

© [2020]

Samuel Ferrara

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

THE CONTEMPORARY SUBLIME:  
PROGRESSING THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT RELATIONSHIP

By

SAMUEL FERRARA

A thesis submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Master of Landscape Architecture

Graduate Program in Landscape Architecture

Written under the direction of

Anette Freytag

And approved by

---

---

---

---

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May, 2020

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Contemporary Sublime: Progressing the Human Environment Relationship

by SAMUEL FERRARA

Thesis Director:  
Anette Freytag

The environmentalist movement faces a number of obstacles in acquiring greater support from the general public. One of these obstacles is the challenge of overcoming the tendency to overlook the landscape as just background scenery. Furthermore, many aspects of environmental damage operate at scales that the average person does not usually encounter or contemplate, making it challenging to discern the proper degree of urgency for the issue at hand. Finally, the way in which these messages are represented can prove to be a challenge in their own right, in that they are required to convey important stories regarding the health of the natural environment in a way that people can understand and engaged with. This thesis looks to address the question of how it might be possible to confront and address serious environmental issues in a manner that would be engaging for the public.

This thesis argues that this might be accomplished through a revival of the philosophical idea of the sublime updated for a contemporary context. Sublime landscapes that are informed by contemporary aesthetics can help people grasp the severity of environmental degradation on an emotional level and trigger changes in their behavior. Departing from the ideas of the philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-1797) this

thesis establishes a basic understanding of what exactly is meant by the sublime or the experience of said phenomena.

In order to adequately address the problems facing the contemporary environment, it is important to consider the cultural understanding of landscapes to detect what implications this might hold for the sublime. Historically, the relationship between people and wilderness in the United States of the colonial era has been antagonistic or hostile. Burke's theory was born out of the same attitude. However, this bifurcated relationship between people and the natural world is not the only way in which one can relate to the landscape. Increasingly, people understand the natural world as integral to their own well-being. A contemporary sublime therefore, would necessitate an adjustment in regards to what sort of landscapes can inspire an experience of the sublime. By understanding our interdependence and interconnectedness with the natural world, the contemporary sublime can therefore also include landscapes that convey a sense of threat or danger to the natural environment.

This thesis proposes a concept of a contemporary sublime and examines several case studies in which this theoretical idea might be best applied. These cases demonstrate a spectrum in which an experience of the contemporary sublime has or has not been attempted, ranging from instances in which it is essentially absent to examples found of this idea present. These examples include the case of *Fresh Kills Park*, New York, where it can be seen that the potential for a contemporary sublime experience could be present, but has been overlooked in favor for a more conventional park. The second case study looks at the design efforts in *Welzow Süd*, Germany. This case serves as an example of a substantial effort to preserve a landscape experience of the contemporary sublime that

was unable to come to fruition. The final case of *The Quarry Garden* in Shanghai Botanical Garden, serves as the best example of a landscape design that preserves this idea of a contemporary sublime experience. Each of the locations selected has experienced some degree of environmental degradation as a direct result of human practices, the impacts of which have left visible scars on the landscape which can be directly observed. This thesis argues that through framing (or re-framing) the narrative of these places as examples of a contemporary sublime landscape, these locations can function more effectively as mediums which can convey powerful environmental messages to the general public in a meaningful way.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis adviser Dr. Anette Freytag. I cannot tell you how important your support has been through this process. Your enthusiasm, advice and guidance in this project have helped to make this the most enriching experience of my academic career. I would also like to thank my committee members, Arianna Lindberg, David Smith and Dr. Nate Gabriel. This project has benefited tremendously from all of your unique perspectives and fields of expertise. I truly appreciate all of the patience and assistance you have offered. Finally, I would like to thank my family, cohort and Blake Hall comrades. The encouragement you all have offered has proven nothing short of essential.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments .....	v
List of Illustrations .....	viii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1 .....	7
1.1: Original Theory.....	7
1.2: Exemplary Illustration .....	12
1.3: Sublime in Narrative.....	15
1.4: Geography .....	16
1.5: In National Parks .....	17
1.6: Summation .....	25
Chapter 2 Changing Perspectives .....	27
2.1: Interpreting the Landscape .....	27
2.2: Historic Perspectives .....	28
2.3: Alternative Thinking .....	33
2.4: Landscape Architecture .....	36
2.5: Summation .....	43
Chapter 3 Sublime In Situ .....	46
3.1: Contemporary Challenges .....	46
3.2: Fresh Kills .....	48
3.3: Fresh Kills Program .....	52
3.4: Fresh Kills Art .....	57

3.5: Fresh Kills Issues .....	61
3.6: Lusatia Germany .....	67
3.7: Lusatia Reimagined .....	71
3.8: Lusatia Issues .....	74
3.9: Quarry Garden .....	79
3.10 : Concluding thoughts .....	85
Image Credits.....	88
Bibliography.....	91



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<i>Fig. 1 Studio of Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, circa 1769 .....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Fig. 2. Caspar David Friedrich, The Wanderer Above A Sea Of Fog, circa 1817 .....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Fig. 3. Jacob W. Frank, Double Arch, Arches National Park, .....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Fig. 4. Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir, 1906.....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Fig. 5. Thomas Cole, View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm, 1836.....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Fig. 6. John Gast, American Progress, 1872 .....</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Fig. 7. The American Landscape Architect, James Rose (1913-1991).....</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>Fig. 8. Charles A. Birnbaum, James Rose Center Front Pathway, 2017 .....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>Fig. 9. Mitsu Yasukawa, James Rose Center Tree Patio, 2017.....</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>Fig 10. Field Operations Design Team, Fresh Kills Context Map, 2005.....</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>Fig. 11. Chester Higgins, Garbage Scows bring Solid waste to Fresh Kills, 1973 .....</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Fig. 12. Field Operations, Fresh Kills Master Plan Overview, 2006.....</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Fig 13. Field Operations, Ariel View of the Point .....</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Fig. 14. Field Operations, View of Picnic Ground near the Travis Neighborhood Park Entrance.....</i>	<i>53</i>
<i>Fig. 15. Field Operations, View of Horseback Trials on South Mound.....</i>	<i>54</i>
<i>Fig. 16. Field Operations, Aerial View of the Nature Education Area in East Park.....</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>Fig. 17. Field Operations, View of the September 11 Earthwork.....</i>	<i>56</i>
<i>Fig. 18. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Morphing Time Lines: Energy, 2006.....</i>	<i>58</i>
<i>Fig. 19. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Discovery Center, 2006.....</i>	<i>58</i>
<i>Fig. 20. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “Public Offerings”, 2006 .....</i>	<i>59</i>

<i>Fig. 21. Field Operation, Fresh Kills Park Draft Master Plan Illustration, 2006.....</i>	<i>62</i>
<i>Fig. 22. Fresh Kills park conceptual sketch: Plan view.....</i>	<i>64</i>
<i>Fig. 23. Fresh Kills park conceptual sketch: Section.....</i>	<i>65</i>
<i>Fig. 24. Lusatia Region Map.....</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>Fig. 25. Osha Gray Davidson, Welzow Süd opencast lignite mine .....</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>Fig. 26. Concept Illustration of Welzow- Süd “Desert Oasis” .....</i>	<i>73</i>
<i>Fig. 27. Aris Tsantiropoulos, Mining landscape with a view of Schwarze- Pumpe power station, 2006.....</i>	<i>74</i>
<i>Fig. 28. Benjamin Pritzkeleit, On a tour of the active mine Welzow Süd, 2008 .....</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>Fig. 29. Yao Chen, Quarry Garden Site Plan .....</i>	<i>81</i>
<i>Fig. 30. Yao Chen, Quarry Garden in Shanghai Botanical Gardens .....</i>	<i>82</i>

## Introduction

Environmentalists face a number of problems that prevent more people from joining their ranks. First, there is the matter of perspective. The average person is wrapped up in a preconceived notion that the natural world is only scenery, background, or the setting in which one's life takes place. The pressures of modern society, in which we are increasingly enthralled by technological advancements and digital landscapes, provides the perfect circumstances for an individual to dismiss the physical realities present in the natural world. In light of such conditions, it is hardly surprising that the landscape is perceived as being tangential or decorative.

Not only is the landscape easily overlooked, but comprehension of it is incredibly difficult. Factually, there is a plethora of knowledge available for public consumption. In this age of information, virtually limitless information can be accessed and fewer and fewer people are prohibited from learning. Indeed, one can swim through a sea of information, teeming with scholarly articles, facts and Figs, charts and tables. The problem is not a lack of content, but a lack of understanding. Part of this lack of understanding comes from the challenge of scale. Many environmental disasters, catastrophes or the like operate at scales that go far beyond the human. It is one thing to know that the polar ice caps are melting it is a very different thing to comprehend the severity of the issue the sheer mass of the ice, the tremendous speed at which they are disappearing or the connections this landscape has to the broader ecological community. Numeric value is of little help here as the numbers one assigns to these relationships are nearly as foreign and abstract as the concepts themselves. They paint a picture in which the viewer has no frame of reference. The lack of intensity, results in a lack of a sense of

scale. Ultimately, one can be well versed in this quantitative information and remain relatively indifferent to the issue at hand.

Compounding this issue, one is further challenged by their immediate surroundings that reinforce a very different narrative. It is difficult to take seriously the facts and statistics, when the landscape one operates in appears to be functioning. Unable to see the damage that is taking place, an individual might develop a false sense of security where a strong sense of urgency is needed.

To exacerbate this problem, people are confronted with the added issue of aesthetics. Should one push through these already cumbersome obstacles in sympathy to the environmental cause, one is greeted not with a sense of accomplishment or satisfaction, but one of negativity. A conscientious, responsible individual willing to educate themselves on the pressing situation is met with a barrage of literature that is often dry, technical and void of emotion, or bleak, dismal and depressing. While these may be two very distinct problems of representation, both cases result in a similar emotional state where an individual remains unmotivated to confront the problems at hand. It is not difficult to imagine why some choose to remain blissfully ignorant when the alternative is so distressing. The representation or the framing of the problems at hand is very often problematic.

The answer to these issues requires a nuanced and complex solution. Such a solution would need to present the landscape as more than just background, demonstrate a sense of scale that is tangible to people, and illustrate the problems at hand in a manner that is not overbearingly unpleasant and difficult to consume. A solution to these challenges can be found in the experience of the sublime.

Six years ago, I went on a pilgrimage with my father to the American Southwest. We had spent four days pleasantly touring the Grand Canyon and began driving deep into the desert on the way to El Paso. At some point on our journey, I'm still not sure when, both of us had stopped speaking. Or at least we had stopped speaking to each other. The car was silent, save for the occasional whisper *my god*. Somewhere along that endless road we intuitively felt as though we had passed into a hallowed world. Never in my life have I seen land like that. Flat, open, and empty country that laid bare every inch of the earth's surface and disappeared into the horizon. Titanic, towering sandstone buttes burst through the ground and rose hundreds of feet towards the sky like some dreadful ancient, unknown behemoth escaping its terrestrial captivity. As the sun hung low in the sky tingeing every surface a crimson red I felt as though I were traveling through some bizarre scene out of Dante's *Inferno*. It wasn't until years later, while studying landscape architecture, that someone finally gave me a word to describe this moment. What I had encountered was a glimpse of the sublime.

My fascination with landscape architecture and landscape in general, is focused on the profound emotional connections that resonate with people. These sorts of experiences are articulated most clearly in sublime landscapes; in places that conjure up powerful, turbulent and ecstatic responses from those that experience them. This powerful conduit for transformative experiences offers landscape architecture a unique opportunity to create a shift in paradigm from solving the isolated problems of a particular space to addressing systemic problems that threaten the landscape at large.

The natural world is facing some serious challenges that impact the world at multiple levels. There are large scale phenomena such as climate change or mass extinction. One key problem in finding solutions to such catastrophes is the difficulty in comprehension; these challenges operate at spatial and temporal scales which do not easily lend themselves to comprehension.

However, the silver lining that is present in the small scale lies in representation. When operating at scales of specific sites or locations one is better able to understand the present problem. Locations such as landfills or a coal mines provide physical landscapes that are able to represent large scale issues through a smaller frame. Through these small scale sites, people are afforded the opportunity to understand large scale problems. While it is unreasonable to expect a person to understand the totality of the impacts of uninhibited waste across the globe, it is possible for a person to comprehend the issue of a landfill. The opportunity to educate the public on large-scale issues through a small-scale lens is an important one for landscape architects and landscape designers to act on. This then begs the question, how does one make people conscious of the issues at hand? It is a problem of perception. A problem of taking the large scale environmental problems and visualizing them in a landscape that is legible to the public. A way to confront these challenges lies in experiential learning. Experiential learning here means the direct and immediate contact with the phenomena in question.

This thesis focuses on the sublime both as a historic concept and contemporary one. Chapter I examines the idea of the sublime as articulated by Edmund Burke. This thesis argues that Burke's philosophical idea of the sublime remains relevant in the contemporary moment as the latter is a counter reaction to it. This connection is seen in

the work of Mythologist Joseph Campbell, whose work supports the idea that cultures around the world have formed significant connections to the idea of the sublime in a variety of ways.

The idea of the sublime is directly related to Yi-Fu Tuan's work in the field of geography, dealing with the role of the sublime historically and the relevance of the sublime today. The work of author and essayist Edward Abbey along with landscape preservationist Theodore Roosevelt, demonstrate recognition of the value and significance of sublime experiences.

Chapter II argues that the historic relationship between people and the wilderness has been problematic. The art works of Thomas Cole and John Gast depict the American landscape and instill their work with societal attitudes and values of their time. Joseph Campbell further explains this issue of the European settler's mythological/religious interpretations of the natural world they encountered in America. The colonial conception of the landscape has been one of hostility and antagonism. However, while this perspective of the landscape has had a long history in the United States, this is not the only way of understanding the natural environment. The work of anthropologist Eduardo Kohn and his concept of sylvan thinking offer an alternative way of conceptualizing landscape and an individual's place in it. This idea can be seen in the work of landscape architect James Rose who offers ideas for a more cooperative relationship with the environment. This thesis argues that the existence of an alternative way of relating to the natural environment indicates that there is also an alternative way of conceptualizing the sublime. The industrial devastation and destruction of the natural world can also be seen as sublime

Chapter III analyzes several projects that overlook the potential for a contemporary sublime or act as some examples of what this landscape might look like. Among these examples is the Fresh Kills landfill transformation from New York City's dumping ground to a public park and the implications these design decisions have with regard to environmental issues. Cases outside the U.S. will be examined as well including the IBA Lausitz Germany, and their attempts to create a novel desert like landscape from a decommissioned coal field. The Quarry Garden, located in Shanghai China, provides one of the best examples of a contemporary sublime landscape. This thesis argues that the contemporary sublime is capable of engaging the public and articulating important environmental messages.



## *Chapter 1: On the Sublime: A Historic Look*

### *1.1: Original Theory*

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) was an 18<sup>th</sup> century Irish philosopher (fig 1). Amongst his most famous works was his treatise, “A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful”. What makes this text so distinguished is that it is the first work in the English-speaking world that substantially articulates what exactly is meant by “sublime”. Burke's treaty on the sublime describes an aesthetic phenomenon that holds implications that extend well beyond the artistic or academic and delve into the deeply personal lived experiences of the people that encounter it.

