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Arch 407/507 Human Factors & Architectural Research Methods

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Industrialists dominate | Agrarians accommodate

Resource management in the US often disrupts natural processes fracturing mature relationships between man and the land. The fortifying of shorelines in order to keep floodwaters back, weaken the diversity of estuaries. They function as breeding grounds of water species that sustain human communities decline. Their defense as sponges that absorb rising floodwaters altered. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina made this last point painfully clear. Still, industrial enthusiasts, such as the Army Corps of Engineers, reshape land to the extent that recovery is impossible, even over millennia. It is not a stretch to state that industrialists pursue a society one day capable of overcoming nature and physics in order to fit an economic vision. Meanwhile, agrarians painstakingly accommodate to the realities of life and death in the effort to husband the health and long-term productivity of the land. The buildings and landscapes erected by these like-minded individuals and communities embrace values of thrift and pragmatism, unlike the heroics reshaping the rural and urban areas since the advent of industrialism.

The writings of Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry tell of an agrarianism that goes beyond the fields. His work takes into consideration capabilities of a time and place, linked to the lives and practices of friends and families radiating from within communities. He outlines an approach toward understanding our encounters with the natural and manmade landscapes—the cultural assets that account for the experiences people share in our cities, their hinterlands and rural towns. An agrarian mindset does not necessarily only take precedence on a farm. It might direct our actions within the home, the office and in political and economic debates. Berry has written extensively on industrialism's transformation of farming and American societal relationships, such as between husband and wife. Industrialism in both the workplace and home cuts a wide gash through the ties that bind people to the land, just as the mechanized terror of World Wars impacted the consciousness of entire generations. Simone Weil, a French Resistance Fighter, outlined a course for rooting people to communities to screen out destructive

outside influences (43). In America, the Amish together as a community decide to adopt only technologies that do not negatively alter the make-up of their society and its relationship to god and creation. The critical regionalism section contrasts the Amish and Weil's arguments with the protagonist of critical regionalist theory, Paul Ricoeur.

There are parallels between agricultural and architectural thought and their fascinations with advances in technology. The mechanization of organic processes in both farming and building replaced physical skill and care. The expanded global markets favor the artificial and technological over the natural and useful. An applied aesthetic and an economy bound not to the local people, their buildings and their land, subordinate a community's own cause. Far removed from any democratic control of their own work were the rural communities, as well as, the urban ones. Even their foodstuff manufacturers had laden with preservatives and additives. The produce is "downed" in absence of a higher aesthetic, without reverence. Unless observant, consumers know little of the true *nature* to the contents of their own beliefs.

Paradoxically we [industrial society] are causing death at the largest scale possible, yet no culture has ever taken greater pains to deny mortality or spent more of its treasure to ward off the mere appearance of impending mortality. Man can't or won't admit to his own insignificance" (Orr 181). The supermarket goes a step further, removing this psychological construct from our daily consciousness. On the other hand, life on a farm exposes one to mortality and its biological proceeds. The industrial model has benefited us indeed. We enjoy extensive communication, inexpensive travel and medical miracles; even still, these developments cost society considerably. At times, we don't find ourselves rooted to any one particular place or people, nor do we come across widespread local examples of resource thrift, strong rural communities, or compelling architecture. The oppressive feedlot and the modern airport are cut from the same cloth—or rather, fuel the same controlled explosion that makes jet travel possible.

The author does not attempt to provide a complete history of the transition of American agriculture to a more industrial paradigm; rather for brevity, a series of vignettes contrast operations in both technical and agrarian threads. In fact, a predominantly agricultural island at the confluence of the Columbia and Willamette rivers near Portland, Oregon provides the richest treatment of these worldviews in contention. While the dateline ventures far off the confines of the island, stories based on Sauvie

organize the major narratives.

Universalism | Rootedness

Landscape

Industrialism's eclipse of an agrarian worldview is hardly an American crisis. The Dutch landscape accounts for a much more popular manipulation of nature. As Dutch Design is well in vogue within the architectural community, the seriousness the designers take themselves might correspond to the degrees to which the Dutch cities and countryside were extracted from the sea. We should take just as seriously some designers' call to breach the dikes to re-naturalize the Western Netherlands.

