Sustainability Studio: Terrain Vague Revisited

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"AN EDITOR OF ONE OF THE AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE JOURNALS RECENTLY APPROACHED A PROMINENT CANADIAN ARCHITECT. THE EDITOR WANTED TO PRODUCE A PROFILE ON THE FIRM'S WORK AND REQUESTED A PHOTOGRAPH OF HER AND HER PARTNER FOR THE PIECE. THE FOLLOWING WEEK THE OWNER OF THE FIRM MAILED OFF A PHOTOGRAPH OF EVERYBODY IN THE FIRM, ABOUT TWELVE PEOPLE, INCLUDING THREE OR FOUR SUMMER INTERNS. WHEN THE EDITOR RECEIVED THE PHOTO, HE TELEPHONED HER AND SAID HE JUST NEEDED A PHOTO OF HER AND HER PARTNER. THE OWNER REPLIED, 'IF YOU ARE WRITING A PROFILE ON OUR FIRMS WORK, THEN YOU WANT A PICTURE OF ALL OF US; THESE ARE THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE IT HAPPEN.' SHE DIDN'T SEND ANOTHER PHOTO, NOR DID SHE HEAR BACK FROM THE EDITOR REGARDING THIS MATTER. ABOUT FOUR MONTHS LATER, SHE RECEIVED A COPY OF THE OCTOBER ISSUE WITH PROFILES ON THREE FIRM'S WORK, INCLUDING HER OWN. TO HER SURPRISE, AS A LEAD TO THE ARTICLE, WAS A PICTURE OF HER AND HER PARTNER ONLY. SHE COULDN'T FIGURE OUT WHERE HE HAD GOTTEN IT, BUT AFTER PASSING THE PUBLICATION AROUND THE OFFICE, ONE OF THE SUMMER INTERNS HAD DISCOVERED THAT THE EDITOR HAD EXERCISED A 'CUT AND PASTE' COMMAND ON HIS COMPUTER, REMOVING THEIR HEADS FROM THE ORIGINAL PHOTO SHE HAD SENT."[1]

Design education at the end of the twentieth century has become an isolated, indoor activity,[2] disconnected from tangible experience, real problems and the cities we live and work. According to educator David Orr, a great deal of what passes for knowledge today is little more than abstraction piled on top of abstraction.[3] Design education is becoming increasingly distant from the outside world, increasingly formal and optic,[4] unfamiliar and afar, abstract and utopian - which literally means "nowhere."[5]

While we can readily acknowledge the motivations for and rewards of the normative design studio objective - the place to independently think the unthinkable, to imagine the unimaginable - there are some risks, some holes that may explain why some projects not so unexpectedly die. In contrast to the tendencies in design education to segregate intellect from its surroundings, this paper reinforces the idea that design studio teaching that engages the "uncontaminated magic" of everyday places moves closer to what is broadly termed sustainable design and/or sustainable practice.

This paper is structured into three parts. The first part, "Blind Spots in the Design Studio," describes some of the unsustainable characteristics or fault lines in contemporary design studio education. The second part, "Greening the Brownfield," presents various correspondence between the EPA and a prominent developer currently engaged in the Atlantic Steel Project, currently the largest brownfield development proposal in the United States. The third part, "Terrain Vague and the Everyday," discusses the problem of "form" in the context of sustainability and everyday urbanism.

Blind Spots in the Design Studio

Design studios are too often insulated from ordinary, everyday life. Studios isolated from the street continue to represent the normative model of studio instruction, where topics of investigation tend to promote theory without lived experience. Isolating design education from everyday life excludes a sustaining world rich in color and circumstance. Loss of real engagement with the everyday results in a number of blind spots in the design studio environment.

Blind Spot #1: Studio Seclusion

Isolating design from everyday life reinforces seclusion in the design studio. Detaching oneself from the world around them has a number of consequences. First, it places students at the center of the project and problem at hand, pushing the concerns of the other - neighborhood and community - to the edge. Second, it restricts design research from engaging the outside world. Research unaffected from the contaminated realism of the everyday remains confined, academic and narrow in scope, operating between the drawing board, the laptop, and the library. Third, design thinking is freed from reality and life's imperfections; design processes thus become abstract. Designing in isolation removes oneself from the impurities of everyday life, from the clutter of transmission lines, a warped 2x4, direction of the wind, height of a curb or a conversation on the street. Fourth, design itself is generally exercised as a precious, uncontaminated activity. Students retreat from the outside world, literally [en]closing themselves in the project. With a few sheets of plywood and a walkman, boundaries are constructed. In fact, some instructors encourage students to set up their studio environment like a home, complete with family photos, bookshelves, a refrigerator, and a sleeping bag.