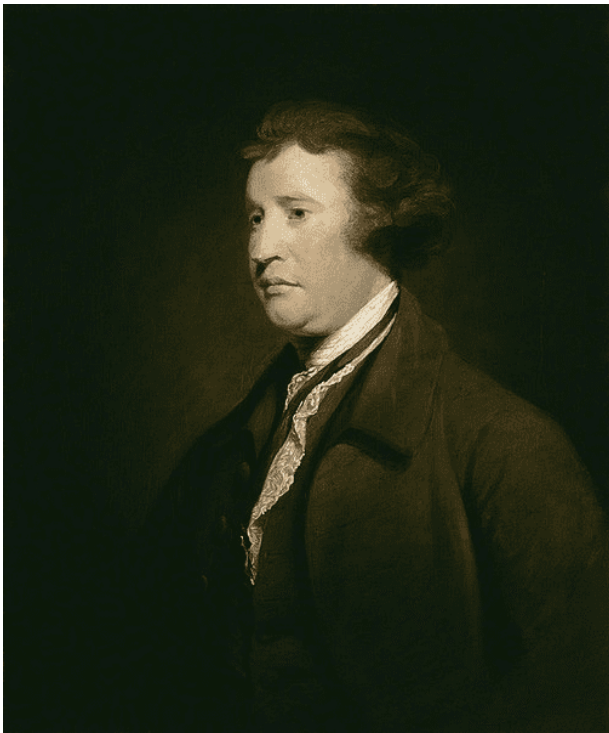


Fig. 1: Studio of Joshua Reynolds, *Edmund Burke*, circa 1769

For Burke, the concept of the sublime can in part be understood in relation to the concept of the beautiful. For him, beautiful are those things that are pleasing, serene, harmonious and agreeable.<sup>1</sup> The sublime is in direct contrast to this. That which is sublime instills a sense of terror, violence, and astonishment.<sup>2</sup> To understand what this means in landscape, a meadow could be beautiful, but a rocky gorge would be sublime. Very much in sympathy of Hegelian dialectics, the beautiful and the sublime can be well understood when they are presented in relation to one another. It is through knowing its opposite that one can understand the sublime.

However, the sublime does not fully reveal itself when related to the beautiful. For Burke, there are numerous attributes that individually contribute to a sense of the sublime. In his treatise, Edmund Burke explores the mental and physical sensations of experiencing the sublime. Burke categorizes over twenty different aspects that either serve as necessary components of the sublime or act in a more accessory manner in contribution to a sublime effect. The following is a summation of Burke's theory.

One of the foundational ideas for Burke's theory is his understanding of pleasure and pain. Burke argues against the notions that pleasure is the absence of pain or that pain is the absence of pleasure. The difference lies in the aftermath of the sensation. Whereas pleasure impacts the subject and then returns said person to a default state of neutrality, the removal of pain leaves a very different impression.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, Vol. I*, Paul Murry , Michael Punch, PG Online Distributed Proofreading Team, 2005,(accessed April 24, 2020)  
[https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm#A\\_PHILOSOPHICAL\\_INQUIRY%20,](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm#A_PHILOSOPHICAL_INQUIRY%20,) 166

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 103-105

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 105-106

He offers for example an excerpt from the *Iliad*,

“As when a wretch, who, conscious of his crime,  
Pursued for murder from his native clime,  
Just gains some frontier, breathless, pale, amazed;  
All gaze, all wonder!”<sup>4</sup>

For Burke, this illustrates his point. The removal of pain is fundamentally different from the addition of pleasure in that once the sensation has ceased the subject is left not in a state of indifference, but one of astonishment, shock and relief. The sublime is notably distinct in its ability to emotionally charge an individual for the duration of the experience, but also to leave a remarkable impact and change of perspective after the experience has ended. Burke recognizes that English lacks a word for this particular distinction and chose to adopt the term delight to signify the agreeable sensation felt from the cessation of pain to avoid confusing it from the joy of experiencing a positive pleasure.<sup>5</sup>

It is this experience of astonishment that served to form the basis of his theory of the sublime. Burke argues that to experience real astonishment was to experience total fixation upon the object that astonished the subject. In this state the subject's mind is robbed of all other thoughts and concerns. In addition to this, astonishment so overwhelms the viewer that the subject is unable to fully comprehend or understand the totality of what it is that is before them. Robbed of one's mental faculties, the subject is able to do little else besides behold the object that generates such astonishment.<sup>7</sup>

In order to create this state in which the subject is completely immersed in the sublime object, Burke argues that terror is the most effective instrument. He reasons that

---

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Pope, *Translation of the Iliad of Homer*, (United States: Silas Andrus, 1849), 544

<sup>5</sup> Burke, *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, 107-108

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 130-132

terror is the fear of pain or death and as a result, it produces a state very sympathetic to pain itself. Here he makes the claim that anything that is terrible or inspires terror is a source of the sublime. Phenomena such as darkness, solitude, and even vacuity can participate in the sublime as they are all sources that intensify terror.

The sort of terror that Burke describes is of a very particular nature. While this tremendous sense of fear does play a significant role in the sublime, there is also a sense of what Burke would call delight. For Burke the two emotional states are not exclusive. They exist as entirely separate entities that can manifest in the viewer simultaneously and create the very specific experience that Burke would call the sublime.<sup>8</sup>

However, according to Burke, in order to make anything truly terrifying obscurity is necessary. The idea here is that even in a state of danger, if one is able to fully grasp the situation and understand what is threatening oneself, the fullest extent of terror is not accomplished. There is nothing more terrifying than what one does not know and cannot understand. Therefore, the most powerful sensation of the sublime comes from experiences in which the totality of the experience is not fully accounted.<sup>9</sup>

The sublime is also built around an idea of power, specifically the power to inflict pain or death. Here Burke offers the example of an ox and a bull. An ox is strong and powerful however, because of its general docile nature and its usefulness to humans, it is not usually associated with the idea of terror or fear. However, the strength and power of the bull is housed in a violent temperament and therefore is more sympathetic to the idea of the sublime.<sup>10</sup> In essence the idea of power serves to create a sense of the sublime but such power is not to be at the service of people. The power of the sublime must exist

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 131-132

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 110-112, 131-132, 138-146

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 139-140

outside of the control of people and not be subject to human manipulation.

For the purposes of this thesis, the sublime is most importantly an encounter with the dark and the frightful which results in a notable transformation in the viewer. It is an experience with the quintessential “other”, the unknown, unfamiliar, dreadful and dangerous. And it is through this experience that one is shocked into a new perspective. As explained by Burke, the sublime is inherently different from the beautiful in this regard of experience. For him, while the beautiful can temporarily lift one out of indifference, its charm only lasts as long as one remains in beauty; one quickly returns one back to a default state of indifference. The Sublime however can rip one out of a state of indifference with shock and awe, but even well after the encounter has ceased the impact of the sublime lives on and is carried with the individual.<sup>11</sup> The sublime has a staying power; a power to capture attention and impact an individual even after the experience of the sublime.

While Burke's ideas have been influential, they have not gone without criticism. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) criticized Burke's work for lacking what Kant considered a philosophical explanation of the cause of the sublime experience. For Kant, Burke documented and articulated psychological or bodily sensations that characterized the experience but lacked a comprehensive answer as to the exact origins or cause of the experience itself.<sup>12</sup> Kant, himself a prominent philosopher, offered his own ideas to this phenomenon. He argued that the sublime experience emerged from a sense of awe in observing nature which was moderated by a person's contemplation of the power of

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 105-107

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Haden (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril, 1965), 146

reason to overcome such a landscape.<sup>13</sup>

Kant's idea of the sublime differs strongly from that of Burke in that Kant theorizes the pleasure of the sublime comes from the thought that one is not subject to, but a master of the awe-inspiring landscape. However, both Kant and Burke agree upon this notion of the other, or the essentially non-human as being a key component of the experience of the sublime. It is through an encounter or experience of something beyond or outside of what is perceived as human or humanity that one is able to have a sublime experience. For Burke and Kant alike, wilderness was exemplified as the ultimate experience of the sublime in that it represented most clearly this idea of the non-human or in-human based on the historical and cultural context in which they wrote. While their theories on the sublime are not entirely sympathetic to each other, both Burke and Kant's theories understand the experience of the sublime as a confrontation with the non-human.

### *1.2: Exemplary Illustration*

A representation of the sublime is captured in the painting by Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* or *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (fig 2). Here one sees a man, darkly clothed, standing atop a rocky precipice. The wanderer views the valley below, which is covered in a thick sea of fog. Off in the distance one can see mountainous peaks erupting out of the misty ocean repeating this pattern off into the horizon, which is all but invisible to the viewer as the sky blends seamlessly with the sea of fog.

---

<sup>13</sup> Isis Brook, "Aesthetic appreciation of landscape", in *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, ed. Peter Howard, Ian Thompson, Emma Waterton (Milton Park: Routledge, 2019), 42

The painting possesses several hallmark features of the sublime: an emphasis on disagreeableness, the promise/threat of danger, obscurity, astonishment, and a sense of feeling small. This idea of disagreeableness can be found in the gnarled and rocky surface that the wanderer stands upon. The texture of the rock is coarse, rough and haggard. The wanderer himself is forced to stand unevenly on the summit in order to peer down into the foggy abyss.



Fig. 2: Caspar David Friedrich, *The Wanderer Above A Sea Of Fog*, circa 1817

The steep cliffs that he stands upon and that he views imply a deep and treacherous plummet should the wanderer lose his footing. The illustration of fog in the image helps foster this sense of depth, while at the same time it obscures the image itself, thereby blocking one's view of what might lie below the mountain. The fog not only blocks the viewer's line of sight but it even blurs the horizon line, leaving the audience questioning what is ground and what is sky. Furthermore, by having the wanderer face away from the viewers and towards the landscape, the image indicates his transfixed state. The magnitude of the landscape, whether we consider the valley below - the mountain peaks or the seemingly endless sky, along with the wanderer's own attention being drawn to some unknown point further instills a sense of significance that draws the attention of viewers beyond the image of the wanderer himself. Instead of a painting of a Fig that happens to be depicted with a landscape as a background, one instead sees a dynamic interaction of the Fig with the landscape.

The sublime describes the strong emotional response of people in the face of some frightening phenomena whose magnitude extends beyond full comprehension. The traditional idea of the sublime posits that this phenomenon can most clearly be seen in the interaction between people and the wilderness. This framework positions people and the natural world as being diametrically opposed to one another. Such an understanding is situated within a particular cultural lens common in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although this narrative was prominent during the time of Burke, this does not mean it is the only means by which one might understand the sublime.



### 1.3: Sublime in Narrative

This idea that the perception of what is sublime is capable of changing can be seen in the work of 20th century academic, Joseph Campbell (1904-1987). Campbell was a professor of literature, working specifically in comparative mythology and comparative religion. Campbell is perhaps most famous for his work *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* in which he lays out his argument for an essential pattern or “monomyth” that can be found in ancient cultures across the globe. In it he describes the quintessential journey that the hero takes. In essence Campbell argues that a hero of a story must leave the comforts of the home and venture into an unknown territory.<sup>14</sup> It is only through this process that a person is able to achieve, accomplish or obtain something of value for oneself or for the community/world the hero comes from. An example of this can be demonstrated through a prototypical fairytale. In the western tradition, a knight in shining armor is pitted against a dragon. The encounter is wrought with danger and turmoil. The favorable conclusion to the story is reached when the hero slays the beast to save the maiden or the treasure the monster guards. This narrative structure suggests that through willing confrontation of the unknown and the frightening one is able to acquire something of value which would otherwise remain inaccessible.

Campbell’s work outlines a general story-telling structure that is found in mythologies and legends from across the world in very different cultural settings. The various monsters or beasts in these narratives are symbolic representations of the sublime.<sup>15</sup> These varied representations of the sublime consequently take on a variety of

---

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, ( New York: Pantheon Books, 1949), 30

<sup>15</sup> “Ep. 2: Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth--'The Message of the Myth'.” BillMoyers.com, June 22, 1988. (accessed April 24, 2020) , <https://billmoyers.com/content/ep-2-joseph-campbell-and -the-power-of-myth-the-message-of-the-myth/>.

forms that are appropriate for the culture in which the story originates. Campbell's work suggests that the basic experience of the sublime can be found in a variety of cultures, but that the particular form in which it takes shape or the way in which it is represented is not fossilized in any particular cultural framework.

#### *1.4: Geography*

Campbell is not alone in his valuation of the sublime as a valuable asset for society. American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (born 1930) ponders the question of the place for romantic sentiments such as the sublime in both historic and contemporary societies. Tuan grounds his argument in the geographic exploration and accounts various environments conducive to experiencing the sublime and the experience of notable individuals that explored these locations.<sup>16</sup>

Tuan makes the case that the sense of romanticism in geography has largely diminished over the decades and has been replaced with a more empirical approach that utilizes quantitative methods, objective documentation, and scientific examination. For Tuan, the air of adventure that surrounded geography in the age of exploration has subsided substantially. However, Tuan suggests that a complete abandonment of such notions, a total rejection of the classical explorer does a disservice to the discipline and to society. He argues that it is the sense of wonder and exhilaration kindled by the prospect of discovery, which drives people to expand their horizons and explore the unexplored.<sup>17</sup>

As noted by Tuan, even today there still exist unexplored areas of inquiry in need of an exploration that go beyond the discipline of geography. Tuan offers the field of

---

<sup>16</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Romantic Geography in search of the sublime landscape* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 3-28

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 167-177

astronomy and space exploration as an example of his point. In searching the cosmos, pondering mysterious worlds light-years away and contemplating realities that seem to defy the laws of physics, disciplines such as astronomy seem to require a degree of curiosity and fascination of the unknown and the unexplored.<sup>18</sup>

What is of particular interest here is the entanglement of two seemingly disparate perspectives: the romantic and the scientific. Tuan is not making the case that either one need be dominant or decried as inferior to the other. Rather, he recognizes the inseparable (or at least what should be treated as inseparable) relationship between an emotional experience and the intellectual investigation of a phenomena. What Tuan has recognized here is that which compels one to act, the source of inspiration to go beyond what is familiar and traditional. To explore the unknown, one needs to operate in a landscape that is governed by what one feels and experiences, not only what one can deduce or calculate.

Tuan recognized serious limitations within the field of geography at the time of his critique. He suggested a sort of paradigm shift, away from the more quantitative and detached approach that was prominent during his time, and an acceptance of other/more traditional means of understanding and exploring.

### *1.5: In the National Parks*

The writings of Environmentalist author Edward Abbey (1927-1989) speak testament to this idea of the sublime as a motivator. Abbey is heralded as a central figure and the source of inspiration to many who choose to champion an environmentalist struggle against industrial degradation. Abbey is best known for his many literary contributions to the

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 32-37

field of creative non-fiction, in which he too engages in this process of entanglement between emotion and reason.

In 1956, and again in 1957, Abbey worked as a park ranger at Arches National Park in Utah. During this time, Abbey kept a journal and recorded his experience of the park, with detailed descriptions of natural landscapes, analysis of why the national park is still worth preserving, what needs to be done to preserve the landscape, and his own insights as to the reason people need such landscapes. These journal entries were later compiled and formed one of his most heralded books, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*.<sup>19</sup>

*Desert Solitaire* contains a litany of examples in which Abbey describes in detail the natural landscape of Arches National Park (fig. 3). Much of these descriptions fall neatly into the category of the sublime.<sup>20</sup>

These are natural arches; holes in the rock, windows in stone no two alike, as varied in form as in dimension. They range in size from holes just big enough to walk through to openings large enough to contain the dome of the Capital building in Washington D.C. Some resemble jug handles or flying buttresses, others natural bridges...The arches were formed through hundreds of thousands of years by the weathering of the huge sandstone wall, or fins, in which they are found. Not the work of a cosmic hand, nor sculptured by sand bearing winds, as many people prefer to believe, the arches came into being and continue to come into being through the modest wedging action of rainwater, melting snow, frost and ice, aided by gravity. In color they shade from off-white through buff, pink, brown and red tones which also change with the time of day and the moods of the light, the weather, the sky.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A season in the Wilderness* (New York: Touchstone, 1990), xi

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, xiii

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 5



Fig. 3: Jacob W. Frank, Double Arch, Arches National Park, n.d.