The last polders formed in the Netherlands were completed in late 60s (Betsky 96). Dutch engineers erected a long dike out in the North Seas around shallow estuaries, which subsequently were drained and made ready for agricultural settlement. After the last polder construction, however, control at the national planning level by industrial and therefore, agricultural interests quickly would wane. In a land synonymous with landscape—the active shaping of the natural topography by man, the government accounted for every square meter; it also figured a way to fuel reconstruction after World War II. Increases in agricultural production lowered food prices and held wages down for a duration. This concoction resulted in a rapid industrial expansion. The environmental movement's rise within the last twenty years has considerably weakened this alliance between environmental planning and agriculture. Dirk Sijmons best states the current shift in thinking as “not to gain land for agriculture, but to gain land back from agriculture” (56).

Planners cannot wait to reclaim agricultural land in order to appease all other land users, particularly recreation-hungry city-dwellers. One proposal calls for revitalization of the Green Heart, the area enclosed by the Rijnland, the conurbation of urban areas in West Holland. Reorganizing agricultural lands might allow for the reintroduction of natural habitat (Sijmons 99). Mind you, some agriculture within the Green Heart shares a tenuous industrial relationship with the environment: fertilizer pollution, sick

animals and the like. Regardless, though the demand for agricultural products is down, the proposals take no account for the “toughness and great appeal of farming as a way of life” (Sijmons 58).

The drainage of low-lying agricultural lands on Oregon's Sauvie Island mirror the polder efforts in Holland. Yet not to the extent that it pulled land from an omnipresent sea, rather the effort held the recurring floods from further alternating the composition of the land. Simply put, Sauvie Island consists vastly of soils from elsewhere in the state. Eons of flooding up the Willamette and Columbia Rivers have deposited rich silt from high above the Columbia Gorge and the fertile Willamette Valley. This silt got hung up on a high point, known as Oak Island, just north of the two rivers' confluence, and formed a larger island. Rushing waters would inundate as much as three-fourths of the island with biannual freshets. The high water mark on the Sauvie was recorded early in its Anglo-Saxon history, however: the 1876 flood left damage in the millions of dollars. A dike drainage system designed in the late 30s dramatically ebbed the floodwaters from covering acreage for any long duration. The flood control system, complete in 1940, consisted of eighteen miles of dikes. In all, seventy-seven miles of ditches and canals drains 10,000 acres of the island's lowlands that once held mud and shallow water (Boddy).

Landowners adjacent the drained lands were first offered to bid. One of them, Robert Vetsch's family, still farms the property bought thereafter by his father.¹ Except for a duck hunter's cabin, 80 acres of lake bottom fed timbered cottonwood trees and various shrubs. As Vetsch explains, agricultural land was then at a premium, the Corps of Engineers believed the county needed to make more land accessible. A few farms inside the first dike were quite large while those outside the dike were sizable in total acreage, a shallow lake might cover as much as half. His dairy mostly sits twenty feet above sea level, in contrast to the preserved Bybee-Howell homestead on the island's southwest corner; it rests forty to fifty feet above the Multnomah Channel.

Vetsch farm is primarily a dairy operation, as was the Island's first farm and purveyor of it name, Jean Baptiste Sauve's of the Hudson Bay Company in 1841 (Boddy). A century and a half later, Vetsch milks upwards of a hundred cows a day. In the spring, the cows get set to pasture when the grasses are up. “After the freshets of grass slow down, we mow it and chop it, feeding it to them in a manger. [With

¹ All references to Mr. Vetsch date from a phone conversation with the author on November 12, 2005.

100 cows,] we use it better that way for longer stretches of time.” Vetsch plants much of his 150 acres in alfalfa to make hay.

The island provided a stable supply of dairy products, as pasture was easily the most flexible land use on a place susceptible to inundation; flooding only harms grasses temporarily (Wirzba 158). Farmers did not have to fret over crop damage so long as their livestock were secure. Dike construction did not become a priority until farmers shifted to growing cash crops. A couple years after the federal flood act of 1936, forty-four farmers formed the Sauvies Island Drainage District. The “purpose of the project is not only to reclaim land but to prevent the flooding of the island during the high water stages of the Willamette and Columbia rivers” (Oregonian 1938). The drainage district’s five-member governing-board maintains the stability of the dikes, however, they can seek assistance and consultation from the US service engineers.

