence of sustainable practices in architecture as a positive development? Are such practices a possible solution to some of the environmental issues that arise in your geographical research?*

MAY > I want to be careful here, because it is a cheap exercise to belittle the often sincere efforts made by practitioners who are confronting environmental issues on a daily basis. But the fact is that many of our current conceptions of sustainability have, on my view, become far too associated with the deployment of so-called “green technologies.” Nowhere is this more true than in the field of architecture. It seems to me that the phrase “green technology” is an oxymoron waiting to happen—or rather is *always-already* happening (to borrow a Heideggerian phrase)—and that we should not be too proud of our clever devices by imagining that they are solutions on par with our state of affairs. Instead we should be ruthlessly skeptical of anyone proposing a technological fix to the processes that are decimating our habitat. Blind faith in technological redemption has undoubtedly contributed to the wide acceptance of devices and systems that we now, in hindsight, recognize to be dangerous. Some of these new techniques are undoubtedly positive developments insofar as they forestall or retard certain accumulative processes. Unfortunately architects have managed to convince themselves that this time will be different, because this time We Have Gone Green. But these devices, like any technology, are already generating associations that we cannot foresee. Later we will call these accidents and malfunctions, but we should know better by now.

This vague conception of sustainability as a kind of substitutive network of green technologies is little more than a band-aid, a small patch on a swiftly deteriorating skin. Eventually we will need to completely revise our ways of life—this seems so obvious that I think it hardly needs saying. We have to change *everything*. This involves imagining less comfortable and convenient methods of being in the world, and probably more uncertain and dangerous individual lives. It involves decoupling ourselves from the crass culture of speed and efficiency that has colonized our psyches.

Ultimately we should take the idea of sustainability to task not because it is a bad idea; precisely the opposite, in fact. We should care for it because it needs constant reconceptualization. The threshold for its application should be absurdly high, almost

impossibly so. We need to begin this revision process soon, because the marketers and magazines have already taken hold of it, and soon it will be little more than a cynical ad campaign, an excuse to sell us more jewelry that we don't need, and another cover for our absurdly wasteful forms of living.

VERB > *You argue that architecture is in the midst of a “scale shift?” Do you consider this positive?*

MAY > There is only one sense in which this strikes me as a positive development: the opportunity to critically redefine the parameters of what it means to think and act on a broad scale, through a close historical look at the roots of our unprecedented material luxury, and their relation to the forms of existence that are brought forward by large-scale interventions. If the questions appropriate to knowledge are simply imported from within planning theory, then architecture will merely inherit the responsibility for having orchestrated ever-larger nightmares; for having eviscerated, with all good intentions, and under the flags of redevelopment and beautification, ever larger swaths of territory. But what if architecture, during the current process of repackaging itself as urbanism, can begin to ask different types of questions? In place of “how do we design a large thing?” substitute (if only temporarily, until new strategies can be devised) “How is it that ‘successful’ attempts to design large things have always failed?”

VERB > *What do you mean by “our unprecedented luxury?” With regard to various interpretations of the word “crisis,” what do you see as the imminent results of this opulence?*

MAY > We in the developed world are living through history's most privileged minute. Soon the clock hand will turn, and the tragedies of our present excesses will become immediately apparent to even the most short-sighted among us. It seems increasingly likely that a set of questions will impose upon architectural discourse in the coming years. As the glossy extravagance of our waning days fades, the new imperatives of this domain will become immediately evident, unavoidable: scarcity, lack, triage, disorder, crisis—concepts that are well known throughout the developing world but are assiduously hid from view in those places where populations enjoy luxuries such as Architecture and Urban Design, peeking through our veneer only when so-called “disasters” strike. As Zygmunt Bauman recently pointed out, the techniques of control, comfort and convenience that much of the global north now enjoys were never meant to be globally applied—quite the opposite in fact; these techniques, extractive in character, have always mobilized global resources in the service of local desires.

1 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 73.

Our localized forms of “civilized” existence have, in Bauman's words, been “made to the measure of select populations.”¹ It seems unlikely that this condition—one in which a select population renders the world increasingly uninhabitable through an insatiable pursuit of fashionable comforts—can go on forever. I don't mean to sound alarmist, but I don't see how it can be otherwise.