Abbey himself acknowledges a point of criticism some have of his work. Some have argued that Abbey stays very much “on the surface” of things. His descriptions can be taken at face value and need not be interpreted for ulterior meanings.<sup>22</sup> While this might be unsatisfactory for those more inclined for a philosophical sermon on the significance of the mountain or the meaning of the river, the fact that his work focuses so much on description and images brings up a very interesting point regarding the sublime. Looking at Abbey's work in conjunction to Burke's it is possible to see a very clear overlap. Burke emphasizes the point that the sublime is created in the mind as a sensation from the world that we observe. There is nothing inherently dangerous, evil, or terrifying about the mountain. It is not in the Mountains essence to be inherently sublime. It is through associations, the ability to connect sensation to imagery that creates a sense of

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, xiii

amazement when one gazes upon it. Abbey's work in description of the surface, his insistence that the surface is more than enough to satisfy, illustrates this point exactly. Instead of trying to sermonize, or project a meaning onto the river valley, Abbey makes his effort to take the reader there; to give the audience a mental image of the river valley and in doing so he presents the "meaning" of a valley gorge. This open-ended approach makes it possible for the reader to form personal connections to a place, instead of only reading about Abbey's own understanding or relationship to Arches National Park.

His choice to refrain from projecting his own subjective interpretation of his surroundings demonstrates the incredible staying power of the sublime. Instead of indulging his own philosophical musings on the abstract significance of his encounter, he chooses a far more simplistic means by which to convey a sense of place: he works to transpose the reader from an abstract world to a grounded one. It is in fact this quality of the place, this grounded truth that has so deeply moved Abbey. It is from these visceral experiences that he re-creates Arches National Park within the confines of a book.

Abbey's connection to Arches national park and the reason why he understands it as a place worth protecting can be explained by understanding its potential to provide an experience of the sublime. For Abbey, Arches offers a chance for an individual to venture outside of the familiar, and step into a completely different world. This other world is one that operates in deep time, deals with tectonic forces, and is carved out of rock and stone. In experiencing this landscape, visitors are able to adopt a different outlook, to acquire a new perspective. Such places do not limit or reduce the human experience, but actually enhance it. This other world is a necessary part of civilization in that it provides sharp

contrast to the familiar world and broadens the perspective of those who experience it.<sup>23</sup>

Abbey expounds on this position regarding what makes Arches Park such an important place. He does so by initially giving his perspective on the proposition to install a paved roadway through the park system.<sup>24</sup> Abbey decries this as an obtuse move on the part of management as it completely overlooks the very aspect that makes the park so wonderful. For Abbey much of the allure of Arches Park and places like it stems from the fact that such landscapes force people out of their common, familiar and comfortable world and entices them to enter a completely different one.<sup>25</sup> He beckons those willing to enter a landscape in which comfort can not be demanded and convenience is not a right. Such a place is void of distractions and reminders of the world one left behind. Because of this, one's attention becomes fixated on an utterly foreign and essentially alien place they have encountered. The very fact that Arches National Park does not or will not provide all the amenities one could ask, creates a remarkable dynamic; one where the landscape is experienced not merely seen. The visitors are in the landscape; the landscape is not scenery. It is an existential relationship.

He couples this argument with an additional point in which he creates a distinction between the sorts of people that frequent national parks. He describes two basic kinds of viewers. The first is one who desperately seeks out a foreign world or a challenging landscape.<sup>26</sup> In essence, such a visitor is looking for a sublime experience. This is in contrast to the second visitor, who attends the park only from the comfort of a vehicle. Unwilling to venture outside the familiar, accommodating luxury of their car, this second

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 39-59

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 39-59

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 39-59

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 49

type of park patron is essentially trapped inside his or her comfort zone. The world of the familiar and the trappings of domestic life are never left behind. Abbey's point regarding the road system is that in an effort to accommodate as many people as possible (both those within and without cars), by attempting to increase the numbers of those that are able and willing to attend the parks, one eliminates the adventure of coming to the park. Questioning this decision, Abbey asks

"...why is the Park Service generally so anxious to accommodate that other crowd, the indolent millions born on wheels and suckled on gasoline, who expect and demand paved highways to lead them in comfort, ease and safety into every nook and corner of the National Parks?"<sup>27</sup>

In the pursuit of comfort, in the drive to secure a vision in which all Americans have access to these incredible landscapes, the management of the parks have overlooked or disregarded the visceral experience of the "wild". It would appear as though the administration of Arches lacked an understanding of the assets that they were tasked with caring for; not only the physical park itself, but the sense of place it offered. Arches is not only precious for its unique geologic formations, but for the opportunity to encounter that which is fundamentally different from the everyday experience of the average American. It possesses the chance for a person to venture outside the familiar, the comfortable and the known, and experience something entirely different, the sublime.

By installing highways throughout the national park, in developing the land to be better used and improved upon, the park is re-engaging with a traditional way of relating to the landscape. What can be seen here is the idea that the natural landscape ought to be made more productive for people. For the administrative team that made the decision to

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 49



install the road system, Arches national park can and should be made to fit into a more anthropocentric world. This effort ultimately misses the point of the preserving the National Parks as places in which one is able to step outside of the familiar and experience the unknown. The installation of the road system takes away from this encounter with the unfamiliar through in that it replicates a way of living that is familiar to many if not most of the visitor to the park. In essence this is an attitude that focuses on consumption of the landscape rather than preservation.

Abbey's profound connection to a landscape such as Arches National Park exists within a rich history of the park system. It follows in a line of precedence dating back to one of the most famous preservationists, Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919). As president of the United States of America, Roosevelt (fig. 4.) became instrumental in preserving landscapes. Being one of the most prominent champions of the National Parks along side such Figs such as John Muir (1838-1914), he echoed very similar ideas in his personal philosophy of leading a “strenuous life” in which Roosevelt encourages everyone to accept challenge in their lives and avoid effortless ventures.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “The Strenuous Life” (speech, addresses the assemblage, Chicago, Illinois, April 11, 1899).



Fig. 4: Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir, 1906

Abbey and Roosevelt shared a foundational belief in the value of nature. This goes beyond an account of ecosystem services or an inventory of natural resources. Rather their shared conviction stems from a more philosophical assertion that there is something inherently valuable regarding the untamed natural world. To engage in such places, to encounter the sublime, was such a valuable asset that both Roosevelt and Abbey believed these landscapes were worthy of preservation. For Roosevelt, preservation meant legislative designations, and the creation of special legal protections barring human activity that would alter the landscape in such a manner as to be incompatible with the spirit of the place. For Abbey, preservation meant restricting

technological interventions; prohibiting automobiles and the like from altering the experience of the place.

### *1.6: Summation*

The sublime is an 18<sup>th</sup> century idea proposed by Edmund Burke. It is a sensation one experiences when encountering something that captivates one's attention, imposes a sense of scale that indicates a magnitude that is incomprehensible, and does so in a way that is at the same time both frightening and pleasurable. Although it is attributed to the romantic era, this idea is capable of manifesting itself in a variety of different forms. Looking to the work of Campbell, the essence of the sublime can be seen as universal, stretching across various cultures around the world. These stories of encountering the sublime cross over from the literary tradition to the historic tradition as seen in the work of Tuan, where explorers venture off into a wide variety of landscapes seeking to experience the sublime. In establishing land to preserve for all Americans, Roosevelt demonstrates this value of sublime landscapes as being of historic significance. Following in Roosevelt's footsteps, Abbey championed this idea of preserving landscapes and the potential for experiencing the sublime.

In understanding the work of Edmund Burke, the core components of the sublime are laid out. Campbell and Tuan further advance this idea and broaden its horizons: applying it to cultural narratives and grounding it in a context of discovery and exploration highlighting that these phenomenon can be experienced in a variety of ways. Abbey and Roosevelt champion this idea through their efforts to preserve landscapes that could afford sublime experiences.

This chapter has analyzed a basic understanding of what has been classically described as “the sublime” and the experience of it. However, this then raises a question of continuity. Is this conception of “the sublime” still accurate in the contemporary moment? What was the historical relationship to the landscape in the United States? What sort of implications might a change in perspective have on what is or is not considered “sublime”?

## *Chapter 2: Changing Perspectives*

### *2.1: Interpreting the Landscape*

The sublime, being a relationship between an object and a viewer, thus something subjective, requires one to consider both the object that a person views along with the perspective of the viewer. This being the case, it is important to consider the context through which the sublime is viewed. Although Burke's treaty was rooted in a classic 17<sup>th</sup> century context, the essential principles and tenets of his theory are by no means fossilized. As seen in the work of Joseph Campbell, the basis of the sublime can be understood as performative; being represented in a variety of ways which are informed by a particular culture in question. It is because of this ever-changing property of the concept that allows this theory to remain present and relevant. In avoiding a restrictive and crystallized manifestation, the sublime remains fresh, vibrant and at the very frontier of expression.

When it comes to the sublime in the landscape, the most obvious area for inquiry is the human-environment relationship. The way in which people relate to the natural world and the dynamics that have fostered this relationship can inform one of the manner in which the sublime might manifest itself for a person or a people. As noted by Burke, much of what can be considered sublime is not idiosyncratic. However, while the essential experience of the sublime is not exclusive to any particular culture or tradition, the specifics of the sublime are not necessarily the same for all. Different cultural traditions and norms will shape and re-imagine the particular form and manifestation of the sublime and incline individuals to react and encounter the sublime in different ways.

## 2.2: Historic Perspectives

In the American context, the cultural understanding of the natural landscape and the sublime has historically been based around consumption rather than respect. Manifest Destiny and the westward expansion of the United States demonstrate the case. During the 1800's the United States developed this credence which declared that the American people had a god ordained duty to expand their domain, and conquer the west.<sup>29</sup> This attitude of consumptive exploitation is exemplified in Thomas Cole's painting *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm* more commonly referred to as *The Oxbow*, 1836 (fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm*, 1836

<sup>29</sup> Fredrick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), 3

The strong dichotomy between the established East and the unsettled West is presented as two distinct landscapes. The left side of the image depicts deep dense forests, a tree growing at an oblique angle with signs of broken and damaged branches and dark storm clouds with heavy rain in the distance. The right side depicts agricultural land extending across the fields, small columns of smoke rising from the chimneys of homes scattered across the landscape, animals grazing in the open plains and boats navigating the meandering river. In the approaching foreground one can see a glimpse of a man, the artist himself, at the border of the wilderness not far from a chair and umbrella set on the hillside. Looking from right to left one can see a landscape sculpted and shaped into something agreeable, useful and manageable to human beings and a wild and uncontrolled wilderness in which people have yet to enter. While the image depicts an inaccurate account of the American land as uninhabited prior to European colonization, it illustrates the European perception of the landscape. The image shows how, with the introduction of European settlers, the already established landscape was dramatically altered and transformed and, in the eyes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century settler, improved. The developed land: the imposed Western understanding of “good” landscape shines in sunlight whilst the unaltered or virgin wilderness lies beneath a dark storm. Cole furthers this idea of consumption with the presence of the chair and umbrella: comforts of home that are brought into the wilderness for enjoyment. This depiction of the wilderness here is representative of the traditional idea of the sublime. The undeveloped landscape exists beneath dark storm clouds, with dense forest obstructing clear lines of sight touches upon the ideas of the uncontrolled, the unknown and the threatening. Such imagery is directly linked back to Burke's understanding of what it means to experience the sublime.

This Romantic era painting speaks to the cultural attitudes of many in this particular moment in American history. It suggests to the viewer that development of the land was progress. The tradition of the European settlers utilizing and transforming the landscape was “improvement”. Such an approach to the natural environment is not one based on respect or any particular reverence to the land or for the indigenous peoples who had inhabited the land long before the arrival of the Europeans. Instead, this perspective suggests consumption of the landscape is not only permissible; it is in fact a necessary step in order to improve upon the world.

This idea of conquering the western wilderness is further demonstrated in the painting *American Progress* (1872) by John Gast (1842-1896). The American spirit personified here by a giant female Fig, donning a roman style toga with exposed shoulders is known as Columbia, a fictional Fig used to represent America prior to the usage of Uncle Sam (fig. 6). Columbia leads the charge from the East to the West, clutching a school book in one hand and laying down electric wires with the other. As she advances forward, so too comes the ordered, organized and regulated world of the U.S. with horseback riders, covered wagons, horse and buggies and steam powered trains. As these means of transportation advance across the landscape they leave behind the agrarian foreground and off in the distance a miniature New York City bustling with ships coming in and out of the harbor. This is foreshadowing the world that is to come with westward expansion. But what must be replaced to make room for this American dream? In order for this destined world to manifest, what must first be removed, cleared or conquered? The image shows the native peoples who had long occupied the land fleeing westward in an attempt to escape violent extermination along with herds of bison, wolves, and bears.



In the distance one can see the snow-capped peaks of the Rocky Mountains below dark and foreboding clouds adjacent to the Pacific Ocean. Once again, the idea of the sublime is represented in the depiction of the wilderness. Nature here is depicted as dark, possessing an abundance of threatening wildlife and entirely foreign to the world that was familiar to the European settlers.



Fig. 6: John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872

The story of “American Progress” can be understood in part as a story of American land ethic, or the lack thereof. As the American people began their spread across the continent, their values regarding the land did not progress, or at least did not deviate from the essential theory of land as a possession or tool rather than an entity in itself deserving of respect. The East was a highly productive land, shaped by the American people to facilitate commerce, transportation, agriculture and the latest

technological advancements. “Good” land was tamed, productive, and sculpted to cater to the wants and needs of its occupiers. The way to move forward, the way to advance society and expand horizons was to remove those elements that were not subject to a more domesticated sensibility. Rather than experience something new or something that might challenge the conventional relationship to the land, the Westward expansion of the country was a continuation of a traditional mode of thinking. Manifest Destiny was not only an expansion of the country's borders but also of the cultural norms and values. Part of the story of Manifest Destiny can be understood as an attempt to bring the culture of the eastern states to the West.

The significance of this image, for the purposes of this document, resides in the symbolic representation of the European settler's cultural values. The image conveys important societal values that were consistently acted upon; namely the removal of the natural/unaltered environment and installation of a more domesticated and industrial landscape. This image conveys an ideological perspective which insists that the “spirit” of Western civilization (in this particular instance the United States) is one that necessarily transforms the landscape, eliminating the natural and wild and replacing it with one that is essentially anthropocentric: focused on how the landscape might be made useful to people. It is through such imagery that one can see a clearly articulated understanding of how the human/environment relationship has unfolded historically.

The historic relationship between the European settlers and the American landscape has been problematic. The landscape that had already been altered and inhabited was powerfully transformed and in some cases destroyed in order to accommodate a particular way of living comfortable and familiar to the settlers. The

wilderness was deemed an obstacle or hindrance for progress and was actively eliminated in order to make room for a more productive landscape that would directly benefit the settlers of the land. In keeping with the more traditional perspectives of the time, the wilderness in both of these images is evocative of the sublime that Burke describes. Consequently, the elimination of the wilderness was also an elimination of the sublime, or more accurately the elimination of an experience of the sublime.

### *2.3: Alternative Thinking*

The possibility of alternate ways of relating to the natural world is held by numerous individuals, including public figures such as Joseph Campbell. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Campbell explains the impact of cultural values on an individual's perspective and relationship with the natural world and the potential for a different way of thinking.

“JOSEPH CAMPBELL: ...Now, in the other mythologies, one puts oneself in accord with the world. If the world is a mixture of good and evil, you do not put yourself in accord with it. You identify with the good and you fight against the evil, and this is a religious system which belongs to the Near East, following Zarathustra's time. It's in the biblical tradition, all the way, in Christianity and in Islam as well. This business of not being with nature, and we speak with sort of derogation of “the nature religions.” You see, with that fall in the garden, nature was regarded as corrupt. There's a myth for you that corrupts the whole world for us. And every spontaneous act is sinful, because nature is corrupt and has to be corrected, must not be yielded to. You get a totally different civilization, a totally different way of living according to your myth as to whether nature is fallen or whether nature is itself a manifestation of divinity, and the spirit being the revelation of the divinity that's inherent in nature.