Blind Spot #2: Objects and Signatures

Student work produced in isolation tends to be hygienic, injected with convoluted meaning usually illegible or indifferent to the public or inhabitant. Operating in a vacuum, the isolated project often takes the form of an object, a distilled artifact free of use, habitation, or ritual. The resultant work is pure signature, untarnished by the hands or voice of another. The work is predictable, usually untouchable, an end unto itself and therefore of no real consequence. It also happens to be the way architectural work is presented in most design publishing.

Isolated, nimble manipulations of form advances an agenda of individual authorship and overwhelms the concerns of the other.[6] Promoting seduction in lieu of substance or service, design processes disconnected from the street emphasize experimentation at the expense of possibility or purpose. Regardless of program or place, person or culture, studio projects that operate in seclusion are too often formally driven, automatic, and produced independently by a single author.

The form of [editorial] practice presented in the story at the top of this paper is characteristic of contemporary design publishing. It is also deathly, unsustainable and represents a kind of decapitation on collaboration... on design as a mode of social practice - a "sustaining, living process" of communication and exchange, cooperation and reciprocity between individuals, groups, and places.

Blind Spot #3: Traditional Programs

In design studios in many schools of architecture, sustainable or life support issues such as unemployment, crime, safety, economics, ecology, citizenship and the common good take a back seat to issues strictly interior to the formal discipline of architecture. "Instead of [architecture] being understood as interventions into the environment that bear social, economic, and political programs, architecture oscillates uneasily between self-expression and some form of effete cultural commentary."[7]

Architecture is never autonomous, never pure program.[8] Standalone, institutional typologies such as schools, libraries and museums continue to overwhelm the studio. While these building types are clear and familiar with a large collection of precedents, they usually conflict with the changing climate of program in everyday life. In today's city, the forces at play are multiple and multivalent where sustaining program types are warped, clouded, and/or fragmented by the concerns of the other. Recognizing the diverse activities and events of the everyday responds to the actual social, economic and political forces at play. In a sustainable studio, program is not autonomous or pure, but an assemblage of multiple, competing identities and agendas.

Blind Spot #4: Practice as a By-Product of Experts

Master plans, calculated axes, grid-iron subdivisions, boxed trees at 30' feet on center, neo-traditional styles, and other popular parochial perspectives perpetuated in many schools of design are often detached from the very forces that induce life in our everyday cities.

Urban critic Raymond Ledrut reminds us that the city is not an object made by one group in order to be sold and used by others. The city is not defined by a collection of neutral, isolated objects. For Ledrut, the sustainable city is an environment formed by the interaction and integration of different practices. Ledrut's definition of the city as the product of social practice strongly opposes the notion of the city as the by-product of experts.[9] A sustainable studio is an architectural project that comprises a dynamic collaboration of people and places, energies and exchanges of all types.

Greening the Brownfield

The executive architect of the "smart growth" proposal of the 138-acre Atlantic Steel brownfield site in Atlanta, Georgia, was recently quoted saying, "This project is BIG enough to make a real difference." The question here, of course, centers on the notion of bigness, and raises several fundamental, and potentially frightening, questions. How big is big enough? Is size, in the end, the criteria that leads to real difference? And, what kind of real difference is he talking about anyway?

Brownfield development is the new, uncharted, ripe terrain for consumption and profit in cities, and it is worth revealing some of the activity that is taking place in the name of sustainability. The following material describes the proposal and the correspondence between the developer and EPA.

The Atlantic Steel redevelopment is a mixed-use, to use Calthorpe's term, "transit-oriented development" on a 138 acre brownfield site in midtown Atlanta. Combining 3,600 residential units, 6.25 million square feet of retail and entertainment space, and 1,000 hotel rooms, Jacoby Development is creating what they title a new "urban livable community."

To provide adequate auto and transit access, the site plan requires construction of a multi-modal (cars, pedestrians, bicycles, transit linkage) bridge across Interstate 75/85 to connect the site to MARTA – our subway system - and highway ramps to improve highway access. The construction of the bridge is a City of Atlanta zoning requirement for the project, in the spirit of inter-neighborhood connectivity and mass transit access and usage.

Unfortunately, Atlanta is currently out of compliance with federal air quality conformity requirements because it failed to demonstrate that its transportation activities will not exacerbate existing air quality problems. In a conformity lapse under the Clean Air Act, the bridge and ramps would be prohibited under standard interpretation of EPA regulations. However, projects which are approved as "transportation control measures" (TCMs) in a states air quality plan can proceed – even during a conformity lapse.