VERB > *We find that your research into the emergence of “modern geographic technologies” helps to outline a general condition of crisis. Can you explain the context of your work and more specifically, indicate which technologies you are referring to?*

MAY > I might answer that with a very short parable, which perhaps I should have recounted at the outset of this discussion: There was once a group of people who believed that they had discovered a means of improving their lives, of protecting themselves against the vast uncertainties of the human condition: the storms, the predators, the sickness unto death. They employed these new means, and life seemingly was better. And for many generations thereafter their descendants followed suit, making improvements on the practices handed down to them, all the while believing with good reason that life was better still. Then one day the people realized that life was not getting better, but was in fact getting worse, because the fundamental conditions of their existence were quietly but rapidly degrading. This situation was made all the more intolerable by the fact that this vast and accelerating degradation was, if not *caused by* then at least *dominantly associated with* the very practices that the people had sought refuge in for hundreds of years.

Everyone knows this story, or one like it. It is the storm in which Benjamin's Angel of History is caught. Perhaps we can agree for just a moment that this is the general condition in which we now find ourselves. This parable serves as a general background. It is the zero condition, and I can't imagine beginning anywhere else; I suppose this is because it is so sad.

One possible consequence of this parable is that many of the ideas and activities and practices that we have historically regarded as solutions to the various problems posed by life have in fact been exactly the opposite, or that some of our most fundamental concepts are quite poorly conceived and are no longer sufficiently fecund. What does it mean to pose life as a problem in need of solutions? Where has this idea taken us? It is so historically entrenched, so reflexive now that it has acquired emotional weight, such that one no longer *thinks* but rather *feels* that life

is a problem we must solve. In any case, it seems to me that we should no longer blindly trust this feeling, or our practices, or our theories, or our strategies or our good intentions, and certainly not our devices.

With this always in mind, my long-term research project examines the emergence of what I believe to be a relatively new epistemic mode of thought associated with the development of a certain family of technical systems and devices and their increasingly pervasive use in the environmental sciences; most notably “satellite (or airborne) remote sensing” and “geographic information systems,” but also a range of similar or integrated sensor technologies, all of which I’ve referred to as “modern geographic technologies.”

My work contends that a relatively young form of rational inquiry has resulted from an historical coalescing, operative since at least the outset of the twentieth century, between a specific way of thinking about the natural and social worlds as aggregations of statistical regularities, and a way of seeing that was rooted in these geographic technologies and their attendant methods. I have provisionally labeled this mode of thought “statistical-mechanical geographic vision”—a phrase intended to simultaneously circumscribe two distinct elements: First, a statistical approach towards the innumerable processes of mass phenomena that scientists and many philosophers associate with the natural and social worlds (or, the employment of what some historians of science refer to as “statistical thinking”); And second, the application of various techniques and devices capable of perceiving and analyzing the character of those processes on a geographic scale.² We are increasingly asking ever-more complex devices and systems to perceive, interpret, and act upon the world in our stead—not so much because we lack the energy or the determination, but because the problems created by our modern lives have outpaced our means for resolving them.

Take, for example, the Landsat Thematic Mapper, a satellite-mounted multispectral scanner. Such sensors are now indispensable in earth systems science, are at the forefront of research into global environmental problems, and are increasingly being used to formulate policy decisions with global reach and impact. The Thematic Mapper, and subsequent, more advanced sensors, have for two decades now returned earth images that are increasingly familiar to our sensibilities; so much so that it no longer strikes us as odd that the physical characteristics of discrete natural phenomena, many of which are invisible to the naked eye even at

VERB > Statistical-mechanical geographic vision: A new mode of thought that has emerged out of the historical relations between the use of inferential statistics to study mass phenomena and the development of modern geographic technologies.

² John May, “Preliminary Notes on the Historical Emergence of Statistical-Mechanical Geographic Vision” in *The Yale Journal of Architecture, Perspecta* 40 (2008, forthcoming).

close range, can be visually analyzed across enormous territories and time scales.

One of the central paradoxes encountered here is that the most pressing environmental issues are those that point towards the technical production, consumption, or modification of certain mass phenomena. These exponential accumulations are the only forces generous enough to affect entire territories, whole ecosystems, the earth. And so we must ask after the limits of technoscientific inquiry; Can these contemporary devices and systems—born of populationist thought and shot through with the uncertainties that accompany probabilistic reasoning—provide answers to the most intractable, largest-scale, technologically-associated environmental problems we are now facing? Or are they simply part of an accumulating panorama of feedbacks, meticulous and patient, engendering entirely new statistical realities?

