



Land_Art_National_Park

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"I would postulate actually that waste and enjoyment are in a sense coupled. There's a certain kind of pleasure principle that comes out of preoccupation with waste."

--Robert Smithson, "Essay on Entropy," 1973.

Fig. #1: Robert Smithson, Spiral Jetty, 1970, Great Salt Lake, Utah.



_Concept

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Today we are in the midst of a Land Art renaissance. Institutions ranging from Sculpture Center in New York to MOCA in Los Angeles have mounted major exhibitions on Land Art in recent years, and it is becoming an increasingly popular topic of scholarly study. At the same time, several staggeringly ambitious projects that were conceived during Land Art’s heyday in the 1970s but long seemed impossible to realize due to their scale and complexity are finally nearing completion—most notably Michael Heizer’s City, begun in a desert valley in Nevada in 1972, and James Turrell’s Roden Crater, an enormous installation housed inside an extinct volcano northeast of Flagstaff, Arizona that was conceived in 1979.

It is not surprising that Land Art is so much in the public eye, given that landscape is the arena in which many of the most pressing ecological crises of our day are literally unfolding. The ongoing protest over the Dakota Access Pipeline is only one among a multitude of examples that remind us that many of the most urgent political issues of our time are themselves rooted in environmental problems. Ecological concerns are increasingly at the forefront in architecture, too, as evidenced not just by the spread of terms like landscape urbanism and landform building in recent years but by the fact that the role of landscape architects is expanding to include infrastructural and urban-scale projects that in an earlier era would have been considered the purview of city planners or regional planning officials.

We welcome this resurgence of landscape within the discipline of architecture, but we also argue that in order to most fully and most productively engage landscape as a means of addressing broader ecological concerns, architecture must recalibrate its relationship to both landscape and nature. The legacy of the picturesque runs strong in architecture, and encourages an idealized, image-based approach to the natural landscape—an approach that is all the more problematic given the accelerating pace of climate change and the increasingly precarious and disruptive state of the environment itself. Yet even as intellectuals both within and without the field have recently made efforts to reconceptualize nature to reflect this new reality—from philosopher Timothy Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) to architectural historian David Gissen’s *Subnature* (2009)—mainstream design still operates under an idealized notion of a stable and predictable nature. As a result most architectural responses to environmental concerns have remained on the level of representation, broadcasting their concern for environmental responsibility through a set of all-too-familiar tropes—photovoltaics, elaborate louvers and frit patterns, the conspicuous placement of green walls and roofs, and the atoning use of recycled materials.

We believe that Land Art offers a rich model for designers seeking to rethink the relationship between building and landscape and architecture and environment. Just as many Land Artists were decades ahead of their time in terms of environmental thinking (Robert Smithson’s interest in entropy led him to address questions of waste and reuse, to name just one example) they were pioneers in moving away from form toward process and material. Most fundamentally, they understood that landscape is not an image of nature but is fundamentally formless, in the sense articulated by the self-described “anti-philosopher” Georges Bataille. For Bataille, the formless was not a concept that could be defined but a process that could be deployed: in his famous description of the *informe*, he proposed that “a dictionary would begin as of the moment when it no longer provided the meanings of words but their tasks.” Following Bataille, many Land Artists instrumentalized a wide range of ecological processes—decay, erosion, accumulation, settling, creeping—that have been excluded from architectural thought because they don’t fit into our image of what the discipline should be, but that could prove to be extraordinarily productive for our field.

Renewed attention from architects may be coming just in time for Land Art, too—many major sites are currently being transformed from avant-guard outposts to luxury destinations for high-end cultural tourism. This shift is accompanied by an increasing emphasis on preservation and branding that runs counter to the fluid, process-and-material-based ethos that originally drove many of the projects. Accordingly, our studio will create a Land Art National Park, conceived as a laboratory for experimentation in the relationship between art, architecture, and landscape.