Jacoby Development regards Atlantic Steel to be a TCM, and proposes that EPA exercise its regulatory flexibility under Project XL and allow the project to go forward, arguing that the redevelopment would provide numerous environmental benefits, including tailpipe reductions. The developer's argument are fourfold:

1) Atlanta is one of the fastest growing regions in the US.
2) Growth in Atlanta has historically located in outlying suburbs – converting farm and forest land to housing and office parks. In fact, Atlanta has the longest average commute than any other city in the country. This project would centralize growth intown, where jobs, housing and entertainment destinations are close together, and walking, biking and transit are viable transportation options. The design is tailored to keep trips short and create multiple transportation options. The development is projected to reduce travel by more than 50 million miles per year with significant reductions in associated tailpipe emissions.
3) Additional environmental benefits include clean-up and redevelopment of an underused former industrial site, reductions in polluted stormwater run-off, and decreased development of open space at the metropolitan edge.
4) Development of Atlantic Steel would provide a tax base for the city, amenities for the neighborhood, and housing opportunities for buyers and renters, and economic opportunity for city residents and private industry. According to the developer, Atlantic Steel's multiple benefits are typical of Smart Growth.

If the project does not occur, greenfield sites would likely absorb much of the growth Atlantic Steel intends to serve. Continued industrial use of the site would likely contribute adversely to the overall environmental impact of the area. Shoud the bridge not be constructed, it is likely that the property would be developed as light industrial warehouse space with a "Big Box" retail tenant. If this project does not go forward, little if any remediation is expected to take place because sufficient resources do not exist to undertake the clean-up.

Jacoby Development hired the town planning firm, Duany Plater-Zyberk, to provide pedestrian friendly design suggestions after the initial site design by the executive architect raised objections from local community groups and citizens. These include: 1) construction of walkways and open areas to connect interior parts of the development; 2) extra-wide sidewalks; 3) realignment of streets to create direct connectivity between neighborhoods; 4) inclusion of a lake/park in the center of the development; 5) the distance from any edge of the development to transit services (e.g. shuttle) will be a reasonable walking distance: under 1100 feet, or walk of less than 5 minutes; 6) installation of sidewalk furniture, lighting and landscaping to encourage pedestrian use of the site.

According to the developer, the site design incorporates many "smart growth" site design principles. Two of them are described. 1) Features which promote pedestrian and transit access rather than exclusive reliance on the car. 2) Avoid creating areas that are abandoned and unsafe in the evening, hotels and offices will be located within walking distance of shops and restaurants, shops that serve local needs will be located within walking distance of both the Atlantic Steel site and the adjacent neighborhoods, and wide sidewalks will encourage walking and retail use.

In the name of "creativity and flexibility," Jacoby and EPA intend to determine the overall superior environmental benefits which will result from the project. According to the developer, the project could serve as a "model" of infill land development – an alternative to what is often referred to as "sprawl." As distinguished from sprawl, this "urban livable community" would result in moderate to high concentrations of residential and employment trip ends, a vertical and horizontal integration of land uses (residential above retail), and a highly interconnected vehicular, pedestrian and bicycle circulation system both within the development and to adjacent areas of midtown.

So things appear to be looking up, or do they? The argument here is that we need to think carefully about the implications of such big projects and the kinds of brownfield development that are being planned and built across the US today. We should be concerned for two reasons. First, there are large sums of federal subsidies available today for these projects – to develop property, which today means to order the land, build buildings, and lease space. The environmental cause and protest has opened monies to cities across the country to infill their intown property. Funds are available and developers, with politicians, architects, planners, and engineers, are knocking on the door. The question is how are these monies being spent, or more to the point, to quote Rubio, "building may be more the problem than the solution." Secondly, and more significantly, we need to think carefully about the social and spatial implications of such large development due to the kind of massive rationalization, organization, and transformation at play.