VERB > *What is “statistical thinking?”*

MAY > Statistical thinking is the belief that regularities and causal relationships prevail within large, diverse masses, despite the chance character of certain individual phenomena. The concept of statistical thinking, as elaborated by someone like Theodore Porter,³ should be distinguished from the separate but related idea of “statistical morality” which arises in my work. Our “statistical view of nature”⁴ has been escorted along its entire historical becoming by the simultaneous appearance of a kind of statistical morality—a hardening of assumptions and beliefs that now appear as natural states of affairs; manifold processes and sums of relations between assemblages that have come to constitute certain axioms of thought and practice. This hopeful morality is at work everywhere today, and it traverses the globe with the aid of an entire domain of technologies whose very invention would have been impossible without the near-contemporaneous emergence of statistical thinking.

Certain ways of life are given priority by, and are continually resonating with statistical thinking; with the activities, accumulations, devices, values, and events that have been, and continue to be, coextensive with its appearance. Statistical thinking seems to bind together a range activities across the spectrum of contemporary life, yet I would argue that this not necessarily because statistical methods reveal natural truths—they may or may not—but because through these procedures we naturalize truth.

³ Theodore Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820-1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

⁴ Morris Kline, *Mathematics in Western Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

VERB > *How do these methods of statistical thinking (or “statistical morality” in general) affect the built environment?*

MAY > In our desire to comprehend and control life at larger and larger scales, we are perhaps unknowingly putting in motion whole regimes of mass phenomena that can initially appear natural (or at least nonhuman) in origin. We are somehow managing to increasingly alter the world at the level of ontology. There are enormous and substantial feedbacks, deep mutualities between this relatively new statistical worldview and the ever-accelerating pace of the degradation of our environment.

To cite just one example, nowhere is this circulative process (between the statistical world view and our environment) more readily on display than in so-called “geographic information systems,” or GIS. Michael Curry has written about the exact manner in which these systems have come to determine new realities for entire populations by continually modifying the flows of commodities and information out of which we make our daily decisions.⁵ They do so by generating a highly degraded statistical abstract of segments of populations, comprised of basic demographic data, but also of vices, weaknesses, fears, stresses, susceptibilities and impulse decisions. This absurdly reductive model is then idealized, and all efforts are made to reproduce it, to exaggerate its contours until the consumptive habits of a population have been brought in concert with certain economies of scale and scope.

GIS is used to determine mortgage rates, building codes, transportation routes and highway placement, and the products that receive prominent placement in the supermarket. For obvious reasons these are rarely the foods that a population should be consuming for their own health, or for the health of their habitat, but instead what they are most susceptible to, as well as highly elastic goods yielding enormous returns to scale (like, say, an aluminum can filled with carbonated sugar water). These techniques of geodemographic conquest are nearly universally employed by market research firms. Of course hustlers have been plying their trade for millennia, and so aspects of this story are seemingly timeless. What is different now is the immediacy and vast extension of the technical systems being used; their simultaneity and comprehensiveness. And so more and more of us trudge along, eating

ourselves into oblivion, lounging on disposable Swedish furniture purchased on credit, utterly torpid, yet busied by sanctioned amphetamines, all the while cooled by simulated arctic air in overvalued, negatively-amortizing homes we were duped into thinking we could afford.

VERB > May suggests that the use of GIS (Geographic Information Systems) is one example of how relations between statistical thinking and technological systems can modify the conditions of social reality for various populations.

⁵ Michael R. Curry, *Digital Places : Living with Geographic Information Technologies* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

Now, are these “effects” of our having used GIS to understand mass phenomena? Are they “caused” by GIS? Obviously these are not sensible questions; they are far too reductive. So the first step is to learn to properly describe it, to devise conceptual categories that are capable of encircling it.

VERB > *In the Fresh Kills essay, you reference Virilio’s observation that “to invent the ship is the invent the shipwreck.” How can the concepts of simultaneity and comprehensiveness, when applied to technology, inform our understanding of a term such as crisis?*

MAY > I find it even more helpful to say that in many cases—arguably the most important cases, from an ecological standpoint—the ship and the shipwreck are in fact the same. The shipwreck is simply another function of the ship, always-already unfolding within the sphere of the vessel. The signifier “ship” is merely a reductive placeholder; concealed beneath it are all of the possibilities that can be associated with the object itself. As Wittgenstein noted, “the possibility of its occurring in states of affairs is the form of an object.”⁶

I think if one acquaints oneself with even a general history of technology, it is nearly impossible not to come to the realization that our everyday discourse tends to permit a certain optimism regarding the technical systems that inhabit our daily experience. We say, “my device was working fine, and now it is not; I will need to have it fixed so that it will function properly again.” Yet if we look closely at virtually any device or system, we realize that statements

of this sort are literally nonsensical. In truth it seems that the class of phenomena we collectively designate as “technology” is always-already working and failing, always-already fixed and broken; this harsh simultaneity is always-already in place, from the moment of an object’s emergence until well beyond its last dying day. This point needs to be made and brought to the level of obviousness, and one of the quickest ways to demonstrate its veracity is to examine our histories of technologies from an ecological perspective, where things are inexorably deteriorating.

