

THE IRONY OF INTERVENTION: DESPOLIATION AND REMEDIATION

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ABSTRACT: The out-scaled processes of strip-mining appear incredible, absurd, and even ironic. In fact, the notion of irony, in which explicit meaning is different from intended meaning, is itself a useful critical tool for extending concepts which otherwise guide conventional discussion about design for the environment. J. B. Jackson, for instance, wrote about the “vernacular” landscape. But how can the word – which denotes characteristics unintended, unselfconscious, yet entirely artificial – be applied to *landscape*? Are there circumstances in which understanding the transition from a natural to man-made landscape can be moderated by “ironic” sensibilities? Shlomo Aronson’s design for the Negev Phosphate Works, among other examples of extensive site intervention, provides a useful lesson. One can perceive, in Aronson’s work, a kind of visual vernacular, established by the natural landscape’s own precedent at an existing place and time. *Perception* of this vernacular, on the other hand, depends upon the subtle, ironic chiasm between site specificity and its opposite: the general concept of landscape itself.

KEYWORDS: Landscape, irony, strip-mining, Negev Phosphate Works, Schlegel.

Introduction: The Plans-Unraveling World

Interpretations are frequently insertions of something that seems desirable or expedient, and many a deduction is actually a traduction [sic] – a proof that erudition and speculation are not quite so harmful to the innocence of the spirit as some people would have us believe. For isn't it really childlike to marvel at the wonder of what one has created oneself? (Schlegel 1991, 21)

Architects often see the built environment through the narrow prism of *building* design, as though their creative engagement with the world stops short at the water-proof boundary of a wall or window. But the premise of an interdisciplinary approach challenges architects to look at physical and cultural landscapes, which the well-known writer J. B. Jackson defined once as, “large-scale organizations of man-made spaces” (Jackson 1984, 141). Of special interest is how we come to assemble interpretations of those spaces, but this essay seeks to put aside their technical configuration – akin, otherwise, to most architects’ traditional *métier* -- in order to take some inspiration from a few quaint ideas about, of all things, irony.

These notes have been prepared during 2010’s disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. That oil spill and its continuing effects is a disaster, of course, in ecological terms as well as in the human dimension. But a core issue is the failure of implementation and planning. Is this enormous failure the “Planned World,” or might our collective experience be better described as the “Plans-Unraveling World,” or the “Plans-Spinning-Out-of-Control World”? Indeed, those who grew up with movies like *Towering Inferno* and *The Poseidon Adventure* will agree that our planet’s fate this last decade appears more and more to have been scripted by Irwin Allen – a consequence, one should observe, of our technical and political leaders’ embracing all sorts of excellent plans.

Planning after Failed Planning: Among those plans are intentional acts of despoliation, such as strip mining or any other kind of systematic material extraction from the earth. It’s the word “systematic” which is key and which is characteristically human, since upon “systematic” effort is founded civilization itself, traditionally seen as the historical transition from subsistence to settlement, brought on by the gradual adoption of agricultural practices. Mining, whether for metals or for stone or for oil, is the inorganic counterpart to agriculture. Indeed, our hegemony over the natural environment increases through the constant consumption of mining’s products, just as the width of one’s personal girth expands due to the continual sipping away at high-fructose corn syrup.

Even popular accounts increasingly acknowledge that our ever-accelerating use of land is increasingly damaging, although no responsible agent intentionally seeks to cause a dustbowl or an oil spill. No one plans it. No one, as we have become aware through the events of the Gulf oil-spill, plans *for* it. Yet the contingency of its occurrence is nevertheless a result of our organized efforts to control our environment.

One might seek, therefore, a suitable sensibility with which to engage sites of industrial despoliation. These landscapes have long been the subject of academic writing, but in books about environmental philosophy, for instance, all human acts tend to get lumped together as “artifact,” even where the companion concept of Nature comes under question (Lee 1999, 229-239). Indeed, much of this writing instead focuses on what is “natural” and what is not. Some books, such as Robert Elliot’s *Faking Nature*, argue not only for the intrinsic and distinct “value” of entirely natural systems, but also takes pains to establish rigorously the conceptual interface between natural systems and artificial creations (Elliot 1997, 116). Though the boundary between the two may sometimes be blurry, Elliot strongly rejects the tautological premise that all human activity falls within some universal, therefore natural, system. But, once established, this boundary has for Elliot and others quite clear ethical consequences, for all human activity is essentially disruptive due to its unique intentionality and scale. In Elliot’s case, he seeks to challenge the impulse towards despoliation now made “acceptable” by promised restorations of the kind you see here. But what alternatives are open to us when what is natural has already been destroyed?