BILL MOYERS: Don't you think that Americans, modern Americans, have rejected this idea, this Indian idea, of nature as revealing the divinity, because it would have kept us from achieving dominance over nature?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Yeah, but that's the biblical condemnation of nature that they inherited from their own religion and brought with them. God is not in nature, God is separate from nature, and nature is not God....

I'll never forget the experience I had when I was in Japan. To be in a place that never heard of the fall in the garden of Eden. To be in a place where I can read in one of the Shinto texts, "The processes of nature cannot be evil." When every impulse, every natural impulse, is not to be corrected, but to be sublimated, you know, to be beautified. And the glorious interest in the beauty of nature and cooperation with nature, and coordination, so that in some of those gardens you don't know where nature begins and art ends. This to me was a tremendous experience, and it's another mythology..."<sup>30</sup>

Here, Campbell expounds upon this idea of cultural values and beliefs (in this case religious beliefs) as the basis upon which one's perspective is shaped towards nature. For Campbell, the outlook and behaviors of a people are, at least in part, directly informed by the value system this people subscribe to. In much of American history, one of these foundational value systems was Christianity. Further, the biblical texts of this religion take an adversarial stance towards the natural world. Strict adherence to this text informed its followers that the natural world was "corrupt"; not something to live in harmony with but to be dominated, "corrected", shaped and molded to meet an ideological perspective of perfection.

Not only does such a perspective create a malevolent tension between people and the natural world, but it also facilitates the devastation of the natural environment. A value system that held little regard towards virgin forests, rolling green hills, and clean flowing streams would not be encumbered to respect or preserve such a landscape. This is by no means to suggest that following the Christian faith or any Semitic religion for that matter, determines exactly how one will act towards the natural world. Rather, it is to understand that a value system that interprets the world as a source of corruption would

---

<sup>30</sup> "Ep. 2: Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth--'The Message of the Myth'." BillMoyers.com, June 1988. (accessed April 24, 2020) <https://billmoyers.com/content/ep-2-joseph-campbell-and-the-power-of-myth-the-message-of-the-myth/>

pursue behaviors that look to domesticate the wild and permit actions that are damaging to the natural world.

Optimistically, Campbell points to other perspectives on nature in other parts of the world. In lacking a value system that necessarily pits people against nature, a new perspective on how to engage and relate to the world is created. Interestingly the example he gives alludes to the Japanese gardens describing them as having tremendous aesthetic value and coordination and cooperation with nature so as to create a sense in which one loses the boundary line that divides design and nature.

One method of thinking or relating to the natural world can be seen in the work of anthropologist Eduardo Kohn. In his book *How Forests Think* (2013), Kohn explains a new approach to understanding the role of people and how they might connect to the natural world. Kohn challenges this notion of “dualism”, or the idea that humans are fundamentally different from the natural world in that it is only humans which possess the capacity to think. For Kohn, although people undoubtedly think in a way that is distinct, this distinction can be better housed within a more comprehensive category of thought that also acknowledges a variety of methods for thinking. In perpetuating this sort of dualistic perception, people are more inclined to be disjointed from the impacts they have on the world at large.<sup>31</sup>

This line of thought that looks to expand on what constitutes thought, what Kohn terms “sylvan thinking”, falls very much in line with the ecological knowledge and understanding that had previously existed prior to the European colonization. Manifest

---

<sup>31</sup> Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*, (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 2015), 13-22

Destiny and the expansionist outlook forcibly removed the indigenous people from the landscape. Along with this loss peoples, these removals caused a near erasure of the possibility for being in relation with the natural world as indigenous peoples had once been able to participate in. This idea can be seen represented in *American Progress*, where the indigenous people and the landscape that they had established is effectively erased and replaced. In the interview with Bill Moyers, Joseph Campbell also recognizes this process as being an essential component to the story of the American relationship to the land.

#### *2.4: Landscape Architecture*

Not only are new perspectives on how one relates to the natural world incredibly significant for those concerned with environment, but they also demonstrate opportunity in the world of design for new creative endeavors and education. With the adoption of such an outlook, there exists the potential to seamlessly merge aesthetics with ecology, creating landscapes that function both in the cultural and the natural realm. It is exactly just such an approach that has been championed by many accomplished Figs in the world of landscape architecture.

The work of the American Landscape Architect James Rose (1913-1991) represents a new perspective on landscape and aesthetics. Rose created his own home as a sort of living laboratory, where he tested out his theories and designs (fig. 7). Located in Ridgewood New Jersey, the beginnings of the design took inspiration from experiences Rose had in Japan, when he was enlisted during WWII in Okinawa.

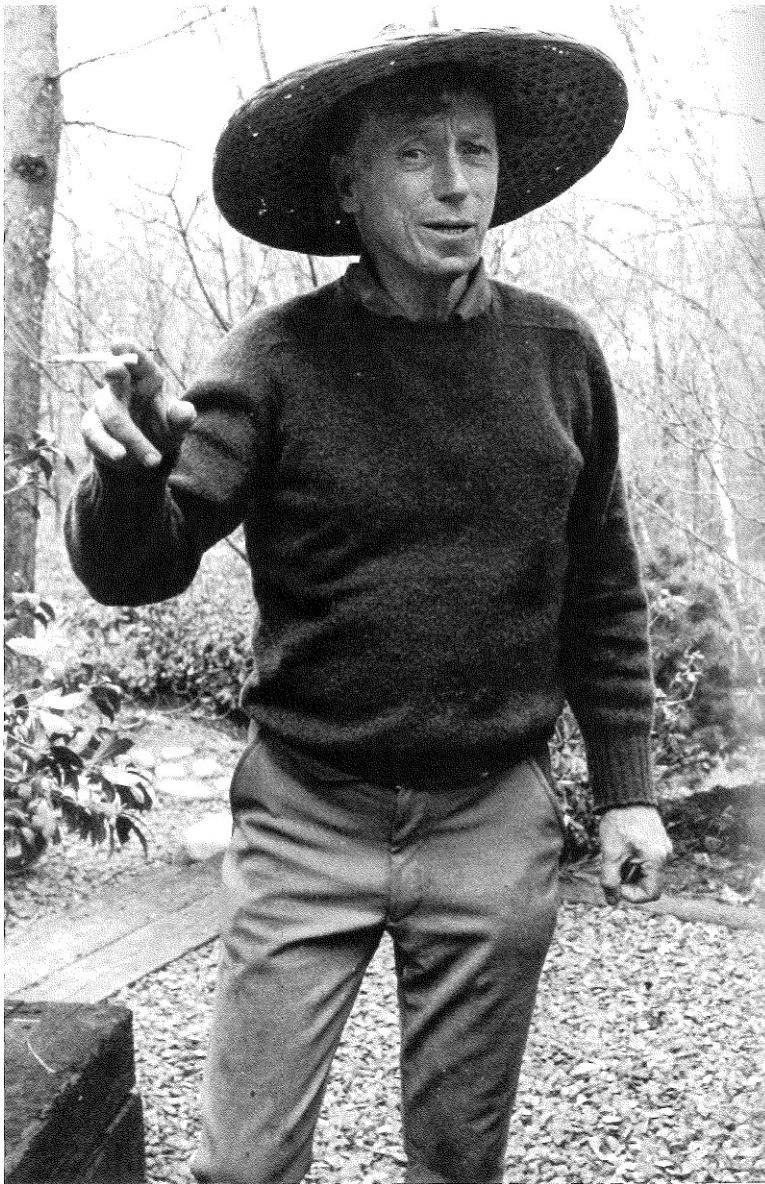


Fig 7: The American Landscape Architect, James Rose (1913-1991)



The layout consists of three structures, a guest house for his sister, a studio for himself and a main house for his mother, all located within a property that measures less than 1400 square feet. The design intent was to create a space that would embody the essence of change. The design has proven a success in this regard, undergoing numerous transformations over several decades since its original construction.<sup>32</sup>



Fig. 8: Charles A. Birnbaum, James Rose Center Front Pathway, 2017

This idea of flexibility, of impermanence and transformation through time is significant in that it highlights a crucial aspect of the emerging mindset of the contemporary moment. The work of James Rose champions this idea that success cannot be prescribed or endlessly replicated. This is not to say that one is never able to find solutions to problems, but rather that these solutions are temporary, ephemeral and cannot

<sup>32</sup>

Dean Cardasis, "Maverick Impossible: James Rose and the Modern American Garden." (Paper Presented at The Garden Conservancy Symposium, New York, New York, March 1993), 8-10



be expected to handle the unforeseen circumstances of the future. It is in fact this quality of remaining open to modification that allows for meaningful preservation. Instead of a complete abandonment of the past and the old way, flexibility makes it possible for aspects of the historic to be preserved for the future.

Another remarkable aspect of Rose's work is the approach he takes in addressing the relationship between human beings and their landscape. His work blends the modern trappings of life for the typical American, consisting of common elements precious not for their material quality or value but for their use and functionality in the landscape. In choosing to incorporate the people into the environment, to make the home and path an extension of the garden and the yard, Rose articulates this new perspective in which the divide between the interior and exterior is blurred to such an extent that one cannot tell where either ends or begins. It is a seamless relationship that highlights the seemingly dichotomous pair of opposites as continuum where change occurs more in material than in sense of separation. Rose encapsulated this idea saying:

“We do not have an individual word in the American language to describe the fusion of shelter with the landscape... With such a word, we might build a whole community of space-sculptures-with-shelters, instead of house-plus-gardens. It might even spread to cities, this fusion idea, and then we would have a whole lot of people going from one place to another and carrying on their business and living right in the midst of nature instead of preserving that dream patch of wildflowers somewhere else. It would be like going sane.”<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> James Rose, *Creative Gardens*, (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1958), 171

A photograph of the James Rose Center demonstrates Rose's ambition quite clearly (fig. 8). A long stone laden patio complete with large bluestone slabs connects the house to the rest of the property through a path system. A large multi-branching tree grows directly adjacent to the main dwelling, an elevated walkway, spiral stair case and geometric reflection pool. Surrounding this area of the property, a number of sizable shade trees grow and fill in the unoccupied space. What is interesting about this arrangement of elements is the placement and spacing of hardscaping, housing and natural vegetation. Rose's design introduces numerous materials, both manmade and natural, and does so in a manner that offers little distinction or designation of exclusivity. The home and its amenities appear to have been constructed around an old growth tree. The result created is sympathetic with the natural world and follows in the line of sylvan thinking.



Fig 9. Mitsu Yasukawa, James Rose Center Tree Patio, 2017

The designs and theory of Rose points to an important shift in perspective of the contemporary moment. This new approach to landscape design, one that goes beyond the tried and traditional, displays contemporary cultural values and is primed to challenge historic conventions. This modern moment of landscape design that looks to meet the needs and desires of people and incorporate them in such a way that cooperates and coordinates with the natural world stands as testament to a substantial paradigm shift. This new cultural value system celebrates a healthy, sustainable and cognizant relationship between the human and natural world.

This is not to suggest that prior to the modern era, there was little to no regard for the natural world. There are countless instances of numerous cultures and notable Figs professing great admiration and a high degree of value on the natural world well before the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, within the context of a strictly Western perspective the current social-political climate is rather unique in that the discourse concerning the natural landscape is not trivial or tangential, but rather pronounced and a key issue for many. Take for example the climate strikes taken places in over 100 countries across the globe in 2019.<sup>34</sup> With hundreds of thousands of activists marching in unity over their shared concern and passion for protecting the planet from total devastation, it is clear that the natural world is particularly important in the modern zeitgeist.

With such an understanding in mind, it is clear to see that people in the contemporary moment are less apt to hold hostile or antagonistic beliefs regarding the human/nature relationship. Instead of the more archaic attitude in which the domain of civilization and the natural world are mutually exclusive and essentially at odds with one

---

<sup>34</sup> “US to stage its largest ever climate strike: ‘Somebody must sound the alarm’” The Guardian. September 20, 2019 (accessed April 24, 2020)  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/20/climate-strikes-us-students-greta-thunberg>

another, there is a new-found understanding that insist upon a more symbiotic relationship; one in which both society and the natural environment maintain a sustainable and prosperous connection.

This contemporary set of values in Western civilization regarding the human/environmental relation has profound implications regarding the Western understanding of the Sublime. Because the ultimate enemy or rather the ultimate “other” is increasingly seen not in nature alone but in the devastation or removal of nature, it stands to reason that the truly sublime landscape must also not only see the untamed nature as the zenith of the sublime. Instead a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the sublime is necessary to be effective.

Furthermore, Rose’ philosophy and work are worth noting for their implications regarding how the relationship between people and landscape might change. For Rose, the role of design played an important role in the establishment of a new kind of relationship. It is through design that new dialogues can be established. In the case of Rose, by creating landscapes that were designed for both people and the natural environments his work looked to overcome what he saw as a false dichotomy.

In adopting this contemporary perspective, a new understanding or adjustment to the philosophical notion of the sublime is necessary. For Kant, the sublime was exemplified by the traditional notion of the wilderness. Given the historical/cultural context in which he wrote, such an association is understandable. However, it is necessary to modify this association in order to contextualize the experience of the sublime for the contemporary moment. If one is to understand that the natural world and even the wilderness as being important and integral to the well-being of an individual and

even society, then it becomes necessary to conclude that environmental damage and devastation is in fact a potential source of a sublime experience.

### *2.5: Summation*

Historically, the landscape narrative has been focused around human exceptionalism. The Western tradition of the European colonists and settlers holds a perspective that posits nature as being corrupt or an obstacle to overcome. In this perspective, progress and advancement is achieved through dominating nature, exploiting the land and sculpting it to be more conducive to human needs. It is with this mindset that the westward expansion took place, displacing or eliminating the natural world, wild-life and the indigenous people. This attitude of consumption goes hand in hand with moralistic landscape paintings and the rise of Capitalism as an economic and political system.

However, while this line of thought has had a long history, there is room for alternative thoughts. Different ways of thinking and relating to the landscape have existed in the indigenous cultures of North America before colonization. With sylvan thinking, the dichotomy between people and the natural world can be dismantled and a new way of relating to the land that is less antagonistic and more symbiotic can begin to take shape. Evidently this would also affect politics and economics which would be much more focused on preserving the natural environment and work against climate change. In my point of view, this sort of sylvan thinking has even taken root in the field of landscape architecture as seen in the work of James Rose and shows the potential for a new kind of relationship between people and the natural environment.

What this means for the contemporary sublime is a shift in perspective. If nature is in fact essential to a sustainable future, the true source of fear and terror can therefore be found in landscapes that demonstrate the very real peril that faces humanity: the devastation of the natural world and the extinction of the species. For the contemporary moment, not only mountains of rock and stone but ones of waste and refuse can instill a sense of terror and disbelief. It is with this understanding of the reliance and dependence upon the natural world that it is possible to appreciate the truly horrifying circumstances that have imperiled society's future. In such a perspective one is able to perceive industrial devastation as a force of its own which has spiraled out of control. Following the lead of Figs such as Rose, one way for people to engage with this idea of a contemporary sublime could be through immersive landscape experiences. Through landscape design, it might be possible to engage the public in new discourses regarding society, the natural environment and the relationship between the two.

This shift in perspective is important not only for aesthetic considerations but also for environmental ones. Through linking the sublime with environmental disaster and degradation a unique opportunity arises. As explained in the previous chapter, the sublime possesses a profound capacity to change the emotional state of its audience both during the encounter and even well after the experience has transpired. By utilizing the sublime in connection to environmental crisis, one has the potential to instill a motivating force to act upon the experience. By equipping the audience with the facts and realities of the environmental situation along with creating a deep emotional change, one challenges the visitor to consider what might be done to create a healthy and sustainable future.

