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ARTICLES

Uredeemably Utopian: Architecture and Making/Unmaking the World*

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ARCHITECTURE, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE, planning, and other environmental design fields are practices whose primary aim is to make the world, to make something new. We give material form to some vision of human society and place. The shadow side of this creation, this making, is that these fields are also about "unmaking" the world. The world already exists, and every time we plan, design, and/or construct some aspect of worldness, we are replacing and therefore unmaking something else. In this sense, our professions and disciplines are always embedded in critique—"something else should be here." The work is inherently utopian/dystopian.

Many professionals in architecture, planning, facility management, graphic design, engineering, and so on—the environmental design fields—balk at the use of the language of utopia. Design practitioners are well aware of the early "modernist projects"—of the theory and practice of people such as Le Corbusier, Gropius, Mies, Howard, the Bauhaus, and others. The critique of the utopian view of modernism, its imperialistic vision, and the manner in which it has been implemented in our cities and landscapes, has caused many to retreat from any discussion of utopianism. Indeed, the critique of the modernist version of daily life is well deserved as can be seen in the use of Le Corbusier's "Radiant City" as a model for many public housing projects, or Howard's "Garden City" as played out in the endless tracks of suburbs. There is an appropriately critical perspective in the recognition that the imposition of one "man's" utopian vision on a culture results in destructive imperialism. It is understandable that the design fields have largely retreated from an explicitly utopian project, seeking instead to "fit into" what is perceived as the mainstream culture. It is as if those who practice design have truly recognized the terrifying power of a visually explicit imagination of the world-that-might-be.

However, when pressed, many designers would be clear that their intention is to make the world a better place, to create supportive, and when possible, beautiful places and things for people. A better house in the suburbs, a more technologically sophisticated and functional office building, a safer highway with more beautiful scenery, a new school, handicapped accessible bathrooms—all of these wish for a "good life" for the people who will use these places. Each individual act of design and making rests within an utopian impulse. It is ironic, therefore, that the aggregate of such

acts as experienced daily in our vernacular landscape is neither beautiful nor "good." Perhaps this is because, as a field, we do not often question what the good life is, and for whom.

There are those who would argue strongly against any utopian characterization, suggesting instead that they are simply doing *practical* work: solving problems, building buildings, designing gardens, packaging a product, or planning neighborhoods. There is nothing utopian about such actions; these are technical-rational solutions to current social problems. And indeed, the uncritical reproduction of the existing social and material order appears to be a-utopian.

The employment of a language of *practical* accepts the utilitarian, unstated vision of who humans are and our place on earth. The utopian vision of a "thoroughly modern 20th century industrialized world" remains invisible to these professionals, and frankly, to many others in our culture. The material manifestations we live with everyday—highways, shopping malls, the suburbs, cities, corporate farms, televisions, and so on—are accepted as normal and inevitable.

This contemporary world was predicted by utopian thinkers in the early part of this century, and has been created through the countless, daily acts of planning and making/unmaking. The unmaking associated with making insures that the modernist utopian vision is produced. Tearing down and disposing of a 19th century commercial building and replacing it with a big box retail or fast food chain is about a vision of the world and a specific form of economic order; destroying a woodlot for a new subdivision speaks to the primacy of humans and our right to take the world for our own purposes. These actions of environmental interventions supplant an existing world order; they are indeed, the future. What remains unstated is the power of the modernist utopia/dystopia, and the complicity of architects, designers, and planners in creating and maintaining this world.

The inability to see and confront the visionary and utopian character of making places enmeshes the environmental design fields in a dehistoricized and uncritical situation—a position which assumes there is no vision and from which it is impossible to take a critical stance. This a-utopian perspective leaves us and our places impoverished. It kills the dream of a different kind of place, a different culture, and a different location for humans in the world (Schneekloth). To refuse to accept the utopian character of the practice of design is to deny the power of the field to bring "imaginative possibilities of what is not into the concrete realm of what could be" (Bartowski 10).

The above characterization of the professional and academic practice of architecture and other design fields is, of course, a simplistic accounting of a diverse and complex practice. There are many within our respective fields engaged in important and cogent critical work which seeks to unpack the ways in which the dominant themes of culture have generated a specific and ubiquitous form of material life. The critique not only addresses the form of our material world, but also the context for environmental design such as building codes, business practices, availability of materials, and so on. The

contemporary scene in the United States and other post-industrial modernist cultures is reified daily through the context of design practice, and the possibility of significant change hard to imagine. But it is being done: critiques of the current material/social order and alternative visions of the future are constructed daily by designers among others. These imaginative acts are a form of resistance; they challenge the current structure of the world, and offer a vision of other ways of being.

What I would like to do in this paper is to offer some examples of the ways in which architecture and other design fields as a collective practice actively take responsibility for their utopian work—engage in *utoping* if you will. The use of imaginal power, forms of representation, and different ways of practicing challenge existing norms and power structures. By so doing, the practice of *utoping* has the possibility of changing what appears to be the inevitable trajectory of the future.