Plans Past Planning (Alternative Approaches towards Reclamation): A superficial review of the history of mining and mine reclamation shows that there are several distinct categories of approach. The earliest approach of which I’m aware was to do nothing: that is, either to abandon the site entirely with no remediation or else to cordon it off and to maintain it in “good working order” until the time the property is either sold or re-opened. But as early as the late 1930’s, the proliferation of strip mining made neglected sites increasingly visible (Brothers 1991, 221). Furthermore, after mining companies implemented chemical-based extraction techniques to increase their yield, these sites were also increasingly found to be toxic. Doing nothing was no longer a viable option. In the US, legislation requiring remediation was introduced by those states most affected by strip mining (Office of Surface Mining Reclamation And Enforcement 1977). At a national level, legislation was passed later to regulate new mines, for which reclamation plans were to be filed in advance of excavation. Industrialized countries around the world followed similar paths.

But what might reclamation mean for the design of a site? Well, here is the point of divergence. Most early reclamation projects sought to emphasize utility. Abandoned mine sites, land from which mineral wealth had been literally extracted and exhausted, were to be refurbished to accommodate other uses. One such proponent of reclamation, typical of his times, wrote, “The success of the reclamation must be judged by the benefits ... of permanent use.” (Knabe 1964, 75) In all cases the value of reclamation depended upon a continued ethos of human exploitation, so that purely environmental considerations had little weight in planning the reclamation efforts.

But by the late 1960’s, as greater ecological awareness encouraged an appreciation for natural systems in their own right, alternative reclamation paradigms emerged. Instead of “remediation,” one might speak instead of a “Return to Eden.” In this approach, mined land is to be returned to its original state. And there’s an obvious logic to this thinking. This logic made the process of legislation somewhat smoother than before, since “fixing” something is easy to for politicians to explain and to support. Furthermore, growing interest in the preservation and stewardship of existing natural reserves encouraged the hope that remediated sites could even someday join them as wilderness.

At first glance, to return land to its original state seems an unassailable goal. But certain technical issues arise which point to theoretical problems. First of all: what is the “original” state of any landscape? After all, both physical circumstances and cultural perceptions are dynamic. To which point in a landscape’s long ecological or geological history should conditions be returned? Second: even if one were to identify an original ecology among all the others throughout the history of a site, how could that system be re-created now that surrounding conditions themselves have changed? How could original plant species be sustained if the supporting zoology no longer exists? How could indigenous animal species be re-introduced within the boundaries of a ridiculously reduced habitat? A third technical problem has to do

with a site's *existing* condition: How can any ecosystem be re-established upon terrain whose geological make up is now, at best, denuded or – at worst – poisoned?

All these challenges are non-trivial, but they can be overcome in practice, if not in principle. So if a former mine site is restored with *any* viable ecosystem, who would be so curmudgeonly as to complain? This is the point of many environmental ethicists: no one would, and no one does. And so today's proposals for reclamation serve paradoxically the interests of those mining companies who seek fresh ground to disturb. A public which clamors for cheap goods and continued employment by those same companies will embrace fully any proposal by which "out of sight" will result in "out of mind."

But there are other, alternative approaches which seek to keep many of these problems both in sight and in mind. A genre of site-specific installation called "Reclamation Art" emerged in the late 1960's, along with the expansion of artists' working interests beyond traditional spaces like museums, galleries, and studios. Contemporary art's general reorientation towards themes with greater social awareness dovetailed well with new critical perspectives about mining, industry, and the human use of nature. Among early figures in these efforts were Robert Smithson, his wife Nancy Holt, and – from another angle – Robert Morris. Since that time, the use of reclamation sites as loci for critical comment has become an industry of its own, with considerable resonance among both critics and public alike.

Nevertheless, mainstream civil engineering still maintains a kind of distance from Reclamation Art. There's a flawed relationship between these fields, but the problem rests *not* with the artists. Instead, professionals who work with or think about "The Planned World" should adapt, in part, these artists' engagement with such sites as *objets trouvés*, the perceived character of which taps our broader society's pained awareness of a damaged environment. Can we maintain that awareness through the entire trajectory of these sites' remediation? Can a circumstance of situational irony, where recent history has formed our shared attitudes towards these landscapes, be turned constructively for its own integration within future landscapes?

These are *not* rhetorical questions. For why else to do we make plans?

Speaking "Landscape Vernacular" (An Encounter with Butte, Montana): The example of Butte, Montana, is especially evocative. The city is famous as America's premier boom-or-bust mining town. Aerial views of Butte make obvious the spiritual and geographical heart of the city: Berkeley Pit, a one-thousand seven-hundred foot hole-in-the-ground from which about one billion tons of material was extracted since its opening in 1955. A recent conference there had asked participants to consider mining, as part of what is often called, "the vernacular landscape." But often this term is taken for one thing and not for another. "Vernacular landscape" usually means the collection of man-made structures which extend over the terrain, defined either geographically, historically, or as a locus of connected places. The phrase emphasizes those structures outside the canons of architectural history, and means more than anything the ordinary buildings conceived and used by so-called ordinary people. Examples might include mine shelters, engineering structures, company-built housing, and post-industrial adaptations of those same buildings.