If one is to understand the sublime within this context, where environmental

destruction and damage are to be considered, there are some profound implications that accompany it. In the first place it is to suggest that the devastation of the natural world by human externalities or as consequences of human behavior is in itself a component of the sublime. Here, development and industrialization can no longer be viewed as purely pillars of success and societal advancement. Instead they must necessarily be understood as also being part of a landscape which is in fact distressing, frightening and even sublime. People are therefore an integral part of the sublime, not only as observers but as active agents.

This change in understanding and relating to the landscape can be accomplished through design. In the case of James Rose, design served to create landscapes that sought to more intimately connect people and the natural world in a harmonious manner. This then raises the question of the sublime. Can design create new kinds of relationships between people and contemporary sublime landscapes? What sort of designs might foster new dialogues regarding a contemporary sublime landscape?

## *Chapter 3: Sublime In Situ*

### *3.1: Contemporary Challenges*

One of the key ideas found amongst the plethora of realizations that have come in the wake of seminal classics such as the work done by Rachel Carson with her transformative novel *Silent Spring*, is the idea that the behaviors and decisions made by human beings can have tremendous and even devastating consequences for the natural world. Today, many have taken this lesson to heart and pursue careers in environmental planning, the environmental protection agency, or the national park system to name a few. Within the field of landscape architecture, such ideas of good stewardship of both public and natural spaces are championed and celebrated. Today, many award-winning designers are praised not only for their aesthetics prowess, but also for their ability to restore beleaguered and struggling landscapes as healthy and thriving pieces of a functioning ecosystem. In many cases their efforts are successful, catering both to the recreational and aesthetic wants and needs of their clients as well as providing aid and remediation to seriously troubled environments.

In instances such as these, it can be difficult to tease out potential pitfalls that might arise as a result of such an approach. However, the process of restoration often requires a transformation of the site. This process of transformation, either through the removal of the disturbance or the introduction of more beneficial elements, presents a new challenge of how to preserve the site's history. More specifically the history of what happened, what caused the landscape to fail, what brought about this environmental damage and the very need for remediation in the first place?

The memories of what caused or what resulted from environmental degradation



are very likely unpleasant. They may very well be a source of repulsion and perhaps even offense to some. However, the discipline of landscape architecture needs to continue its role as stewards of the natural world, responsible caretakers that look to amend the failings of the past and ensure that such mistakes are not made again. This is not to say that there can be no room for enjoyment or pleasure when it comes to this process of remediation. Public engagement and support is absolutely necessary and desirable for a successful design. However, the pursuit of comfort must not come at the expense of understanding the root cause or source of the problem. If the opportunity arises for a landscape to tell a story, to speak to its audience about systemic problems which devastate the environment, it is the responsibility of the designer to allow this message its chance to be heard.

The following sections of this chapter examine several landscapes that face a variety of challenges and develop a number of different solutions. Each of these sites have been selected based on several qualities they possess that directly contribute to a contemporary sublime. These landscapes have historically been damaged by industrial practices and have since been the subjects of remediation efforts. Their devastation has left a substantial impact on the landscape that can be directly viewed by the visitors to the site. Additionally, the sites chosen possess attributes that are classically associated with the sublime including elements of greatness, disagreeableness and the unknown or unfamiliar. Along with these contributing factors, these landscapes have been selected as they exist on a spectrum, ranging from instances where a contemporary sublime has been completely overlooked, to the best instance found that is representative of the idea.

### 3.2: Fresh Kills

One such case can be seen in Fresh Kills (fig. 10). This landfill is slated to become a booming metropolitan green space; the largest New York City has ever known. The design for this future park is ambitious, for it seeks to accomplish meaningful change that can both benefit society and the natural world. While the design stands as a testament to the potential for transformation and metamorphosis that exists in even the most dismal of places, it sadly misses a precious opportunity to salvage a lesson learned from the mountains of refuse that came before it.



Fig. 10: Field Operations Design Team, *Fresh Kills Context Map*, 2005

As New York City expanded its population, so too did it expand its consumption and waste.<sup>35</sup> To meet the ever-growing waste capacity of the city, Fresh kill's landfill was opened on Staten Island in 1948 at a time when the island's western shore remained relatively undeveloped. This was intended as a short-term solution to an increasingly

<sup>35</sup> "NYC Parks : Fresh Kills Park: About the Site", nycparks.org, January 14, 2020 (accessed April 24, 2020) <https://www.nycgovparks.org/park-features/freshkills-park/about-the-site>

exacerbated problem. However, this “short-term” solution lasted for over 53 years and became the principal means by which all New York City household trash and garbage was disposed of (fig. 11). For decades the former swamp became the housing facility for thousands of tons of New York City's solid waste. At its peak, the landfill received an average of 29,000 tons of waste per day. It is under such conditions that only seven years after its opening that Fresh Kills became the largest landfill in the world. Today, the site holds roughly 150 million tons of solid waste.<sup>36</sup>



Fig. 11: Chester Higgins, *Garbage Scows bring Solid waste to Fresh Kills*, 1973

The increasing environmental regulations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the closing of other landfill sites servicing New York City. This resulted in Fresh Kills becoming the only landfill left in operation for residential solid waste. However, this was

---

36

Ibid

put to an end with the passage of a state law which sought to end Fresh Kills' acceptance of waste by 2001, cap the existing mounds of waste, and relocate the city's waste to other sites located out of state. This was later amended after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Center and Fresh Kills was temporarily reopened to accept the material that resulted from the disaster; an additional 1.2 million tons of rubble, debris and other material.<sup>37</sup>

In 2001, a design competition was held to redesign the former landfill into a public park. The beginning competition was an open solicitation inviting professionals worldwide to enter. Teams could be composed of professionals in a wide range of fields including landscape architecture, architecture, ecology, planning, engineering, art, and graphic design. After an initial round of review, six teams were selected to present their designs for review by a jury of professionals who specialized in fields relevant to the end use of the site. Looking to include the public in the process, the city held a series of public meetings and forums in which the people of Staten Island and surrounding communities could inquire about the park and participate in the planning. On December 18, 2001, at the conclusion of the international design competition, the City declared the top three entries, and awarded the landscape architecture firm Field Operations first place. Having won the competition, the firm was given the contract to prepare a master plan for the Fresh Kills site (fig. 11). This design team, lead by landscape architect James Corner (born 1961), consisted of a variety of experts in landfill engineering, remedial design, ecology, habitat restoration, and communication art.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Megan Moriarty, ed. "Fresh Kills: Landfill To Landscape: International Design Competition: 2001"(PDF file) (accessed February 21, 2020)  
[https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/plans/fkl/about\\_competition.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/plans/fkl/about_competition.pdf)

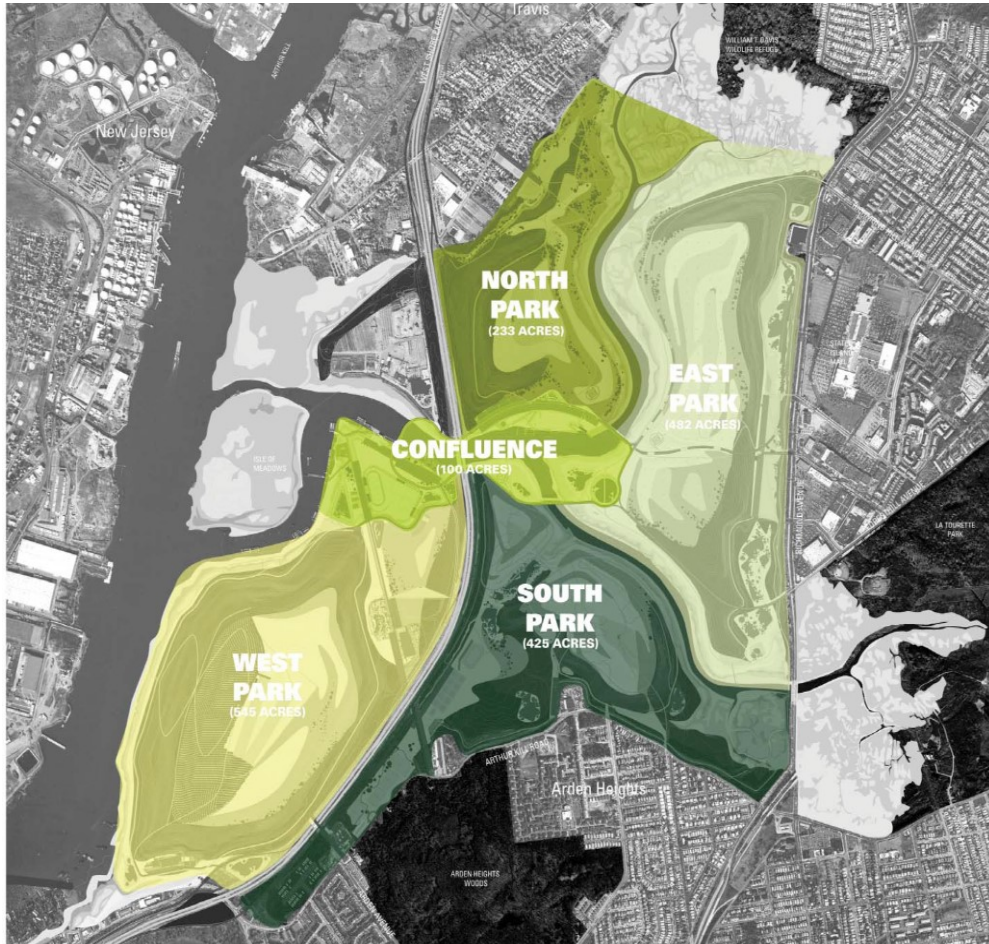


Fig. 12: Field Operations, *Fresh Kills Master Plan Overview*, 2006

Through personal excursions attempting to view and document the site (fig. 12), I have found the park to be virtually inaccessible, with prohibitory fences and locks blocking off entries and exits. The park remains under construction and closed to the general public. The only exception to this rule has been special events in which the park is temporarily opened, and through the scheduling of guided group tours. Due to complications with staff availability, my formal request to tour the site could not be accommodated. I have therefore, turned to the design plans, images, and information available to the public by the Fresh Kills Park Alliance.

---



### 3.3: Fresh Kills Program

The new design for Fresh Kills features five distinct sections each with a unique character and geography. The “Confluence” sits at the physical center of the park. It is here that all of the other portions of the park, along with the creek system converge. Access to the four other park areas, along with administrative buildings and active recreational programming are all envisioned to occur within this 100-acre portion of the park. The immediate adjacency to the water will be a featured asset, with esplanades, boat launches, a marina and a ferry system all available to its patrons (fig. 13). In the spirit of adaptive reuse, the design maintains the bulkheads used previously to unload and haul trash from the barges to the landfill. These areas have been branded the “Creek Landing” and the “Point” and are slated to serve as the most intensely programmed areas of the park.<sup>39</sup>

Fig. 13: Field Operations, *Ariel View of the Point*



<sup>39</sup> “The Park Plan - Fresh Kills Park.” <https://freshkillspark.org/the-park/the-park-plan>. Draft Master Plan PDF, (accessed April 24, 2020), <https://freshkillspark.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Fresh-Kills-Park-Draft-Master-Plan.pdf>

The “North Park” differs greatly from the “Confluence”, designed as a haven for wildlife and a source of light/passive recreation. “North Park” is aimed at celebrating the range of environments housed within it, with approximately 60% being characterized as upland, 25% as lowland and the remaining 15% as wetland. The 233 acres sits directly adjacent to the William D. Davis Wildlife Refuge and is designed to capitalize on this asset by maintaining a majority of the park land as natural habitat to preserve and improve upon the already deteriorated portion of the refuge and expand such habitat outwards. The “North Park” will look to also expand upon the needs and desires of the adjacent community, including small scale creek restoration, denser vegetated buffers between private property and public park land, and a small picnic lawn (fig. 14). A series of paths and trails will allow for access from the creek through the site and up to the summit of the mound, affording beautiful views all along the way.<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 14: Field Operations, *View of the Picnic Ground near the Travis Neighborhood Park Entrance*

The “South Park” features a more robust sense of energy and activity. With a large area of level non-wetland land the design seeks to capitalize on this opportunity for more intense recreational opportunities for activities such as soccer, tennis, mountain biking, or track and field facilities. The majority of these will take place within a confined 38-acre strip. Outside this highly programmed space, pedestrian, mountain biking, and horseback-riding trails would traverse the park and allow for access to the summit of the South Mound (fig. 15).<sup>41</sup>



Fig. 15: Field Operations, *View of Horseback Trials on South Mound*

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid



“East Park” contains vast scenic views and open vegetated areas. With a collection of ponds, a choice location for observing the bird life of the site, “East Park” follows suit, and provides trails for access to the top of the capped mound. Due to the unique topographic quality of the area, large meadows, lawns, trails and open recreational space are all imagined as potential uses for the site. In addition to this vast open area, the main parking and vehicular access to Fresh Kills itself would also be located within “East Park” (fig. 16)<sup>42</sup>.



Fig. 16: Field Operations, *Aerial View of the Nature Education Area in East Park*

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

The “West Park” is proposed to exhibit a large-scale earth-work project, replicating the same size and width of the twin towers as a monument to the utilization of the site as the location for the sorting of debris after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. The work would exist within a meadowed field and be oriented towards the former location of the towers (fig. 17). In recognition of the solemnity of the location, all active recreation is kept away from the site with only trails and pathways leading to the exhibit and the flourishing ecology surrounding it.<sup>43</sup>



Fig. 17: Field Operations, *View of the September 11 Earthwork*

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

The various sites of the park, whilst having a variety of programming, are consistent in their overall tone. The park maintains an image of a serene green space in which people are able to enter, use and enjoy. This thriving landscape says little of the devastation that had taken place prior to the park's creation. This site communicates a story in which both people and the natural world seem to have a healthy and balanced relationship. Such an approach suggests that systemic problem that created the world's largest landfill should be understood as an isolated incident that society has dealt with and can now move on from.

#### *3.4: Fresh Kills Art*

In addition to the memorial for September 11<sup>th</sup>, the park intends to house a number of artistic and cultural works. In collaboration with the master planning team, artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles (1939) has created a number of conceptual proposals. Ukeles is a New York City based artist, known for her work centered on feminism and service-oriented work including subjects such as waste-flows, recycling, people and the environment. She has proposed several art concepts for Fresh Kills including "Morphing Time lines: Energy" intended to be one of the earliest artistic work installations with in the park (fig. 18). To be located on the East Mound, the work consists of a grid of small mirrors and lights arranged to reveal the grid layout of the methane gas monitoring system located beneath the surface. During the day, the grid's mirrors would reflect the sun light, whilst at night; solar powered lights would illuminate the grids location.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid



Fig. 18: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Morphing Time Lines: Energy*, 2006

Ukeles also has plans for a “Discovery Center with Four Discovery Outposts” (fig. 19.). This work is intended to be located within the “Confluence” section of the park and serves as a potential learning opportunity to better understand the site and its environmental conditions. It is to be composed of a number of earthwork structures with “high-tech interior hollows -eggs- for hands on learning, experimentation and exploration of advanced developments in ecology, technology and the flow of urban materials”.

