

04. ASSEMBLAGE

One

The notion of assemblage has been used in a number of disciplines to describe a collection of different types of objects and relations that act on, and with, each other to form a dynamic arrangement or organization of material conditions. In archeology, for instance, assemblage identifies a collection of diverse things unearthed by a dig, that “hang together” not only through their having been discovered on the same strata, but through their expression of some aspect of a life (or lives) that has brought the specific things together in the first place. Bowls, cups, bones and figurines express a certain condition of everyday life-ness in pre-Columbian Mexico. In geology, assemblage refers to “a group of fossils that, appearing together, characterize a particular stratum” (Wise 2005: 77). There is a contingency to the arrangement of fossils that might be discovered on a stratum, but it is not random, as only certain animals existed in that form in that location at that time. The fossils constitute a *group* and express a certain *character* (ibid.). In art of the 20th century the word assemblage is a term associated with collage, Dada and other avant-garde or pop art styles, designating works assembled out of diverse objects (like Duchamp’s Bicycle Wheel and Jean Arp’s *Trousse d’un Da*, an assemblage of driftwood, paint and found board). The later work of Frank Stella also has qualities of assemblage, using painted materials such as magnesium, fiberglass and aluminum on one canvas. Tinguely’s drawing machines (“meta-matics”) introduce the elements of time and productivity, as they actually make drawings (Hulten 1975: 80). They are mechanical ecosystems.

Two

Landscape architects are most likely to have come across the word assemblage with reference to ecology, where it refers to a biological community of organisms living in a localized area of habitat. All animals and plants associate themselves with particular combinations of environmental conditions. In so doing they form part of a biological community that includes plant, animal, bird, reptile and insect species as well as themselves. A biotic community is an assemblage of organisms living together and interacting. A lizard assemblage (say) is a sub-unit of such a community. Biotic communities and their component assemblages are without rank and scale. A reptilian assemblage, for instance, could be as small as a dead log, or it could be the entire forest floor. It could even be the rainforest itself. (Heatwole and Taylor 1987: 185). Important aspects of ecological assemblages are the numbers and kinds of species they contain, and how these structural characteristics change in space and time in relation to environmental conditions. Different lizard species can comprise an assemblage: at any one location it is possible to identify an assemblage that contains half a dozen species of lizard. The nature of the habitat is an important determinant of assemblage structure. The more diverse the vegetation, and the more complex the geometry of the habitat, the greater the number of spatial niches available, and the greater the species richness that is possible.

Three

The idea of assemblage has been extended and enriched through the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Their work has particular appeal to landscape architects as it adds a temporal

dimension to the physical, spatial and territorial aspects of the term. The French word they use is *agencement*, which does not refer to a static condition, but rather to a “putting together” or “laying out,” or “fitting.” An *agencement* is not so much an arrangement or organization as a process of arranging, organizing, fitting together. This is very much like the process of organizing landscape encounters. Moreover, for Deleuze and Guattari, assemblages create territories. They actually make the milieux in which they thrive. These milieux are much more than spaces, involving a sense of belonging to, and causing change within; they do something – stake a claim, express a relation or set of relations.

Four

Assemblages are as much about intensive qualities as they are about extensive qualities. That is to say, how something occurs is as important as what occurs. Not just: the lizard ate the insect, but a lizard-insect event occurred when the sun was at its highest and the wind was in the west. Or, in order to maximize heat gain the lizard perches on three legs on a twig in the morning and lies flat on a rock in the afternoon. A garden is a composition of non-metrical spaces and properties defined by the speed of plant growth, the seasonal temperature gradient, the filtration rate of water through the soil and daily variations in light and shade, that produces metrical spaces and properties such as the area of lawn where the water pools, the distance between perennials in the understory, the massing of hedges and shrubs.

Five

As well as being material, however, assemblages are discursive. They are systems of signs. “Archeological assemblages are not just the things that are dug up and their qualities and relations, but the discursive assemblages through which the things, qualities and relations are expressed through nomenclature, jargon and the semiotics of the dig: the semiotic system that transforms a cup into a particular type of cup” (Wise: 80). The discursive element refers to the way in which the assemblage enters into discourse: how it is described, framed, and allocated meaning. The evolution of an assemblage includes the discursive component in the ongoing rearrangement of connections. For instance, a landscape condition such as a small urban park, which assembles a wide range of species and their interactions (birds and bread; squirrels and spilled grain; residents in summer shade feeding birds and watching squirrels) may feature in a community discussion about housing development. Future states of the assemblage and its components could hinge on the outcome of this discussion, which may have to do with the evaluation of the terrain with respect to different criteria: tidiness, economic inputs and outputs (maintenance, use as a concession site), inhabitation by homeless people, and so on. Humans, in fact, just as nonhumans, may participate in many assemblages at the same time. They may make new ones, and transform existing ones, bending and twisting them into new conditions. Humans enter into an assemblage through a process of taking on the conditions that make it up. It’s like going to stay with some relations for a few weeks. You take on their patterns of inhabitation, their speeds, their directions and connections, their patterns of everyday life.