But for conference organizers, the "vernacular landscape" did *not*, actually, mean the terrain itself, even if most other definitions of landscape would. And this distinction evoked, if nothing else, an appreciable irony. What else should be the most prominent backdrop for "ordinary" man's experience in Butte, if not an enormous hole in the ground -- and not some tool shed up on the rim?

That rhetorical question may be followed by this direct one: Rather than a "vernacular landscape," can we speak instead of a "landscape vernacular," taken to mean a visual language with which we might work through our planning and design? In other words, "vernacular" like the speech of the people of a place, "vernacular" akin to a speech-of-the-terrain derived from the landscape's current state and not as it was long ago ... or as in fact it *never* was, except in our selectively-constructed memories.

A few caveats are in order. A "landscape vernacular" should not be limited to the visual, although this account is biased towards primarily visual experience. But design for the landscape needs to engage the entire palette of animal senses as well as the life of physical systems which may not even be perceived by us. Design for the landscape, however defined, must also connect the complex web of relationships among wildlife, botany, geology, hydrology, and so on. For any designer, working towards a "landscape vernacular" should mean to reach beyond the normal boundaries of one's limited perception,

that is to say, one's own obvious, experiential center. With reference to Butte, or to any of thousands of similar sites worldwide, speaking "landscape vernacular" may be a matter of saying many things at once, so that the strongest, most obvious associations may trade places on occasion with others. A "landscape vernacular" needs, in fact, an *ironic* voice, the better to sustain the presence of critique within acceptance.

Speaking "Landscape Vernacular" (Aronson's Negev Phosphates): A plausible example might be a project by Shlomo Aronson, in the Negev Desert not far from the Dead Sea. This project may be interesting mostly because it embodies troublesome issues about reclamation as much as it solves them.

Although desert landscapes are today understood to be complex ecosystems, like all others, for generations this area in the south of Israel was considered barren, even by the standards of the neighboring arid regions. But, as in the American southwest, mineral deposits attracted large-scale industries to extract and exploit those resources. Originally, and for decades after, open-pit mining was the usual course of business at these sites. And, as elsewhere, on-going destruction of even this remote and forbidding region drew public attention, which subsequently forced the company involved to draw up a plan for remediation. Aronson writes in his monograph that he conceived a "strategy (which) calls for a new mining procedure that eliminates the open pits by filling them in once the phosphates are removed. The plan determines the area, slope, and shape of fill deposits, which echo the surrounding crescent-shaped geological formations." (Aronson 1998, 138)

Aronson's premise is immediately discernable: to make use of what is typically waste material for immediate reintegration into the site. Here, the re-graded forms are mimetic, yet abstracted. They evoke the surrounding topography, but their relationship falls well short of mimicry. This is not "fake nature," but something else – quote, "a gigantic environmental sculpture," unquote, as Aronson himself calls it. In fact, there is nothing natural about these new forms, but they do seem consistent with what I've called the "landscape vernacular" of the surrounding terrain. With some technical attention to hydrology, water flow for those occasions of flash flooding, and the fill material's angle of repose, Aronson's designs for Negev Phosphates may have more in common with urban planning than with the usual approach to mine reclamation. So be it: these land forms' attraction for me appears significantly rooted in the possibility of a different kind of intrinsic value – based on human gesture – with which to supplement the value of nature now only residually present around the site's periphery.

The influence of a generation of land art, site-installation art, and Reclamation Art seems more than visible in Aronson's approach – it seems to be crucial, even though Aronson's design is not, strictly speaking, a work of art. Indeed, the project conforms clearly to the professional definitions of Landscape Architecture. But like examples of Reclamation Art, these recent interventions for Negev Phosphates may approach what Thomas Heyd saw in Robert Morris' work from the late '70s: to make us "reflect on the denatured character of the place. Paradoxically, the work transforms the site while it also preserves its history. This reclamation... turns the immolation of nature into beauty – while putting that same immolation on view." (Heyd 2007, 120)

One might infer from this example that remediation is most easily conceived when the surrounding landscape is itself desolate. Certainly, some of the poetry of Aronson's gesture depends upon the visual correspondence between mined sites and desert landscapes. But, instead, another way of interpreting Aronson's work might be proposed: speaking landscape vernacular, while remediating an injured ecological system, should still resonate with man's mark – like the trace, perhaps, of a palimpsest which can never fully be eradicated.

