CURT GAMBETTA

FOR AN INTERFACE

I. The Assembly of Trash

Nature is a model of silence and of political accord organized according to a very particular architecture, as shown in Boullée's famous project for Newton's tomb. This assembly has disappeared. Which assembly, then, are we in now? This is what we must discover.[1]

The assembly of trash stands in contradistinction to the spatialization of public assembly. Public assembly conjures up images of spaces of debate, of assembly halls, constellations of furniture, urban voids, the piazza and the square, the sidewalk and the street, and so forth. A number of these images invoke spatial containers and enclosure. Others suggest the organic coming together of bodies without the predicate of a physical enclosure, as when strangers meet in the street, or chairs are assembled for a debate. Still, they are haunted by notions of enclosure or spatialization. Models of public life such as the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere *spatialize* collective exchange, as though it can be entered or left at will.[2] The historical consequences are discomforting: in order to enter into debate or exchange, disavowal of attachments, passions and questions of identity (such as race or gender) is requisite to 'participation' in spaces or processes of public exchange.[3]

Space does not precede the assembly of trash. It is inherently issue-driven. Attachments are not left at the door. Issues, John Dewey writes in The Public and It Problems, are what bring a public into being. Dewey's proposition is that matters of concern (think: *matter*) are the mill and grist of public life, rather than *a priori* expectations on behavior, citizenship or responsibility. An issue is public when the indirect consequences produced by actions in the world extend beyond those engaged in them. Attachment and belonging turn around issues and objects of interest. Where these interests fall spatially is contingent on the issue at hand, as is the public's very status as a collective body. When there is no interest, there is no longer a public. Public life is thus inherently transitory and always in motion because objects, like social formations, are inherently unstable and subject to change.

Garbage is an unwieldy material realm. The unintended consequences of waste-making are plentiful and are anathema to containment. Membrane walls leak, bins and dumpsters are harvested for food and recyclable materials, smell escapes. The assembly of trash is indifferent to the political space of the container. Perturbation occurs not within an *a priori* space of contact or debate, but at the unstable boundaries or gradients where toxins, smells and other effects erupt into sensory or bodily consequence.

Consider the case of McCarty Road landfill, sited in the northwest periphery of Houston. The contaminating seepage of smell, sound, dust and toxins stops neither at the landfill membrane nor the entrance gate to premises of the landfill. Rows of pipes line the perimeter of the landfill mound, spraying clouds of perfume in order to mediate the foul stench of freshly laid waste. The battle is Sisyphean, fighting odor with odor. The 'foul and the fragrant' each in their own right constitute soft boundaries whose limits and extents are changing according to direction of the wind or the quality of the air.[4] The bleeding of effects and consequences supersedes the sensible: Seagulls consume the landfill waste and ingest its toxins, travelling to adjacent neighborhoods and depositing the toxins through their shit. Abrasive sounds are shot through the air as a repellant, sounding off something like missiles or shrill cries. Mediation is not limited to warfare. Unintended consequences are also productive opportunities. Pipes remove scrubbed gasses from the landfill, sending methane to a number of nearby sources, including a brewery that powers its boilers with the gaseous by-products of Houston's consumption. Resource or not, the secondary effects of waste-making travel through animal hosts and ethers of water and air, drawing the surrounding landscape into an uneasy embrace.

Pipes, smells and the movement of toxins enmesh multiple forms of life with the machine of the landfill. Interfaces are made at both the line of enclosure *and* the attenuated consequences produced by the qualities or performance of that enclosure. Where does architecture participate in these vectors of contact? Though the assembly of trash is indifferent to the architecture of the container, architectures of containment, such as landfill membranes or waste bins, are crucial agents in larger processes or butterfly-effects around which an assembly gathers. Containers or enclosures of matter act as intense moments of mediation and control, making available particular consequences of decomposition and waste processing to the sensory or bodily terrain of daily life, while assuring that others remain shrouded and invisible. Here, architecture will potentially act as an important gatekeeper to the public life of wasted things, and to the conditions from which public life may, or may not, emerge.

II. The architectural encounter

Architecture as such rarely engages these questions about waste and public life. Moments where architectural projection is set to work in the representational or built world of waste infrastructure comprise a spare but insightful history, amounting to points of departure both outside and within its auspices. Just as it would be naïve to suggest that architecture determines social relations, it would be naïve to suggest that architecture is not implicated in social transformation, particularly when architecture is linked to matters of common interest and infrastructure such as garbage, sewage and water. What attitudes do the encounters between architecture and waste produce towards architecture as a mechanism of social innovation or mediation?

Early interfaces were decidedly infrastructural. Technologies such as asphalt or paving cast the space of the street as a hard and durable surface devoid of waste, impervious to decomposition and filth. Ground—dynamic, unpredictable and invasive—was the primary site of interface between waste-making and collective life. In eighteenth-century Paris, paving was invested with a "prophylactic potential," Rodolphe el-Khoury writes, drawing a close relationship between the architecture of surface and the health of the body.[5] The membrane of macadam, on which Baudelaire would stand and ponder the anxieties of modernity shielded the common space of the street in nineteenth-century Europe and colonial metropoles from the miasmatic gasses and moisture of the earth—then thought by the sanitary imagination to be responsible for menaces such as the plague and other illnesses.[6]