Six

Assemblages are always emergent. Their dynamic components can be characterized according to their material content, their expressive content, and the processes in which they become

involved. A landscape assemblage might be composed in the following way (adapted from De Landa 2006):

Material components

soil, sunlight, trees, animals, humans, water, walls, paths ...

Expressive components

forms, textures, colors, habits, trajectories of the material components, such as plant growth and shadow gradients

Process components

food chains, adaptive traits, microclimatic requirements that maintain the components and their relationships, and thus the viability of the assemblage ...

Seven

Each of these components is subject to disturbance. For instance, a specific terrain's soil profile can be disturbed by flooding and the resultant sedimentation or erosion; climate change can affect the range of species that are involved in an assemblage; an exotic species can enter an assemblage of native species and redistribute its structural characteristics. A new regulation can require the removal of trees, or force a new road through an urban park. Disturbance gives rise to the recombination or reformulation of an assemblage by eliminating, replacing, or relocating relationships. Components can be unplugged from one assemblage and plugged into another without losing their identity, as when birds migrate, or seeds drift into the chinks between the bricks of a building, take root and grow. The relationship between an assemblage and its components is nonlinear. Assemblages are formed and affected by the populations and elements of lower-level assemblages, but may also act back upon these components, causing adaptive strategies to occur.

Eight

Landscape architects develop, transform and create assemblages. They do this by gathering, composing, redistributing, emphasizing and enhancing existing material, expressive and processual components. Included in this orchestration are human and nonhuman elements. Landscape architects may develop assemblages without prejudicing or privileging different components, with the objective of developing collectives of human and nonhuman objects and relations – with the objective, that is, of creating interactive, democratic ecologies of becoming. What is critical is that landscape architects assemble elements in such a way as to create a world in which it is possible for all components of the assemblage, human and nonhuman, to engender their own possibilities of existence – to become what they may become. Rocks, trees, insects, birds, animals and humans are regarded as having in common a fit relation to an assemblage that continually evolves through its encounters with disturbance.

Nine

While landscape assemblages may include ecological assemblages, they are not limited to them. Some of the most articulate and expressive landscape assemblages use social objects, events, signs and utterances to contain or extend the physical ones. Parc Andre Citröen in the 15th Arrondissement of Paris swings simultaneously between closure and movement. Designed by Gilles Clement and Alain Provost in the early 1990s, Parc Andre Citröen collects a wide range of heterogeneous components to create an integrated composition of landscape architecture structures and processes that weave back and forth between old-fashioned and new-fangled constructions of nature and society. Like many late modern landscapes (Parc de la Villette, Paris; Yorkville Park, Toronto; Mahuhu ki te Rangi Reserve, Auckland), it lays out combinatorial, collagist techniques of disjunctive juxtaposition and geometrical layering and ordering in plan, and a sculptural massing of cubes, cylinders, cones and extruded lines in elevation. The result is a self-consciously art-inflected arrangement of mineral and vegetal rooms, edges, planes and walls that can readily be modeled in three dimensions. Surrounded on three sides by the city and bounded on the fourth by the River Seine, the park has a large rectangular central lawn contained by a long canal to the west and a series of six small gardens to the east. Each of five of these "Jardins sériels" is associated with a metal, a planet, a day of the week, some aspect of hydrology, and one of the five mechanisms of human sensory perception. The sixth is devoted to the sixth sense. Adjacent to this last garden is "Le Jardin en Mouvement" – The Garden in Movement – a wild garden where the rigid geometry of the main areas of the park gives way to rose bushes, cornflowers, poppies, bamboos, balsams, digitalis, thorns, and weeds growing freely.

The sharp, figured delineation of static baroque landscape elements of Parc Citröen, such as the canal, the vast lawn, lines of trees clipped into platonic forms, and the six dynamic garden ecologies at once restates the binary nature / culture divide that has haunted landscape architecture and western society at large, and comments on this division. Visitors weave in and out of the enclosed gardens, at times totally immersed in intimate sensorial realms of touch, smell, hearing, vision and taste, and at others acutely aware that these sensations are framed within a composition that presents them as so many carefully disordered boxes of light and shade, bird and bee (one even has hives in it).

Ten

These emergent systems are set within a larger assemblage that produces a much wider range of affects. It draws on art history, botany, architecture, landscape design traditions; it pushes corridors and allées into its urban context of high rise apartments and offices, visually and spatially pulling these into its orbit: the city, the RER (the rapid rail system that services Paris and its suburbs), the River Seine, water moving in canals, splashing in fountains and pouring down sculptured walls. The six ecology gardens are simultaneously abundant and controlled. Cataloging, classifying, putting on display: a museology of open landscape systems. Parc Andre Citröen uses the material, expressive and processual components of a landscape assemblage spatially, formally and discursively. While at first the visitor sees division, between nature and culture, order and disorder, slowly this stratification breaks down and it becomes clear that nature is culture and culture is nature; order rises from disorder and chaos generates order. Emergence can be understood epistemologically, it reminds us, as well as ontologically.