The Irony of Intervention: So where is irony in all this? In our negotiation of this palimpsest, through each of its layers. The critic Douglas Muecke, like so many others before him, was hesitant to pin down a definition of irony when he wrote, "the art of irony is the art of saying something without really saying it. It is an art which gets its effects from below the surface." (Muecke 1969, 5) As an easy simile for mining, Muecke's comment is hard to resist. But his tentative definition points usefully towards irony's rhetorical mechanism. Linda Hutcheon has written that "irony is an interpretive and intentional move: it is the making or inferring of meaning in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an attitude toward both the said and the unsaid." (Hutcheon 1994, 11) Hutcheon's point emphasizes the presence of interpretation as a partner in irony's construction. Her definition also quite nicely identifies

the significance of one's attitude towards what is said (or visible) and what is understood (or perceived). Coming across the Negev Phosphate works, or upon a city like Butte, one may easily put together alternative and conflicting narratives concerning its condition, but one must acknowledge conflicting attitudes, too. Prosperity or exploitation? Transient contamination or permanent destruction? Urgency or ... "just get over it"? Can a final choice be made among them? Should there be?

Planning our world has always been bedeviled with ongoing antinomies. Choose one narrative, exclude another, but then exclusion becomes a front-page story before long. No single interpretation of our man-made landscape remains dominant. As it turns out, writers who have studied irony have always come up against just such an interpretive regression, which can appear to be infinite. (See de Man 1996, or Alford 1984.)

Much of the substance of what I've called an "interpretive regression" depends upon an ironist's intention. Usually, the regression goes like this: did the speaker mean what he or she said, or was the statement meant ironically? Then, does the use of irony itself allude, ironically, to another meaning? And so on. Although classical writers like Quintilian expressed little interest in this problem, European critics and philosophers grew frustrated by irony's potential instability. If perceiving irony is to perceive a so-called "hidden" meaning, the possibility of other ironic meanings seemed to assure only chaos or, "error, madness, and stupidity, in all its forms." (de Man 1996, 184) Readers familiar with Romantic literature will anticipate that it was Friedrich Schlegel who most famously embraced irony's difficulty as a positive, almost universal principle. Schlegel's take on irony depended on its very instability. He wrote, for instance, "[Irony] contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication." (Schlegel 1991, 13) Schlegel elsewhere connected the positive character of the infinite directly to ironic speech. Georgia Albert has written that Schlegel defined infinity as, "the possibility that opposed and mutually contradictory elements might be present at the same time." (Albert 1993, 827) and cites his comment that, "(w)ho has a sense for the infinite... utters, when he expresses himself decisively, nothing but contradictions." (Schlegel 1991, 83) These verbal games seem far-removed from our physical environment

But when we encounter the effects of strip mining, we see little which jibes with our expectations, whether they're about scale, about ecology, or about shelter for the human animal – or for any other. A place like the pit near Butte, Montana, is *way* outside our comfort zone, both literally and figuratively. We fail to grasp these landscapes; we reject their painful history; we demand their erasure. Yet we perceive – that is, we do know, at some level – that our own, familiar way of life is based inextricably upon their creation. This dissonance is no doubt properly perceived as ironic; but our response should be no less so. We would do well to grapple, like Schlegel, the impulse towards contradiction in designing for our lives and our landscapes.

Finis: In keeping with this ironic turn, two images come to mind not from the 21st century but from the 16th. These are Philibert de l'Orme's allegorical wood cuts, The Bad Architect and The Good Architect. In discussions of Renaissance-era architectural treatises, these pictures often used to illustrate the prescriptions of that period's novel architecture, called (with no intended irony at that time) *all'antica*. As allegory, de l'Orme's intention is obvious. He characterizes the old, medieval ways as blind and inept; the Bad Architect has no eyes and no hands. (de l'Orme 1567, 281) The landscape through which the Bad Architect is stumbling is remarkable, too, for it is relatively barren, apparently desolate, and subject to stormy weather.

But, today, perhaps one should replace the traditional reading of de l'Orme for an ironic one. How strange that this terrain is so similar to all the attractive clichés of the American West, to deserts throughout the world, or even to a mining landscape! How familiar is that "vernacular" structure, which stands in resilient contrast to the bombastic classical buildings proudly promoted by the so-called Good Architect! Where are we today, from the standpoint of environmental design, that we might usefully reverse de l'Orme's original designations – good and bad – to afford a narrative more appropriate for the future? One doesn't need to be a post-modern literary critic to suggest even that blindness (that is, the de-emphasis of the visual and of one's privileged interpretive perspective) may be a way forward towards insight. We find ourselves, all too often, squarely but blindly in a landscape for now despoiled by our

planning's acclaimed "best practices." What's next is likely to be neither Urban nor Rural, and it certainly will *not* be Wild. But it will be, inevitably, our own.

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