Many veteran farmers felt disempowered by the service corps authority to prevent continued freshets from washing silt over the island, and therefore, improving the soils long-term health. Farmers could predict these occurrences and prepare accordingly to prevent injury and lessen property damage to repairable levels. A survey of newspapers articles concerning Sauvie Island from the period revealed no public protest. (In fact, the protest I came across concerned dismay over the sale of Marquam Lake to the game commission, fearing interference with the drainage project (Oregonian 1942).) So while it is clear that organization led the way in the dike building: the drainage district board and the Army Corps of Engineers, it is unclear of the degrees to unanimity on the part of individual island farmers. Yet as Vetsch explains, “Some just wanted to maintain the status quo. Old people on the island, farming for many years, were accustomed to the way things were. They were getting by on less money than it takes now by using horse and man power. When the levees were completed there would be an assessment. The taxes each farmer would be charged were based on the height of the farmers land.” The lower your land sat the more you’d pay. Vetsch is certain that without the dikes to protect the land and the pump house to drain it, no farming by current standards would exist on the island today.

Milking machines have eased duties for Vetsch throughout his 82 years on a dairy. “As a youngster, I remember begging my father to let me milk a cow by hand like he did.” He figures that a farmer could milk 15-20 cows by hand still. “Maybe it might require us to get back to some religious

grounding like the Amish in order to stop using the machines,” Vetsch considers, “but they too have ways of getting around their religion to accept machinery.” He’s seen them lead a team of horses towing a gas-burning haymaker.

Critical regionalism

Gene Logsdon, an Ohio farmer and author, refers often to encounters with his Amish peers in terms of their ingenuity in appropriating home-based technologies. Like Robert Vetsch, Logsdon is aware that Amish yeoman sometimes utilize gas-fueled hay balers, however, he learned that the combined effort of the baler’s compact motor and horses costs less to operate than a tractor. Why do these two farmers find their counterparts so unique? Vetsch hinted at the reconciliation of technology with theology.

Logsdon explains:

Their religion, as well as their common sense, taught that tractor power in the field would tempt them, perhaps beyond their moral sense to resist, to expand acreage, which in turn would mean competing with their brethren, driving up the price of land, and eventually forcing other farmers out of farming and thereby destroying their communities (Logsdon 152).

For this sad tale differentiates industrial agriculture from sustainable farming. Amish theology almost prescribes mechanical innovation so long as the effort is homemade, its source transparent. They see themselves as caretakers of Creation, not sovereign over the earth. Their bishops merit heaven through fieldwork (Logsdon 154). An Amish friend of Gene Logsdon remarked:

If the Amish have anything to offer society at large, it is our notion of a theology for everyday living. I fear that people in general have become too alienated from the land, from nature, from the *real* world. Creation has become something distant from them, has ceased to be a living part of them. This kind of alienation can influence seemingly religious people to become exploiters rather than nurturers. Not using tractors in the field or foregoing electricity in our homes is no great sacrifice when seen in this light, especially when we can figure out alternative technologies that make our lives as comfortable as any. We really do see God in the birds, in the plants, in the soil. Heaven knows, when the first warm days of spring roll around, we farmers almost do worship the sun. (Logsdon 154-155).

If the Amish represent a rooted theology, the architecture and words of W.G Clark and soon after Samuel Mockbee embody regionally placed practices. Clark abides his work in a place: "Settlement implies a benign and sympathetic occupation, the selection of a specific and favored place, and the engagement of that place to meaningful use; settlement is the establishment of home" (Jensen 11). His work springs from indigenous inventions economic, practical, and simple, believing imported traditions dating from the colonial period in America reference forms and intentions alien to the peculiarities of the land, inhibiting America's ability to settle. While Modernism in architecture might seem more closely paralleled with the ideals espoused in our Declaration of Independence, modernist models are as foreign as our traditional American modes. "Modernism's sought-after universality ironically makes buildings for nowhere, unrooted and insignificant with respect to place, ungrounded in terms of form, tentative and ill-at-ease in our landscape" (Jensen 15).