The deleterious emanations of the earth did not terminate at the surface of the ground. At different moments in the global staging of modern sanitation, the disease-bearing damp was also said to creep up into the built landscape of the city, positioning the wall as an extension of the earth.[7] Le Corbusier would later echo these concerns about the decay affiliated with the terrestrial in his "Five Points for a New Architecture" and projects such "Towns Built on Piles," suggesting that the building free up the ground plane for the stated purposes of decongestion and moistening concrete.[8] The consequences of proximity to the circuitry of decay were understood to be bodily as well as behavioral. In settings such as reform era Britain, the United States and elsewhere, the material world was invested with the power to shape human conduct and behavior.[9] To the sanitarian, the crowded and dirty quarters of the late 19th century city were more than a mere reflection of social ills. As dank, congested and rife with waste, the qualities of the urban environment bore direct consequences on the moral character of the individual and social bodies of its inhabitants. The built is figured not only as an expression but as a protagonist in the constitution of social life, a material substrate that would absorb, transfer and,

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Typically, the subject of architecture – human or non-human (in this case, the wasted object) – is represented in an indexical or imagistic fashion, but remains distant. In order to bring the weight and shape of wasted objects into suspended engagement with the audience of my Master's thesis presentation, I collected unwanted articles from a spectrum of material qualities and social uses. Each object is sealed in vacuum-formed plastic and set against a grid, underscoring its physical traits. To be handled and distributed.

if harnessed towards desirable goals, project outward new models of individual and collective life.

Waste re-entered the frame of architectural concern in the ecological turn of the 1970's. The garbage architecture culture of the 70's took up garbage as a material for architectural construction, exploring its use in low income housing and various settings at the supposed peripheries of the modern: communes, third world settings, etc.[10] Garbage architecture was proposed in the 1970's by Martin Pawley and others as a potential solution to the projected global housing and resource crises as well as a departure from the supposed mystification or reification of the design profession.[11] Much of the spirit of his project reverberates today in the discursive umbrella of sustainability and alternative building practices. Not unlike the recycling movement of the 1980's and 90's, the presence of waste in materials and techniques of construction was intended to produce a consciousness about consumerism and waste-making. The potential to transform social relations through an interface with waste was no longer an imagination of interface in the form of bodily infection, or moral pedagogy. Interface was forged by staging, through techniques of construction, a proximity to the inert objecthood of wasted things.

As a strategy, proximity to waste suggests multiple avenues of potential. What does it mean to engage the consequences of waste through process and not object alone? Process invokes program, and the bringing together of dissonant program into close proximity or friction recalls the concept of the social condenser, 'patented' by Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis: "Programmatic layering upon vacant terrain to encourage dynamic coexistence of activities and to generate through their interference, unprecedented events."[12] Mira Engler and Gina Crandell, in their project "Open Waste System Park" (1992), produce through collage, diagrammatic modeling and narrative an image of waste processing sited within the existing infrastructures of suburban life.[13] Rather than entering into 'vacant terrain,' new interfaces are staged or generated at the interstices of the ordinary. Minor infrastructures such as "roofed bins" and "transparent cases for collecting waste" are sited within and between existing infrastructures of daily life, such as the "grassy margin between the street and the sidewalk."[14] The intervention relies on narrative to suggest a finer grain of potential interface.

Much like Engler, Inaki Abalos and Juan Herreros stage new proximities in their imagination of public experience. Abalos and Herreros position a museum about waste processing in the heart of the Valdemingómez recycling plant on the outskirts of Madrid, immersing the subject in the machinery of waste processing. The interface with waste is pedagogical: the minor museum functions as a public intrusion whose presence at the heart of the plant contaminates the otherwise inaccessible program of the recycling plant. But their intervention exceeds the gesture of intrusion

or programmatic proximity. Typically, materials recovery facilities are dark, internalized structures that function as shelters to an independently configured materials recovery system. In Valdemingómez, the roof is lifted and configured along the same sectional lines as the gravity-driven machinery it houses, rendering what is normally an indifference between process and enclosure as a mutually responsive architecture. The materials recovery facility accomplishes a new awareness between the immense machinery of waste processing and the architectural machine.

For Abalos and Herreros, the urban periphery – an "area of impunity" – is an important public zone of social friction, regulated by infrastructure but relatively unmarked by the determinacy of the city.[15] Though the activities of daily life are contaminated by their contact with waste processing in the interventions of Engler and Abalos and Herreos, they are ultimately a retooling or extension of existing 'public' infrastructure, rather than an intrusion into more private domains, such as the home. Much of the architecture of daily life remains intact and is unaltered by the interface. What is public and what is private remain relatively stable spatial spheres. Consequently, the machinery of waste processing is only gently reconfigured or exposed by the orchestration of sensible contact. How might the awareness and interaction that Valdemingómez intimates function, if brought back from the urbanism of the periphery and into the mechanics of daily life? What kind of consequences might a shift from the peripheral and invisible to the urban and interfacial have for an architecture of public life?

[1]Latour, Bruno, "There is No Terrestrial Globe," in *Cosmograms*, ed. Melik Ohanian (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2005), 217-218.

[2]Mah, Harold, "Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians," *The Journal of Modern History 72: 1, New Work on the Old Regime and the French Revolution: A Special Issue in Honor of Francois Furet* (March 2000): 153-182.

[3]Fraser, Nancy. 1992. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed., Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 109-142.

[4]The phrase 'the foul and the fragrant' is borrowed from the title of Alain Corbin's book, *The Foul and the Fragrant, Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).