VERB > Technology is often optimistically presented as a solution to our problems; one that, in spite of occasional malfunctions and accidents, can mitigate the damaging ecological effects of previous practices. However, May argues that this simple causal mindset is distracting us from a more informed and nuanced understanding of the ways of life that accompany the introduction of new technological systems.

[Please refer to Paul Virilio, “Interview with Der Derian,” in *The Virilio Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998)]

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), 6-7.

The internal combustion engine, the digital computer, the heating and air-conditioning unit that comforts you right now—are they “working”? Are they “functioning” properly? These questions should be discarded as virtually useless. It is silly to speak of the technical dimension as comprised of objects that are all

essentially functioning properly save for periodic maintenance or upgrading. We should replace this reductive, naively optimistic view with a more fecund description. Doing so might force us to be more cautious in our deployments, because it would erase from our vocabulary ideas that, I think, have misled us regarding the realities of our technological lives: accidents, failures, byproducts, breakdowns, malfunctions, repairs, side-effects, and the like.

How can one seriously speak of “byproducts” anymore? Does this even begin to describe something like Fresh Kills? Can we still stand, dead-legged, staring into the face of the next toxic incident, momentarily expressing a bit of the requisite left-liberal shock and indignation, behaving as though we somehow did not know, as though we are all still so naïve? These happenings that we regard as “side-effects” in need of “management” are not secondary; they are in fact equivalent to the outwardly apparent function of a device. This is the simultaneity of the technical domain, and so long as this domain is coupled with an extractive morality bent towards violent and insatiable consumption these so-called incidents and accidents will continue to occur, each one appearing unavoidable.

The concept of comprehensiveness refers to both the increasing spatial reach of the technical domain, and the depth and breadth of its penetrations into the relations between our ideas and our actions—to the fact that it is becoming less and less possible to think or act, or even to feel without accessing this domain. The comprehensive character of our technologies requires that we never consider these tools, instruments, devices and systems in the singular. This class of phenomena that we call technology is nearly always operating in a populationist manner, splayed out across territories, engendering massive, silent, unseen realities.

VERB > *As a geographer and a practicing architect what do you consider to be the relationship between architecture and geography?*

MAY > They certainly entertain relations in my mind, but not in any systematic manner. In my work they remain largely separate ventures—one historical and descriptive, the other generative. I do not “mix” them, or exchange parts of one for the other. I don’t trade metaphors or methods from one to the other. In truth I don’t really consider myself a ‘Geographer’ in any proper or traditional sense, though I don’t really give it that much thought. I am simply trying to describe and understand some limited portion of what one might call the technical dimension of our modern condition. Within that activity, however, I do try to place particular

emphasis on the relations that this dimension entertains at a geographic scale, which is to say, at the scale of populations, territories, and mass phenomena.

I think the disciplinary relations between the two have been somewhat overemphasized in recent years, largely by people who don’t really understand the other field terribly well—which is not to suggest that there are not connections, just that we should be cautious in assuming that the two speak the same language. A good deal of the most productive work in geography today is being done by the physical breaches of the discipline, which are rapidly changing the character of environmental science, and are rooted in a scientific legacy that has little if any understanding of architecture. Conversely, the grammar of geographical analysis is quite en vogue nowadays in architectural circles: territories, terrains, topographies, and so on. Not long ago it was French Theory, but then all the theorists died, so now vague geographical metaphors are the popular way to enhance your formal justifications. But what should be obvious to any critical mind is that this is a relationship of convenience, resting precariously on the fact that these metaphors immediately fulfill several goals across the avant garde spectrum, simultaneously referencing one’s “commitment” to scripted digital modeling, rhizomatic reasoning, and the notion that architecture can somehow also be urbanism.

There’s no harm in any of this. Whatever works to inspire generative activity should be considered fair game. But on my view it all smacks of reductive thought and a formulaic mentality; faux-radicism beneath a hi-res digital veil. As Guattari once asked his fellow psychoanalysts, “why Greek tragedy?” And I say none of this from the standpoint of a possessive geographer—quite the opposite. My concern is the manner in which architectural thought has for forty years now confined itself and inhibited its potential through this kind of instrumentalism. I think architects would often do better to let their objects speak for themselves.

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