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur with trepidation wrote of the push toward universalism by the architects of western society and its conquests in the developing world:

The phenomenon of universalization, while being an advancement of mankind, at the same time constitutes a sort of subtle destruction, not only of traditional cultures, which might not be an irreparable wrong, but also of what I shall call for the time being the creative nucleus of great civilization and great cultures, that nucleus on the basis which we interpret life, what I shall call in advance the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind (276).

These thoughts then lead to the question: "How to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization? The problem is not simply to repeat the past, but rather to take root in it in order to ceaselessly invent" (Ricoeur 276). As alluded to earlier, the Amish might offer the best response, mastering the appropriation of foreign influences in order to preserve the sanctity of their work on earth. Reciprocal exchanges are as vital as naturally rooted ones, wrote resistance philosopher Simone Weil, who also considered the enormous task of resurrecting a defeated national culture, the French citizenry after World War II. "But a given environment should not receive an outside influence as something additional to itself, but as a stimulant intensifying its own particular way of life" (43-44). Only the communities own hands can accept those contributions after considering the consequences.

Ricoeur's writings later would form the basis for Kenneth Frampton's classic essay on the

features of a critical practice. Rather than sentimentally assuming the vernacular unconditionally, an architect extracts a particular element and engages it with a modern vocabulary (Frampton 327). Architects Jeremy Till and Sarah Wigglesworth criticize Frampton for relying heavily on aesthetics and tectonics in his judgments and all together ignoring a “political engagement with place” (Moos 80).

Samuel Mockbee's collegiate experiment, the Rural Studio, has done empowering work bestowing diligence upon the buildings of a culture mostly disregarded by modern optimization, though not untouched. In other words, the communities are still in tack, though poor and marginalized. Self-consciously, without pity and instead offering real charity, he pressed architectural students to dig-in and identify with their countrymen. Only then would they be capable of delivering a building that met the families needs and the conditions of Alabama's black belt area while also necessitating thrift. Mockbee is clearly aware of Wendell Berry's belief that “In order to be good you have to know how—and this knowing is vast, complex and humble and humbling; it is of the mind and of the hands, of neither alone.” Past projects designed and built by the Auburn undergraduates include an energy-efficient straw bale home, a chapel enclosed by tires filled with earth and a community respite sheathed in refuse windshields. Till and Wigglesworth hold the Rural Studio in esteem for innovatively responding to a world of diminishing resources, poverty gaps and also for contemplating the architect as counterbalance to “the homogenizing tendencies of globalization” (Moos 80).

What the Rural Studio and the Amish do and Sauvie Island did when it mostly was covered in pasture, Kirby Fry made clear in an article entitled “Growing Your Own Home:”

Just as individuals can only find spiritual balance within themselves by resolving internal conflicts before restoring external conflicts, so too can we only find environmental harmony in our settlements by turning inward to fulfill our physical needs before turning outward. Instead of depending on remote sites for water, food, shelter, income, education, and medical care, we should first turn inward to what we already have available on site and all the potential uses we can design into our settlements.

Education in accordance to a land ethic & aesthetic

If architects' "goodness is more important than their greatness, their compassion more eventful than their passion," as Rural Studio co-founder Samuel Mockbee points out in the book of the same title, students should engage in projects benefiting a wider cause than personal academic gain (Dean 3). Keep in mind that "education in the true sense is an enablement to serve—both the living community in its natural household or neighborhood and the precious cultural possessions that the living community inherits or should inherit," states Wendell Berry in *Home Economics* (Berry). Regrettably, pundits often do the opposite of Berry's understanding, advising local officials to embrace exploitive practices which deny individuals family-supporting wages, clean environments, and stable, healthy local economies and communities. If instead, instructors taught students to eschew rootless upward mobility and embrace a place as their own to serve, they would be obligated to that place's immediate possibilities, its environs and social welfare. They come to identify with their whereabouts. As chefs, farmers or even architects, their activities would preserve natural resources by reusing and recycling.