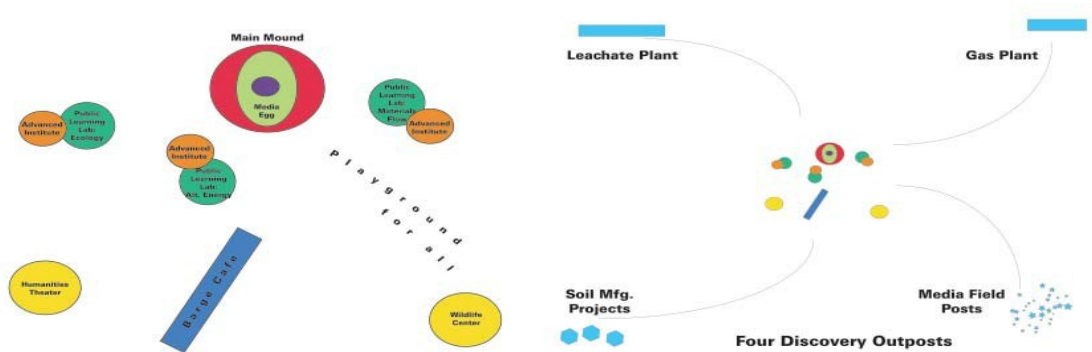


Fig. 19: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Discovery Center*, 2006

Another proposed artistic entry by Ukeles is “Public Offerings: Made by All, Redeemed by All” (fig. 20). In this project, one million private citizens are to select or create an object of personal value. These donations would then be encased in glass blocks and distributed throughout the park, codified, and inventoried along with coordinates of

their locations.<sup>45</sup> This work looks to better establish a connection between the people and the environment, looking to the park landscape not as a detached entity, but a social construction that is the product of society.



Fig. 20: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “*Public Offerings*”, 2006

The park's notable interest to connect art and culture to the park and the people is quite clear. In fact, the draft master plan explicitly states “A site as culturally significant as Fresh Kills – with its history of consumption, waste, engineering, and, now transformation- calls out for the integration of art and culture...”<sup>46</sup> It is abundantly clear that the designers of the park are not only well aware of the significance of the site, but they even directly acknowledge the specific dimension that generated the need for a “transformation”. Despite this, the approach the design takes to addressing these issues is rather tangential. The artistic works that the project has proposed would be an excellent way to highlight the reasons why a design intervention was even necessary in the first place. Yet, the education that the public receives is essentially factual information, or what one could learn from reading a book. Understanding here takes place in discrete, designated “eggs”, or is communicated through light displays that signify what is taking

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

place out of sight and out of mind. The artistic work here lacks the ability to convey experiential knowledge of the damaging impacts of waste because they do not facilitate an experience of the landscape itself. Instead education comes from a constructed human intervention. Essentially, a visitor is not learning from their experience of the landscape, but from the signage made by other people.

The opening line for the description of “Public Offerings: Made By All, Redeemed By All”, reads “—All of us made the social sculpture that is Fresh Kills”.<sup>47</sup> If one is willing to go so far as to say that the creation of Fresh Kills Park can and should be understood as a product of a collective, then surely the same can be said of the creation of Fresh Kills landfill. Yet, the opportunity for understanding exactly how or why such a great effort was needed to transform the landscape is not present in an experiential medium.

In the digital age, access to information is met with incredible ease. Having never set foot outside of New Jersey, one can access thousands of images of the Grand Canyon and a plethora of resources to learn and understand the place. One can easily obtain a great deal of factual information of a place without ever having been there. Despite this ability to “know” the Grand Canyon, having been swarmed countless times with iconic imagery of its scenic views and remarkable features, people will travel from across the world to this remote and isolated spot on the map. This would seem utterly useless if the point of the journey was to acquire some factual knowledge about the place. One could learn all there is to “know” about the canyon from the comfort of home. The reason one would need to leave home is to absorb the experiential knowledge of being in that space. What Fresh Kills is missing is not education, but experience.

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

### 3.5: *Fresh Kills Issues*

The team created a master plan that divided the soon to be park into five sections each with a variety of programs and activities for public enjoyment. However, while this is a tremendous vision, it does notably lack a means of contemplation or reflection upon the ultimate source of the problems that have brought Fresh Kills to the dire circumstances it was in only a few years ago. Further, the design approach not only lacks this means of reflection, but the manner in which it is presented is somewhat problematic. The perspective of a draft plans for a future Fresh Kills park shows an extensive pathway system that extends throughout the park, connecting a variety of locations and facilitating access of the pedestrians (fig. 21). Observation platforms and docks are among the varied amenities available to the general public within Fresh Kills.

The lush greenery and abundance of vegetation in meadows, forests, and wetlands cover the landscape and convey a strong sense of a thriving healthy landscape. When considering the historic conditions of Fresh Kills, the proposed designs offer a phenomenal alternative to the former landfill. The design re-imagines a previously unusable space as a new hotspot for outdoor recreation, and public enjoyment. However, this then begs the question, “When one removes these vestiges of the past, what does one risk losing”?





Fig. 21: Field Operation, *Fresh Kills Park Draft Master Plan Illustration*, 2006

Here in lies the issue. It is beyond dispute that the societal habits, norms and ways of life created the Fresh Kills landfill. The consumptive habits of the New York City industries stand as a testament to a way of living in which people are virtually divorced from their waste. It is representative of a societal norm in which individuals are not able to experience the very real impact of their own decisions regarding consumption and its impact on the landscape and the environment. With such a pronounced and pressing issue at hand, transforming or erasing any visible trace of this worldwide problem fails to address and acknowledge an environmental disaster. Unlike, earthquakes or other natural catastrophes, the epicenter or origin for places like Fresh Kills can be found at the feet of the anthropocentric way of thinking. It is cultural habits and societal norms that have given birth to landfills. It is the decisions made by individual consumers to rampantly use and discard materials at tremendous scales that have created the conditions necessary for



literal mountains of refuse to take shape. None of this is to suggest that this is in any way a case against parks. Rather, it is meant to expand the pallet of options available for dealing with such troubled landscapes. Fresh Kills is a unique landscape. It is emblematic of an incredibly dire issue that is often difficult to truly comprehend. With such a unique symbolic quality, it would be a missed opportunity for designers and for socially conscious citizens to not act on this rich opportunity for education.

While the idea of preserving a landscape of waste might at first sound completely void of any aesthetic merit, examining such a landscape within the context of Edmund Burke paints a very different picture. As explained in earlier chapters, in considering Burke's aesthetic ideas regarding the sublime it is necessary to expand their scope to more fully appreciate the difference between the contemporary moment and the context in which Burke wrote. This expansion of the sublime necessitates the inclusion of landscapes that have been disturbed or damaged by individuals or society. With such an understanding in mind, the preservation of Fresh Kills landfill as a testament to the unencumbered consumption of society would fit very well into this new notion of the sublime.

A roughly sketched vision of what a contemporary sublime landscape might look like depicts a plan view of the Fresh Kills park boundaries along with an enlarged look at the North Mound landfill cap area (fig. 22). The enlargement of the North Mound shows a section corridor running directly through the capped mound itself. The concept does not look to undo or replace the work of the Field Operations team, but to build upon their efforts by incorporating this new design element.

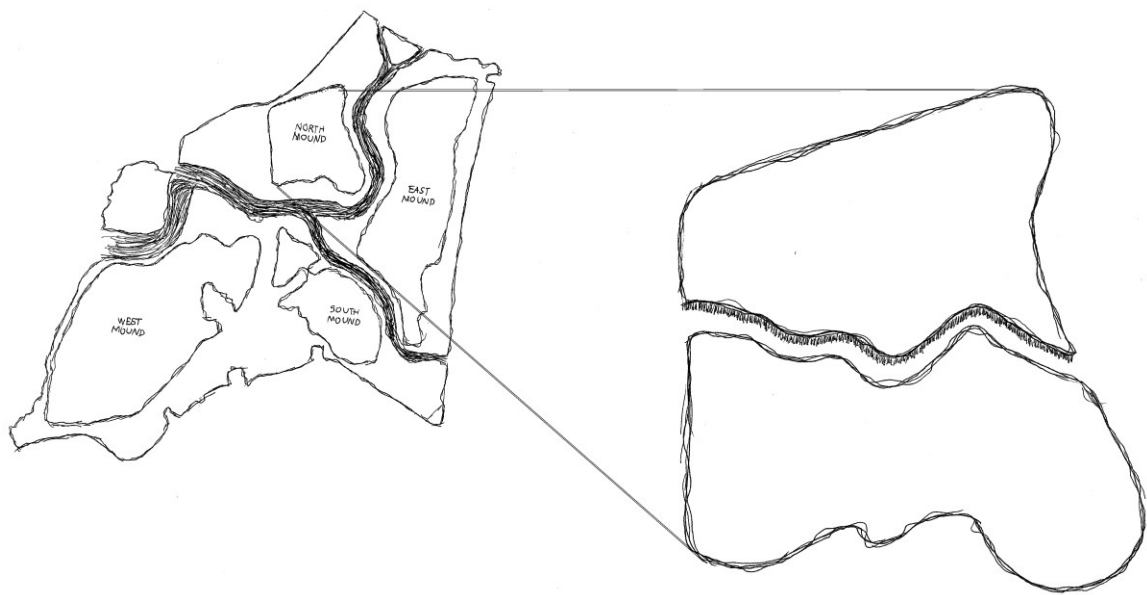


Fig. 22: *Fresh Kills park conceptual sketch: Plan view*

A section cut showing a small portion of the corridor pathway alludes to the tens or hundreds of feet of refuse capped beneath the various layers of topsoil, filters, and fill necessary to cap the landfill and create Fresh Kills park. The experience of the juxtaposition of the idyllic parkland setting existing atop this capped landfill and what is actually underneath would be made possible for the corridor pedestrians by installing highly durable and transparent material.

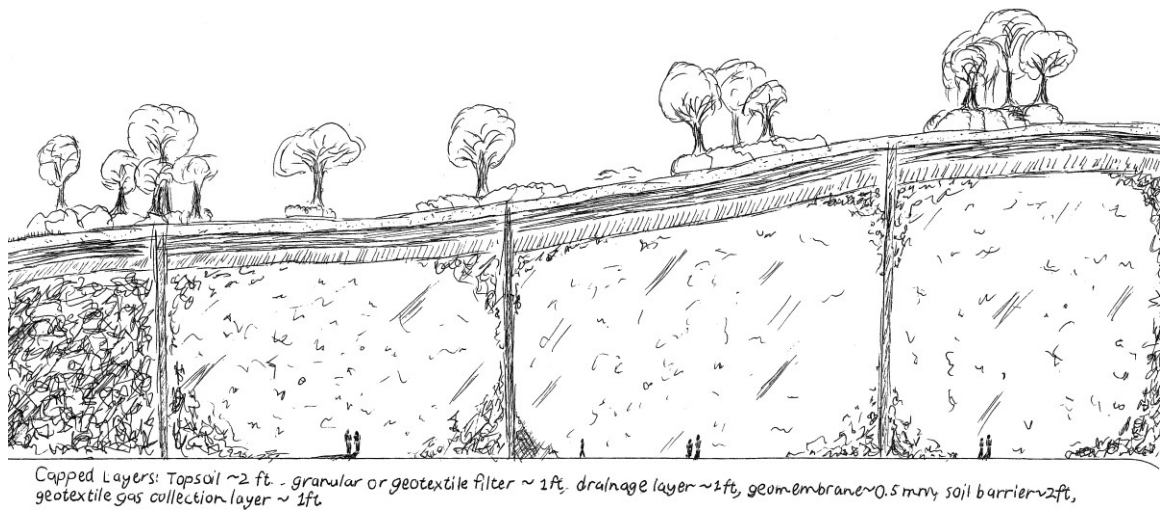


Fig. 23: *Fresh Kills park conceptual sketch: Section*

This corridor experience would serve as a means for experiencing a contemporary sublime. By allowing visitors of the park to walk through a portion of the landfill, a sense of scale could be established in regard to the systemic problem of waste creation, the impacts of which extend well beyond the boundaries of Fresh Kills. The height of the walls on both sides of the corridor could visually enforce a sense of suddenness and vastness in addition to creating a sense of being encompassed. The visitor will thus be effectively surrounded by the damaged landscape (fig. 23). The stark contrast of a traditionally beautiful parkland setting on top of a corridor displaying the mountains of refuse would highlight the distinct landscape aesthetics of both the existing park and the former landfill.

Burke was quite clear that the sublime could not be created with apprehension, terror and dread alone. The profound quality of the sublime stems also from the delight which is experienced with the cessation of such negative emotions, similar to the relief from the cessation of pain. In a design for Fresh Kills in which the sublime quality of the

landscape was preserved, the “delight” would be experienced upon the exit from the corridor. The delight of Fresh Kills would reside in the knowledge that the world has not yet become one massive, festering landfill. That there is still time enough for individuals and society at large to act in such a way that the future might be one in which places like Fresh Kills are nothing more than a vestige of a bygone age. The delight of Fresh Kills would exist in the opportunity that still exists for a shift in paradigm and the chance to design for a better future.

This sense of delight is incredibly important not only as it relates to the overall concept of the sublime itself, but also as it relates to the environmental lesson that desperately needs to be considered when considering the story of Fresh Kills landfill. As previously explained, the sublime possesses a sense of delight which can be understood as a general sense of relief that accompanies a daunting/intimidating encounter. By instilling a sense of dread at the potential future that awaits society should it not amend its transgressions and reconsider its methods of operation, the sublime demonstrates a strong sense of urgency in its audience. However, the relief that the sublime provides averts the audience away from the defeatist mindset that plagues the nihilists of the world. A sublime Fresh Kills, one which daylights the serious environmental challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, would allow for its audience to contemplate the very real impacts of their own habits without smothering them in a sense of futility.

In the case of Fresh Kills, the opportunity for a contemporary sublime experience is present. However, this aesthetic asset has not yet been realized. The design is opting for a landscape that is serene, scenic, and virtually void of the waste that shaped its very grounds. The design offers many opportunities to connect people to their environment ,

but not the harsh reality that plagues places such as Fresh Kills. The public is lacking in opportunity to engage with these landscapes and is consequently lacking in the understanding of their realities.

Although Fresh Kills overlooks this sublime asset, there are cases in which the designers not only try preserve some signal that the landscape is failing, but even highlight these failings as a core component of the experience. One notable example is the case of the Welzow-Süd open cast mine. Although Welzow-Süd exists in a different context with different environmental issues, it faces a very similar conundrum as presented in the case of Fresh Kills. Specifically, both sites are faced with the question of how to connect people to the landscape and to which landscape should they be connected.

### *3.6: Lusatia Germany*

The second case study leads us to Germany, to a region called Lusatia (fig. 24), which today, holds large areas of shut down brownfields. However, Lower Lusatia was once an agrarian landscape; with sandy, but not infertile soil: in 1865, its people busied themselves with the harvesting of corn, fruits, vegetables; growing tobacco, keeping bees; gathering timber; catching fish.<sup>48</sup>

While there were pockets of small pieces of industry scattered throughout the region, real industrialization remained relatively absent from the land until 1855. Prior to this date it was well known that lignite, or brown coal, was abundant and easily accessible in Lusatia with some seams of the resource being so shallow as to breach the surface of the earth.

Yet the quality of this lignite was unreliable, and generally considered poor. All of this

---

<sup>48</sup> Petra Kabus, “The History of an Industrial Region: How Lusatia became what it was”, in *Redesigning Wounded Landscapes: At the IBA Lusatia –a Laboratory for New Landscapes*, (Berlin: Jovis, 2012), 37-38

changed with the introduction of a briquette press. This technological advancement allowed for lignite to be sufficiently compacted as to make it a viable option for fuel.<sup>49</sup>



Fig. 24: Lusatia Region Map

Lusatian lignite has since become a substantial component to the German economy being one of the only sources of fuel readily available in the country.