_Site_and_Program

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Broadly speaking, the studio's site is the entire region of the southwestern United States where land art installations have historically been concentrated. We will focus our attention on seven specific sites, each one occupying a canonical place in the history of land art:

- Spiral Jetty, Robert Smithson, 1970, Utah.
- Double Negative, Michael Heizer, 1970, Nevada.
- Sun Tunnels, Nancy Holt, 1976, Utah.
- Lightning Field, Walter De Maria, 1977, New Mexico.
- Marfa, Texas (focus on Donald Judd's outdoor installation of his monumental sculptures at Chinati Foundation).
- Roden Crater, James Turrell, begun 1979 and still under construction, Arizona.
- City, Michael Heizer, begun 1972 and still under construction, Nevada.

Our spring travel will follow a classic American mode of experiencing landscape: the road trip. We will visit as many of these sites as possible, as well as a variety of public lands and natural monuments throughout the region, with the goal of learning equally from our experience of both the land art and the natural landscape of the American West.

The studio brief will require students to two crucial architectural components of a hypothetical Land Art National Park: a visitor's center, on the one hand, and a sequence of pavilions or outposts, on the other. Working simultaneously on these different programs will force students to confront a range of fundamentally architectural problems (particularly scale and figure/ground relationships) and above to consider a range of different relationships between building and landscape (the visitor's center as object in the landscape, for example, versus the pavilions as field of interventions distributed across it). While the general focus of the visitors center will be on providing exhibition space and tourist amenities and the primary focus of the pavilions will be on interaction with land art and landscape, the students will have the freedom to interpret both programs in relation to their chosen site, which may be an individual land art site, some combination of sites, or any location within the broader territory of the Land Art National Park region. Students will not only seek to articulate a new relationship between architecture and landscape but to rigorously address the problems of tourism, transportation, preservation, ecology, and infrastructure that are posed by the idea of a Land Art National Park. Successful projects will use architecture to address both the mundane—parking or plumbing—and the sublime—vast vistas or monumental topographies.



_Methodology



The ultimate goal of the studio is nothing less than the creation of a new architectural methodology, allowing a fundamental shift from form to process and understanding design not as a means of producing a final solution but of initiating a dynamic, non-linear, and flexible series of actions and reactions. The basic method will include the following steps:

As Found:

A formless approach must be rooted in existing material and environmental conditions, so the initial phase will include research into site, process, and typology, exploring both the history and production of land art sites, their current use and cultural impact, and ongoing issues in their development and preservation.

Operational Experiments:

We will undertake a series of experiments to explore the interactions between matter, structure, site, and process. This is not a form-finding exercise but instead a way of finding the formless—of identifying the key processes that students wish to engage and of emphasizing iteration over the production of a single design configuration. The emphasis here will be on physical rather than digital simulation, designing exercises that allow us to exploit the embodied intelligence of materials themselves. Even the most advanced digital simulations today are unable to effectively address the scale and complexity of landscape; when collaborated with a material physicist on our design for the million-pound pile of sand in our project Tent Pile, he told us that his lab could not digitally simulate the behavior of much more than a teaspoon of sand and that we would have to rely on physical simulation for our modeling. The students in our studio will follow a similar method, performing and documenting a series of material experiments that will form the basis for their approach to design.

Representational Experiments:

Studio production will focus on the combination of and feedback between experimental representational techniques. In particular, video will be used to engage the temporal aspects of ecology, and large-scale models will be used to engage with the experiential and material dimensions of each project.

Discourse and Design:

Throughout the studio, there will also be an emphasis on research and dialogue, not as the starting point or foundation for design but as an integral part of the design process. Over the course of the semester, we will hold several informal seminar-style conversations with experts, ranging from ecologists to land artists to art historians to environmental engineers. Each student will be expected to articulate a clear argument not just about their project but with their project—just as the notion of a formless ecology suggests that there is no clear line between environment and building, there should be no division between thinking and design.