A great part of our existence involves consumption and, "if we do not have the humility nor respect for the 'what' the 'who' or the 'how' then we must indeed have a poor ethical grasp" of our civilization (Ronsheim 2). David W. Orr sums up the dilemma concisely in his *Ecological Literacy*. "the consequences of actions are a measure of our intelligence, and the plea of ignorance is no good defense" (Orr). The failure of education underlies the planetary ecological-economic predicament; therefore, universities have environmental and social obligations to lead students out of this crisis. Orr forewarns "the skills, aptitudes, and attitudes necessary to industrialize the earth are not the same as those that will be needed to heal the earth or to build durable economies and good communities" (Orr). For example, as J. Glenn Gray understood in *Re-Thinking American Education*, a liberally conducted education "is least dependent on formal instruction. It can be pursued in the kitchen, the workshop, on the ranch or farm...where we learn wholeness in response to others" (qtd. in Orr). Education thus far, however, hardly responds to these students' greatest aspirations. Long overdue is a serious, sustained effort at improving the quality of connections between consumptive cities and the lands that feed them.

A culinary arts school incorporated with a farm and restaurant on Oregon's Sauvie Island attempts to respond to this deficiency. A widely reported proposal by the late Professor John Ronsheim called for a Bachelor's degree in Culinary Arts at Antioch College a quarter-century ago. The degree

would have been the first of its kind in the nation. The proposal's basis was the manual *Le Guide Culinaire* by Escoffier. Studies would have included winemaking, cooking and serving as well as tending to a farm purchased by the college at Antioch and possibly Tuscany. Those rich programmatic elements will be adapted to fit a Northwest version.

Students will learn to farm, cook at a restaurant, and make value-added products such as wines jams, and jellies. Sauvie Island, a designated Agricultural Reserve of Multnomah County, is ideally situated a few clicks outside Portland's Urban Growth Boundary. The restaurant could serve visitors from the city as well as offer reasonable fare for those who reside on the island. While ripe for exploitation in the eyes of developers, Sauvie is worth maintaining as an effective local source for food and recreation; an integrated cooking school-community farm also bolsters income for island farmers.

Foremost the project provides a vehicle to develop a truly thoughtful and American cuisine suited to Sauvie Island, pregnant with architectural implications. Incorporating the Bybee-Howell homestead, the centerpiece of the 93-acre public park, as a restaurant harmoniously weds setting with food and wine, preserving the character of the place. While purely theoretical, the thesis project's end design may influence the future of agricultural lands on the island. In other words, the thesis sets a course where the vision must fit the land, not the land pressed to fit a vision.

Solving for pattern

The industrial model recommends communities alter the land irreparably in order to hold a vision. Absentee engineers, therefore, can justify dike construction as economic development, even if the make-up of an ecosystem is changed forever. An agrarian mode teaches us to design visions to fit the contours of the land. Agrarians reveal depth, light and shadow held in the living memory of a community's landscapes and buildings, the culturally rich generators of vital forms. These locally-derived assets may receive stimulation from outside influences only if the influences strengthen the assets' connections to a place.

How do we generate vital regional forms while appropriating "universal "inventions? Kenneth

Frampton offered a means that some have criticized as too aesthetic. Necessary, then to rise to challenge, is to adopt an ethical attitude, as the Rural Studio has shown. Architects, who practice in an agrarian manner, might best realize a critical practice. In order to practice a land ethic, the critical plan must be small, though no less visionary. At a small-scale, communities can carefully appropriate the influence of mechanisms without damaging their relationship to a place, its community, both human and biota as epitomized by Amish communities. Regional form and invention comes about through local ability, thrift and allegiance. Most importantly, we must settle in a place and know its capabilities, in food, shelter and human potential.

Wendell Berry and other agrarians extol the rewards to homecoming. Their descriptions read more like lessons on resolve than nostalgia. They feel strongly that the role of the university is to validate and educate *homecomers*—those willing to dig in and hold back the materialistic tendencies of universalism. (Jackson 166-167). Inhabitants of these agrarian communities might work the land to varying degrees, but all will feel connected by ties to people and how they meet the expectations of the land. The possibility of an authentically settled country still very much lies ahead of us.

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