Unsurprisingly, this vital resource was, as a consequence, ravenously extracted. In Lusatia alone, over 200 million tons of lignite were mined. Because of the nature of the resource being located closer to the surface than hard coal, open cast mining techniques were used, utilizing massive industrial machinery to dig out large trenches extending miles long. By the end of the 1980's nearly forty of these open cast mines were established in Lusatia.<sup>51</sup>

The impacts of this system of mining inflict serious damage to the natural environment. The process removes billions of tons of soil, disrupting the natural soil

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid 40

<sup>51</sup> Jochen Visscher, ed. *New Landscape Lusatia: International Building Exhibition Catalog*. (Berlin: Jovis, 2010), 23

profile of the area. As minerals such as pyrite and marcasite, sulphide minerals commonly associated with coal, are weathered and oxidized they produce acidic products known as acid mine drainage (AMD). As a result, lakes of acid form in exhausted mine pits.<sup>52</sup>

In order for this to occur, the massive machinery necessary for extraction require stable ground to operate, which necessitates groundwater to be pumped out through deep wells that extend beneath the layer of lignite. Consequently, the groundwater levels are considerably lowered for several miles around the mining operations. In some cases old growth trees in nearby villages have died due to drought like conditions as a result of this practice. However, not only are the groundwater levels lowered, but their chemical composition is threatened. When exposed to oxygen, sulfur minerals produce sulphates and iron sludge. This highly toxic sludge, once entered into the river system, proves to be hazardous to most forms of life.<sup>53</sup>

Not only does this mining practice prove troublesome to the natural environment, but it also extracts a serious toll on the human populations that surround it. Part of the lowering of groundwater levels results in ground subsidence, which results in the fracturing of house walls and road surfaces.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, roughly 130 villages, with a population of 25,000 Lusatians were displaced in order to facilitate the voracious extraction of lignite.<sup>55</sup> While this proved to be a distressing time for environmental and cultural consideration, the industry became a source of both fuel and employment. For

---

<sup>52</sup> European Parliament Policy Department C: Citizens Rights and Constitutional Affairs, *Fact-Finding Visit To Lusatia, Germany 14-16 February 2018*, Jos Heezen, 2018 (accessed April 24, 2020) [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/596845/IPOL\\_BRI\(2018\)596845\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/596845/IPOL_BRI(2018)596845_EN.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> Visscher, ed. *New Landscape Lusatia* , 23.

example, while the community Grossräschchen was destroyed displacing 4,000 residents to make way for a new mine, the industry brought work to over 60,000 people. After reunification, and the closing of nearly all of the mines, unemployment rose to 25% in the region.<sup>56</sup>

To date, over 75,000 hectares of land in Lusatia alone have been altered and damaged by the lignite mining process.<sup>57</sup> Needless to say the lignite mines have had a powerful impact on the people and the landscape. In the wake of such trauma, the question then becomes, what is to be done with this “moonscape”, a barren, rocky landscape characteristic of the surface of the moon that Lusatia is left with (fig. 25)



Fig. 25: Osha Gray Davidson, *Welzow Süd opencast lignite mine*

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 23

<sup>57</sup> Reinhard F. Hüttel, “Ecology of Post Strip-Mining Landscapes in Lusatia, Germany,” *Environmental Science & Policy* 1, no. 2 (1998): 129–135



### 3.7: *Lusatia Reimagined*

Germany's Bundesberggesetz (federal mining law) explicitly states that the damages done to the landscape as a result of mining practices must be remedied by the polluter. A typical remediation landscape solution would likely consist of filling and recultivating the large cavities caused by the open-cast mining. This method would make way for agricultural land, natural forests, and areas for development. What cavities that are not filled in with soil would be transformed into artificial lakes. The former structural facilities used in the mining process would be destroyed and replaced by other development sites or be abandoned as brownfields. Such an approach would provide the setting in which the history of the site, the memory of what happened to both the people and the land, would be cleanly swept away; the ideal circumstances to begin to forget.<sup>58</sup>

However, there is debate amongst many as to the efficacy and merit to such a model of progress. Those looking for less of a clean slate approach might opt for a second scenario in which nature is left to itself. Rather than intensive hands on intervention, the landscape would be allowed to advance and change gradually over time once all mining activity has ceased. Groundwater would slowly rise to fill the trenches, vegetation would grow and spread where nature dictates and abandoned structures would decay and break down over time. With the threat of people removed, wildlife would eventually return to reclaim this new and unique landscape.<sup>59</sup>

Despite this idealistic proposal's promise of a return to wilderness, there is substantial reason to question its likelihood. Lacking human intervention, the water that would fill the trenches would be high in sulphates, making it far too saline for fish or

---

<sup>58</sup> Visscher, ed. *New Landscape Lusatia*, 24

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 25

vegetation to survive in. Such water would be unsuitable for people as well; the water would not be usable for swimming and its presence would even risk contaminating nearby water systems. Even accessing this barren water world would be problematic as the soil is loose and liable to collapse around these lakes. The result of this low interference approach would yield not a romantic world returned to better days, but merely an unusable, inaccessible and barren landscape.<sup>60</sup>

Looking for a better way, Internationale Bauausstellung (IBA- International Building Exhibition, applied their efforts to an approach where the landscape could be both functional and preserve some remnant of the site's history of degradation. The result of these efforts was the creation of “island landscapes”, discrete pockets of design in which the character and particular conditions of a specific location dictated the medium or element the design would feature and explore. These islands of design, aim at informing the future by looking to the past; seeking to re-use and preserve the deep and storied history of the landscape.<sup>61</sup>

One of the most fascinating design proposals was the Welzow Landscape Project. It was on this site that massive conveyor bridges and bulldozers tore up the earth, dumped the soil and left behind a bizarre moonscape with a patterned quality of sandy ridges and valleys. With such an appearance, some have come to call the place “Kippenrippen” or “dump ribs”. The design idea was novel in that, rather than attempt a return to the traditional nature of the area, the project attempted to create an interactive experience that combined both strong aesthetics and an ecological message.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 26-27

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 28-29

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 157

The Welzow-Süd open cast mine had not ceased production at the time of the project. Because of the particularly rich abundance of lignite in the location, mining operations have been slated to continue until anywhere from 2030 or even 2050. This means that the area will experience continual spoil as a result from the mine for years to come. One of these spoils is the sandy, desolate desert which forms as a result from the beginnings of the mining process.<sup>63</sup>

The proposed project sought to call attention to this desert landscape. By working in tandem with the mining company, through careful coordination, the design would create a sculpted desert with a lush, green oasis. The idea was to create a varied relief landscape complete with hills, cones and plains which would be slowly vegetated over time (fig. 26). The process would take place over several decades and would coincide with the targets for land re cultivation that the mining operations were obliged to follow.<sup>64</sup>



Fig. 26: *Concept Illustration of Welzow- Süd “Desert Oasis”*

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 158

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 159

### 3.8: Lusatia Issues

Despite this ambitious and highly creative approach, the plans to complete this vision fell through. Through a combination of factors including questions regarding the dust exposure that would be present, impact of tourism, and the legality of the concept fitting in line with the legally binding plan, the design came under fire from critics. Not wanting to totally abandon the project, the design team sought alternatives. Working with a committee of concerned parties including the mining company, local community representatives, planning authorities, and agricultural and forest industries, the team sought to find a solution to remedy the design concerns. However, despite this great effort the subsequent alternative was ultimately abandoned as well. Since then, the desert has become open to public tours, allowing the viewers to experience the bizarre moonscape (fig. 27).<sup>65</sup>



Fig. 27: Aris Tsantiropoulos, *Mining landscape with a view of Schwarze- Pumpe power station*, 2006

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 160

What can be seen in this proposal is this desire to connect people to a damaged and desperate landscape in an aesthetic manner. By opting not to simply bring back the natural environment and instead choosing to provide the public an experience of a totally other world, the design looks to address this disconnect between people and the landscape that their society has produced. Such an approach, would allow the visitor to see a visual representation of what it means to mine the land and what the consequences are of such practices.

In considering the efforts to not only allow people to access these places, but also to create an aesthetic environment, the design also takes into consideration the type of experience that the patrons of such a place should have. The choice to sculpt the landscape reveals the intent of the designers to create a place that can provide an educational experience that is in part pleasurable. Such an experience falls well into the aesthetic category of the sublime where in there exists both pain and pleasure. In this case one would experience the sublime as manifest itself in understanding and representing the negative impacts of industrial power on the landscape mixed with the pleasure of stunning landscape aesthetics. Such a move would not emotionally exhaust the patrons of the site with a nihilistic angst, seeing all efforts to change and improve the old ways of living. At the same time this would providing a jarring enough experience as to motivate its visitors to carry the experience with them long after leaving the desert.

Importantly, the design even takes the connection between people and the landscape a step further by overtly sculpting the landscape. In taking the earth, sand and soil, carefully coordinated in such a manner as to construct ridges and valleys in a patterned effect along with other synthetic shapes and massings, the design reinforces the

connection between human activity and their impacts on the environment. By exposing the direct manipulation of the landscape and the presence in environmental degradation the design forces the viewer to recognize the role society has played in the human – environment relationship.

Not only does this design offer a similar sentiment to the sublime, as being a combination of pleasure and pain, but is also composed of the same descriptive elements as are present in the sublime as well. The landscape itself would be composed of raw earth; cut open like a wound. Hard, granular sand forming mountains would rise to form small chains of mountains. Within this sea of sands and soil, life is virtually absent and would remain so for decades to come and only with gradual pace would any sign of flora or fauna emerge. The dark coloration of the materials would lend itself to the omnipresent feeling of desolation.

The design concept is still further linked to the sublime in its connection to obscurity. In the Caspar David Friedrich painting, obscurity was represented physically in the sea of fog. Obscurity, or the unknown, is present in the novelty of the design endeavor. A landscape that signifies a need for retreat, for many, is uncharted territory. Coming to terms with the notion that industrial expansion needs to be curtailed, in a physical landscape can be a challenging experience and one that many are unfamiliar with. What that experience is like is obscure.

Today, the public is unable to engage in the proposed design but is able to engage with this landscape to some degree. Although the public is not afforded the opportunity to enjoy a free-range experience, a number of tours of the active mining process have been made available (fig. 28). People are able to see firsthand the act of mineral extraction and



the resulting landscapes that form as a direct result. This effort is commendable but is not without cause for concern.

It can be considered commendable in that it is an attempt to foster a relationship between the public and a highly impacted landscape. By offering tours of the moonscape that exists as a result of industrial mining process, the site can serve as an informative experience which can partially satisfy the desire of the public to connect with their environment. People are offered the opportunity to engage with a truly novel landscape that might otherwise be forgotten or never even acknowledged in the first place.



Fig. 28: Benjamin Pritzkeleit, *On a tour of the active mine Welzow Süd*, 2008

However, this experience of a guided tour is not a sufficient substitute for the original design proposal. The understanding one can obtain from a guided tour is more akin to factual learning; the individual is not encouraged or required to mentally engage

with the material at hand but merely asked to record and catalog a series of facts and Figs. Its significance is pre-processed and closer to data than knowledge. This differs strongly from experiential learning, where an individual is actively engaged with the material at hand and is therefore required to go beyond a memorized edict.

Not only do guided tours impede the ability of the public to engage in meaningful experiential learning, but such experiences detract from the potential of encountering the sublime. Guided tours are rehearsed, choreographed and safe. They anticipate what is to come and plan for the future. This sort of approach is not without merit, as it is necessary to do so in order to avoid issues of liability. However, in doing so one is ultimately robbed of the chance to encounter the unexpected. To feel shock, awe or astonishment at what one finds along a pre-planned tour is difficult if not entirely impossible. In circumstances like these, one is able to slip back into the comfort of a higher authority taking charge and responsibility for one's safety and well-being. This allows for the individual to essentially pass over agency and concern over to some outside authority. This sense of security might make for a less distressing and more serene viewing experience, but it fails in exciting any notion of urgency.

An experience of the contemporary sublime on the other hand would have almost the opposite effect. The individual would be presented a landscape which demonstrates the severity of the issue at hand in a manner that creates a strong emotional response. The viewer would be filled with sensations of shock, awe and fear; infusing this environmental message with a barrage of strong emotional perceptions which have not been synthetically crafted by others but have formed organically by the individual in question. This intense connection between the individual and the damaged or disturbed



landscape offers the ideal catalyst for transformative behavior; looking not only to understand what has been done to the environment but what the individual can do to alleviate this degradation.

Such experiential learning could have taken place in the artificial desert landscape that was proposed. The qualities of such are conducive to a sublime experience; an encounter with an awe-inspiring force that radically charges the individual with a strong emotional response. Such a response would not only impact the individual during the experience but would even be carried on after the encounter; potentially leaving the door open for further reflection on the issues at hand after returning to typical daily living.

Despite their best efforts, the design concept for Welzow Süd was never able to come to fruition. The opportunity to facilitate a sublime landscape experience in which the public could engage with the environment was present and attempted. Due to technical difficulties and concerns it was not fully realized. Tragic though this may be, there are instances in which the design effort is matched with an equally successful designed landscape, as seen in the case of the Quarry Garden in Shanghai Botanical Garden.

### *3.9: Quarry Garden*

The third and final case study is the restoration project known as the Quarry Garden in Shanghai Botanical Gardens. As the name suggests, the landscape was formerly one of a pair of rock quarries which were excavated during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The quarries were located at the center of Chen Mountain, once a popular tourist destination. The landscape designers were presented with the challenge of creating a space that could both

accentuate the scenic beauty of the location while at the same time reconstruct the severely degraded ecological conditions; stripped of substantial biodiversity and abundance, compounded with a high degree of rock weathering and soil loss. Furthermore, people's ability to view or access the site had been cut off for over twenty years, leaving the quarry abandoned and very nearly forgotten.<sup>66</sup>

The new garden, designed by THUPDI and Tsinghua University, Beijing features a variety of experiences from both the peak and base of the quarry which can be broken into three distinct sections: the “Lake Area”, the “Platform Area”, and the “Deep Pool” (fig. 29). The “Lake Area” is located to the west end of the garden and is the first portion of the design visitor’s encounter upon entry. This initial section features a “mirror lake”, acting as a balancing agent to the “Deep Pool”, along with a “flower seeing platform” meant to enrich the area with color and aesthetic vegetation. Following the “Lake Area”, visitors come upon the “Platform Area” complete with a system of entries and exits to underground facilities and a series of walls to conduct movement through the site. The final portion of the garden is the “Deep Pool”. Due to the size, depth and variety of surfaces, this last segment of the garden actually forms the essential core of the overall design. The “Deep Pool's” ramp-way allows visitors to descend roughly twenty to thirty meters into the quarry pit, hovering just above the pooled water at its base.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> “Quarry Garden in Shanghai Botanical Garden Songjiang District, Shanghai, China.” ASLA 2012 Professional Awards | Quarry Garden in Shanghai Botanical Garden, (accessed January 14, 2020) <https://www.asla.org/2012awards/139.html>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid



Fig. 29: Yao Chen, *Quarry Garden Site Plan*

Quarry Garden qualifies as sublime in a number of different ways. Firstly, the sheer size and scale of the quarry pit lends itself to the sublime. The pit itself plunges roughly twenty to thirty meters into the earth and extends another twenty to thirty meters below the water's surface (fig. 30). At such heights/depths it is not difficult to consider the tension one would experience at the precipice of the pit. Not only is the quarry deep, but it covers an extensive area of roughly two and a half acres.



Fig. 30: Yao Chen, *Quarry Garden in Shanghai Botanical Gardens*

The design further champions the concept of the sublime through its ability to establish a sense of grandeur in which the landscape overshadows the individual. By virtue of the fact that the design facilitates access around and into the pit itself, the viewer is capable of being encompassed by the quarry. Such an experience completely dwarfs the individual and creates a strong sense of diminished stature in comparison to the immediate landscape. This descent into the pit also obscures all lines of sight except

those that terminate with the quarry walls. In doing so, the design establishes an incredibly simplistic, yet effective, paradigm in which the only object of consideration is the quarry itself.

The material quality of the cliff walls also lends itself to a sublime character. Jagged, rough, and uneven rock lines the quarry cliffs. This gnarled surface is both rich in its textured appearance while at the same time accomplishing a sense of indifference or disagreeableness. Their haggard appearance and gruff exterior remind the viewers of the fact that the place they are experiencing was not created with the intent of catering to aesthetic pleasures. Rather, the beleaguered appearance of the pit reminds the audience of the extractive and destructive history of the location and creates a direct connection between the aesthetic quality of the space and the historic context that created it.