Terrain Vague and The Everyday

Discourse on the unsustainability of form – particularly as it applies to some of the more trouble parts of our cities - can be uncovered in an essay titled "Terrain Vague" by urban theorist Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, a conference presentation appropriately titled ANYPLACE. Rubio describes the role of the architect in the situation of the terrain vague - the post-industrial empty urban lot — as inevitably problematic. For Rubió, the architect is a colonizer and form is his instrument. He writes, "Architecture's destiny has always been colonization, the imposing of limits, order and form, the introduction into strange space of the elements of identity necessary to make it recognizable, identical, universal." Architecture, he follows, is an instrument of organization, rationalization, and of productive efficiency, capable of transforming the uncivilized into the cultivated, the fallow into the productive, the void into the built.[10]

But what is being built? What qualities of place will we experience and remember? When architecture projects its desire onto

[vacated] space, too often it seems capable of doing anything other than introducing violent transformations - introducing the foreign into the familiar, changing estrangement into citizenship, and striving at all costs to dissolve the "uncontaminated magic" of the site into a realism of efficacy. The introduction of the foreign, the unfamiliar, is, one may argue, problematic and unsustainable.

Rubió's concern of the weight and significance of "form" on place, on the city, echoes that of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. For Deleuze, architecture is forever on the side of forms, of the distant, the optical and the figurative. For individuals in the contemporary city, this is indeed problematic. Deleuze reminds us, "individuals in the city look for forces not forms, for the incorporated instead of the distant, for the haptic instead of the optic, the rhizomatic instead of the figurative, the real versus the representative."

Deleuze's description of the real surprisingly corresponds with recent discourse on the virtues of the everyday. Vibrant, pedestrian, full of flavor and energy, and fused within its surroundings, the everyday city is there and yet easily unnoticeable. Based on individual and group appropriation, and the tactical, often illegal use of public and private space, there are no doctrines, mandates, meta-narratives or master plans that define the everyday city. It is an aggregate of small pieces, a sustainable practice of place-making, respectfully added over time in mind of others, inscribed by the lives who live there.

Everyday urbanism is an ambiguous, discontinuous urban landscape of indefinite dimensions. Full of immeasurable flux and diversity, the everyday city is apparently unordered, unplanned and unsightly[11]. Operating from within, from lived experience, the urban form of the everyday city is loose, varied and generally undifferentiated from its surroundings. Everyday urbanism is defined not by an inventory of objects and discrete elements but by patterns of movement, exchange and reciprocity. Engaging the unfamiliar situational experience of the everyday by foot or conversation, in lieu of maps and cameras, will lead to real understandings not only of city but eventually sustainability.

Conclusion

Less than a month ago, EPA found that the Atlantic steel development will produce significantly less air pollution than an equivalent quantity of development at other sites in the region, and therefore can be considered a "Transportation Control Measure." On September 7, 1999, EPA and Jacoby Development signed a Final Project XL Agreement which will remove the barriers to construction of the Atlantic steel site, a "smart growth project" in Midtown Atlanta.

The contemporary place is not a ground, and the brownfield is not merely an environmental problem. The American brownfield today cannot be produced by the force of the Vitruvian firmitas. The issue is not whether building is the problem or the solution. It may be a question of who has control? Rubio concludes his essay by asking the central question, "How can architecture operate in the terrain vague without becoming an aggressive instrument of power, rationalization and abstract reason?" In other words, "How can the American brownfield be conceived and organized to respond and correspond with the qualities and behaviors of the everyday?" For what is the point, to quote urbanist Raymond Ledrut, "The true issue is not to make beautiful cities or well-managed cities, it is to make a work of life."[12]

ENDNOTES

1 Post-Lecture dinner conversation on collaboration, architectural practice, and design publishing with Patricia Patkau, of Patkau Architects.

2 This mirrors American society as a whole. Careful records of human time budgets show most people average only about one-and-a-half hours per day outside. See Jesse Ausubel, "The Liberation of the Environment," in S. Graubard, ed., *Daedalus* Vol. 125, No. 3 (Cambridge: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1996), p. 14.

3 David Orr, "Place and Pedagogy," in D. Orr *Ecological Literacy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 125

4 For example, the effects of information technology representation on architectural design.

5 David Orr.

6 See Exhibition Catalogue of "The Los Angeles Service Station Project," Norman Millar and Chris Jarrett, Co-Directors.

7 See Introduction by Diane Ghirardo in Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture, D. Ghirardo, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), p. 10.

8 Bernard Tschumi, "Program," in *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), p. 3.

9 Raymond Ledrut, "Speech and the Silence of the City," in *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Urban Semiotics*, eds. M. Gottdiener and A. Lagopoulos (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 122.

10 Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, "Terrain Vague" in *ANYPLACE* (New York: Rizzolli Press), p. 122.

11 Andrea Kahn, "Working from the Ground Up: Programming the Urban Site," Harvard Architectural Review (New York: Rizzoli Press, 1996), pp. 54-71.

12 Ibid.