What is of great interest here is the way in which this design handles the reality that constructed the situation. The garden takes full ownership of the history of the site. Not only does the design allow for casual observation of the pit itself, it even facilitates access into the former quarry. Such an approach to the site is both honest and responsible as it exposes the reality of the situation at hand. A visitor to the Quarry Garden would be hard-pressed to remain unaware of the impact that human activities such as mining can have on the landscape. It is one thing to read a detailed history or documentation of the impacts and realities of a quarry. It is a very different thing to be able to experience what a quarry really feels like. To appreciate the scale of the operation, to comprehend the potential impacts of such activity is no easy task. Access to the Quarry Garden provides the public with a valuable resource for both recreation and education.

There are some key differences between Fresh Kills and the Quarry Garden.

Notably they deal with two very different phenomena: in one case the issue deals with the disposal of waste, whereas the other deals with the impacts of industrial mining.

Furthermore, there is a history of romanticizing abandoned quarries that has not been established for landfills. However, one of the most important differences between the design for Fresh Kills and the design for Quarry Garden lie in their approach to the problem at hand. Fresh Kills offers a phenomenal experience in a once inaccessible landscape. Not only does the design offer recreational opportunities for the public but it also remediates a highly degraded landscape; replacing a desolate garbage dump with a lush and functioning ecosystem. However, such an approach addresses the immediate problem rather than the systemic one. By solving all of the issues of the former landfill, by designing a landscape which appears to be pristine and with little to no trace of the problem that called for this intervention, the design clings to a mentality that fosters a willful blindness regarding the impact of mass consumption and non-recyclable waste. Such an approach ignores the greater issue or suggests that the existing mode of operation is not problematic. What Fresh Kills might suggest to the public is that given the time and creative energy, the problems created by the past can be swept away, beautifully in fact. Rather than face the reality that these challenges have a lasting impact, Fresh Kills suggests that time and effort can resolve the issue. In short this approach implies that the existing way of operation is sustainable. This differs sharply with the approach taken by Quarry Garden. In Shanghai, the design intervention daylights the very issue that brought the design team to the site – of course that is possible due to an established romantic relationship to the landscape of the quarries, that does not and cannot apply to waste landscapes, but let us keep the thought and develop it: while the Quarry Garden is

undoubtedly aesthetically pleasing, it is also undeniably honest with its history. By featuring the quarry pit, allowing the public to see and even engage with it, the design affords its patrons the chance to consider the damaging realities that are often out of sight. It forces the viewer to recognize the permanence of their actions on the planet and even challenges them to consider just how sustainable such actions can be.

### *3.10: Concluding Thoughts*

As the Anthropocene advances, the first geologic time period in which human beings exert a global impact on the planet, serious and systemic problems must be confronted. Such a request is a daunting task which can challenge even the most conscious and considerate of individuals. To accomplish this radical shift in paradigm, it is essential that the public is not only conscious of the facts and reasoning that have led to the present situation, but that the public is able to understand them on a visceral level. It is one thing to “know” a mile is 5,280 feet; it is a very different thing to walk it. If the sustainable future of the environment is dependent upon individuals comprehending the impacts of their own personal decisions, it is imperative that the public is confronted with an experience of the severity of the situation. By incorporating the aesthetic theory of the sublime into the landscape design of damaged or remediated sites, one achieves much more than the chance for the public to walk a once inaccessible space. The incorporation of the sublime into landscape design makes it possible to facilitate an emotional connection between the conscious understanding of what environmental degradation “means” and a visceral experience of such environmental degradation.

The experience of the sublime has a valuable that can be activated to this end. Various cultures from across the globe have emphasized, through storytelling practices and the creation of monuments and sites, the importance of willingly confronting the unknown and the frightful. It is this idea of confrontation that has kindled the exploratory spirit of geographers to learn about unknown lands and share their knowledge in an attempt to better society. Landscape preservationists have advocated for the protection of places such as the national parks and in an effort to ensure the experience of the sublime for posterity.

However, this idea of “the sublime” is by no means fossilized. Because the experience of the sublime results as a response to a particular relationship between the viewer and an environment or a landscape, what causes that experience is subject to change. Historically, the sublime for Americans was found purely in experiences of wild, untamed nature and was understood as inherently antagonistic. Not only was nature sublime, but it was also corrupted and in need of correction. The direct manipulation of the landscape to serve human needs was the proper way to interact with the landscape. However, this relationship between people and the landscape as established by the American settlers is not the only way in which people can relate to the landscape. Adopting a new perspective, one in which people understand this relationship to the natural world as a positive one, could allow for a very different sort of sublime to take place. This contemporary sublime experience could allow people to understand the industrial devastation of the natural environment as an experience of the sublime. In doing this, important messages about environmental health could be conveyed to the public through an experiential medium.



Landscape restoration efforts and designs could benefit from considering ways in which to incorporate some elements of the contemporary sublime into their work to both expand and enhance the visitor experience of the site and to convey important messages about the health of the landscape. The range of design approaches and site conditions seen in the site remediation efforts of Fresh Kills in New York, Welzow-Süd in Lusatia and the Quarry Garden in Shanghai indicate that there exists plenty of opportunities to attempt such an effort and that some designers are open to the possibility. As a profession, landscape architecture is well positioned to take up the responsibility of advancing in this idea of a contemporary sublime and design for a more sustainable and enriched future.

## Image credits

P. 7, Fig. 1. Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:EdmundBurke1771.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:EdmundBurke1771.jpg&oldid=314660192> (accessed February 29, 2020).

P. 13, Fig. 2. Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Caspar David Friedrich - Wanderer above the sea of fog.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Caspar\\_David\\_Friedrich\\_-\\_Wanderer\\_above\\_the\\_sea\\_of\\_fog.jpg&oldid=398829573](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Caspar_David_Friedrich_-_Wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog.jpg&oldid=398829573) (accessed February 29, 2020).

P. 14, Fig. 3. Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Double Arch (8519613743).jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Double\\_Arch\\_\(8519613743\).jpg&oldid=342295298](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Double_Arch_(8519613743).jpg&oldid=342295298) (accessed February 29, 2020).

P. 24, Fig. 4. Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Theodore-Roosevelt-and-John-Muir 1906.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Theodore-Roosevelt-and-John-Muir\\_1906.jpg&oldid=364957657](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Theodore-Roosevelt-and-John-Muir_1906.jpg&oldid=364957657) (accessed February 17, 2020).

P. 28, Fig. 5. Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Cole Thomas The Oxbow (The Connecticut River near Northampton 1836).jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Cole\\_Thomas\\_The\\_Oxbow\\_\(The\\_Connecticut\\_River\\_near\\_Northampton\\_1836\).jpg&oldid=390010768](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Cole_Thomas_The_Oxbow_(The_Connecticut_River_near_Northampton_1836).jpg&oldid=390010768) (accessed February 29, 2020).

P. 31, Fig. 6. Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:American Progress (John Gast painting).jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:American\\_Progress\\_\(John\\_Gast\\_painting\).jpg&oldid=396549580](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:American_Progress_(John_Gast_painting).jpg&oldid=396549580) (accessed February 29, 2020).

P. 37, Fig. 7. Cardasis, Dean. *James Rose*. Athens : Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Georgia Press, 2017.

P. 38, Fig. 8 The Cultural Landscape Foundation, <https://tclf.org/landscapes/james-c-rose-residence> (accessed, January 21, 2020)

P. 40, Fig. 9. NorthJersey.com, <https://www.northjersey.com/picture-gallery/news/bergen/ridgewood/2017/09/17/photos-visiting-the-james-rose-center/105739888/> (accessed, January 21, 2020)

P. 48, Fig. 10. *GROUNDSWELL: Constructing the contemporary landscape* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005) 156

P. 49, Fig. 11. Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:GARBAGE SCOWS BRING SOLID WASTE, FOR USE AS LANDFILL, TO FRESH KILLS ON STATEN ISLAND, JUST EAST OF CARTERET, NJ - NARA - 548315.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:GARBAGE\\_SCOWS\\_BRING\\_SOLID\\_WASTE\\_FOR\\_USE\\_AS\\_LANDFILL\\_TO\\_FRESH\\_KILLS\\_ON\\_STATEN\\_ISLAND\\_JUST\\_EAST\\_OF\\_CARTERET\\_NJ\\_-\\_NARA\\_-\\_548315.jpg&oldid=300715140](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:GARBAGE_SCOWS_BRING_SOLID_WASTE_FOR_USE_AS_LANDFILL_TO_FRESH_KILLS_ON_STATEN_ISLAND_JUST_EAST_OF_CARTERET_NJ_-_NARA_-_548315.jpg&oldid=300715140) (accessed February 29, 2020).

P. 51, Fig. 12. Fresh Kills Park Alliance, (Draft Masterplan PDF), <https://FreshKillspark.org/the-park/the-park-plan> (accessed January 12, 2020)

P. 52, Fig. 13. Fresh Kills Park Alliance, (Draft Masterplan PDF), <https://FreshKillspark.org/the-park/the-park-plan> <https://FreshKillspark.org/the-park/the-park-plan> (accessed January 12, 2020)

P. 53, Fig. 14. Fresh Kills Park Alliance, (Draft Masterplan PDF), <https://FreshKillspark.org/the-park/the-park-plan> (accessed January 12, 2020)

P. 54, Fig. 15. Fresh Kills Park Alliance, (Draft Masterplan PDF), <https://FreshKillspark.org/the-park/the-park-plan> (accessed January 12, 2020)

P. 55, Fig. 16. Fresh Kills Park Alliance, (Draft Masterplan PDF), <https://FreshKillspark.org/the-park/the-park-plan> (accessed January 12, 2020)

P. 56, Fig. 17. Fresh Kills Park Alliance, (Draft Masterplan PDF), <https://FreshKillspark.org/the-park/the-park-plan> (accessed January 12, 2020)

P. 58, Fig. 18. : Fresh Kills Park Alliance, (Draft Masterplan PDF), <https://FreshKillspark.org/the-park/the-park-plan> (accessed January 12, 2020)

P. 58, Fig. 19. Fresh Kills Park Alliance, (Draft Masterplan PDF), <https://FreshKillspark.org/the-park/the-park-plan> (accessed January 12, 2020)

P. 59, Fig. 20. Fresh Kills Park Alliance, (Draft Masterplan PDF), <https://FreshKillspark.org/the-park/the-park-plan> (accessed January 12, 2020)

P. 62, Fig. 21. Fresh Kills Park Alliance, (Draft Masterplan PDF), <https://FreshKillspark.org/the-park/the-park-plan> (accessed January 12, 2020)

P. 64, Fig. 22. By author, 2020, *Fresh Kills Conceptual Sketch: Plan View*

P. 65, Fig. 23. By author, 2020, *Fresh Kills Conceptual Sketch: Plan View*

P. 68, Fig. 24. Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Location LUS2.svg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Location\\_LUS2.svg&oldid=194541167](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Location_LUS2.svg&oldid=194541167) (accessed February 20, 2020).

Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Location LUS2.svg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Location\\_LUS2.svg&oldid=194541167](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Location_LUS2.svg&oldid=194541167) (accessed February 29, 2020).

P. 71, Fig. 25. Climatechangenews.com  
<https://www.climatechangenews.com/2016/04/18/vattenfall-takes-us3bn-hit-to-exit-german-coal-operations/> (accessed January 21, 2020)

P. 74, Fig. 26. IBA-see2010.de. <http://www.iba-see2010.de/en/verstehen/projekte/projekt8.html>. (accessed February 24, 2020)

P. 75, Fig. 27. Internationale\_Bauausstellungen.de, <https://www.internationale-bauausstellungen.de/en/history/2000-2010-iba-furst-puckler-land-werkstatt-fur-neue-landschaften/welzow-sud-landscape-project-the-artificial-desert-concept/> (accessed January 21, 2020)

P. 78, Fig. 28. Internationale\_Bauausstellungen.de <https://www.internationale-bauausstellungen.de/en/history/2000-2010-iba-furst-puckler-land-werkstatt-fur-neue-landschaften/welzow-sud-landscape-project-the-artificial-desert-concept/>. (accessed January 21, 2020)

P. 81, Fig. 29. 2012 ASLA Professional Awards,  
[https://www.asla.org/2012awards/images/largescale/139\\_siteplan.jpg](https://www.asla.org/2012awards/images/largescale/139_siteplan.jpg) (accessed January 8, 2020)

P. 82, 2012 ASLA Professional Awards,  
[https://www.asla.org/2012awards/images/largescale/139\\_14.jpg](https://www.asla.org/2012awards/images/largescale/139_14.jpg) (accessed January 8, 2020)

## Bibliography

- Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire: A season in the Wilderness*. New York: Touchstone, 1990
- “ASLA 2012 Professional Awards | Quarry Garden in Shanghai Botanical Garden.” Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://www.asla.org/2012awards/139.html>.
- BillMoyers.com. “Ep. 2: Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth -- ‘The Message of the Myth,’” 2014. <https://billmoyers.com/content/ep-2-joseph-campbell-and-the-power-of-myth-the-message-of-the-myth/>.
- Burke, Edmund. *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke, Vol.I.*, 2005. Urban, Illinois. Project Gutenberg. Accessed April 20, 2020, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm#A\\_PHILOSOPHICAL\\_INQUIRY](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm#A_PHILOSOPHICAL_INQUIRY)
- Brook, Isis. *Aesthetic appreciation of landscape*. In *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, edited by Peter Howard, Ian Thompson and Emma Waterton. 39-50. Routledge. 2019
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1949
- Cardasis, Dean. 1994. “Maverick Impossible: James Rose and the Modern American Garden.”. Paper presented at *Masters of American Garden Design III: The Modern Garden In Europe and the United States*, The Garden Conservancy, 1993 <https://people.umass.edu/cardasis/content/publications/maverick.pdf>
- Cardasis, Dean. *James Rose*. Amherst: University of Georgia Press, 2017.
- Department of Citizens Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2010. *Fact-Finding Visit to Lusatia 14-16 February 2018*. Brussels: The European Union, pp. 1-6.
- Fresh Kills Park: Lifescape, Field Operations New York City, 2006
- “Fresh Kills Park : NYC Parks.” Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://www.nycgovparks.org/park-features/Fresh-Kills-park/about-the-site>.
- Hüttl, Reinhard F. “Ecology of Post Strip-Mining Landscapes in Lusatia, Germany.” *Environmental Science & Policy* 1, no. 2 May 1, 1998: 129–135. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1462-9011\(98\)00014-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1462-9011(98)00014-8).
- Internationale Bauausstellung (IBA). *Redesigning Wounded Landscapes: At the IBA Lusatia –a Laboratory for New Landscapes*, Berlin: Jovis, 2013

- Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by James Haden. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965
- Kohn, Eduardo. *How Forests Think: Toward Anthropology beyond the Human*. Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 2015.
- Megan Moriarty, ed. "Fresh Kills: Landfill To Landscape: International Design Competition: 2001" (PDF file) Accessed February 21, 2020.  
[https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/plans/fkl/about\\_competition.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/plans/fkl/about_competition.pdf)
- Merk, Fredrick, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963.
- Rose, James. *Creative Gardens*, New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1958
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Romantic Geography: In search of the Sublime Landscape*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013
- "US to Stage Its Largest Ever Climate Strike: 'Somebody Must Sound the Alarm' World News The Guardian." Accessed April 21, 2020.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/20/climate-strikes-us-students-greta-thunberg>.
- Visscher, Jochen, ed. *New Landscape Lusatia: International Building Exhibition Catalog 2010*. Bilingual edition. Berlin: Jovis, 2010.
- Voices of Democracy. "Roosevelt, 'Strenuous Life, 1899,' Speech Text." Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/roosevelt-strenuous-life-1899-speech-text/>.