One location for an explicitly utopian practice of design is within the domain of education—both the education of professional designers, and popular education through the activity of professional practice. These educational contexts create the opportunity for students, faculty, and communities to question the dominant practices of making/unmaking that create the world we live in, and the world in which professionals operate.[1]

As a structure for the presentation of this consciously utopian practice, I will offer a series of projects under the themes of **Unmaking** and **Making,** even though many cross borders and engage both making and unmaking. The projects cover a wide range of issues from waste to landscape restoration. This condition points to one of the properties of the practice of environmental design; namely, the generalist nature of the field. We design just about anything and so must engage in a wide range of content areas. We borrow freely from many practices and disciplines. What coalesces our field is less the content of any project than the approach of design, of making, and of imaginative possibilities. I hope to demonstrate in these two sections the ways in which architecture and other design fields can take responsibility for the process of unmaking and making, and explicitly engage in a process of utopian thinking.

Unmaking

> *To reconstruct the world, to rebuild or rationalize it, is to run the risk of losing or destroying what in fact is* (Le Guin 82).

The first series of projects regarding architectural *utoping* will address the shadow side of design and construction—the unmaking.[2] Architecture and the design fields are intimately implicated in the phenomena of unmaking and the results of unmaking, namely waste, destruction, and erasure. Everything we make and construct—from models and drawings to buildings on the ground to new conceptualizations of urban living—unmakes and deconstructs something else. We are mesmerized by the making and most

often oblivious of the unmaking. What are the implications for truly thinking about this aspect of our practice?

The *utoping* projects presented are related to three different aspects of unmaking and the resultant waste: the production and wasting of the materials we use in environmental design; the disposal of hazardous waste; and "left-over" spaces. Each discussion offers some thoughts on the issue that served as an impetus in the educational context, and demonstrates the range of student responses.

The Materials of our Trade

The extensive unmaking that has characterized the modern world results from the magnitude of our tools and technologies, the fact that there are so many human beings on the earth, and the west's peculiar cultural fascinating with the idea of "progress," the new, and change. Thomas Berry suggests that the capitalist's vision of endless resources coupled with the religious notion that the spirit is not of this material world, has opened the way for the type of worldmaking (and unmaking) we do today.

> Just as the doctrine of divine transcendence took away the pervasive divine presence to the natural world, so the millennial vision of a blessed future left all present modes of existence in a degraded status. All things were in an unholy condition. Everything needed to be transformed. This meant that anything unused was to be used if the very purpose of its existence was to be realized. Nothing in its natural state was acceptable. . . . This compulsion to use, to consume, has found its ultimate expression in our own times. (Berry 115)

One of the implications of our compulsion to transform everything is the fantasy of endless resources and no limits, a continued unmaking of the earth. One could argue that it is only within the last 50 years that cultures such as the United States are beginning to see the cracks in this vision, to recognize that the world has finite resources, and to think that it may be possible, even ethical, to share the earth with other-than-human creatures. But this is a tiny crack, a fissure. We still go to war over oil, cut old growth forests, and colonize the world's diverse cultures with our way of life with the rationale of "creating new markets." Many know at some level that we cannot continue to live so unsustainably, but the power of the utopian impulse behind the modern techno-rational world disguises the consequences of our daily lives.

The idea of limits and the confrontation of the wasteful consumption of the earth is obviously a difficult subject within the discourse of architecture. We are dependent on using materials and on wasting; we serve the broader culture. To uncover and reveal the consequences of endless making/unmaking is to confront some of the very basic tenets of the capitalist, industrialized world in general, and the practice of architecture specifically. And to do so is an act of resistance to the unproblematized utopian dream of endless consumption.

In a graduate architectural design studio entitled, "The Subject is Waste," each student was asked to tell and graphically represent the story of a com-

mon building material from birth to death, a product such as concrete block, glass, asphalt shingles, or drywall. They were to reveal what is extracted/taken from the earth; what happens to that place on the earth; what forms of transportation are required to bring together the various elements to a single place; what minerals and even possibly toxic substances are used to make this; where do they come from; what is the production process and what forms of energy are required; where does this happen; what kinds of labor are required; where do the machines come from and how were they made; what happens to the by-products of production such as heated water or spillage; how is it packaged/carried and where does that come from; how is this product delivered to the site [and what was there before this act of construction]; what is required to connect it to other building parts and where do these come from; how does this product wear and gradually waste; what happens when the building comes down; can these parts be reused; what kind of wasting occurs in the current method of disposal such as landfill or incineration?

One student prepared "The Life History of Asphalt Shingles," a material used widely in the United States but very little in other parts of the world. Shingles are a by-product of the petroleum industry—felt dipped in the waste product of oil production. In a sense, this appears to be a good thing because we are saving a waste material. Yet, an asphalt shingle roof must be replaced about every 10 years, and there is nothing that can be done with the "used" shingles. One result of the reliance on the use of an expendable rather than more durable or repairable roof material is that 14% of municipal landfill is asphalt shingles. As a petroleum product, this waste potentially contaminates ground water.

The enormity of displacement and the amount of waste generated in the making of asphalt shingles or a sheet of plate glass or a nail, stagger the mind. For designers who have asked substantive questions about the materials of their trade, the specification of any material for a building, landscape, or household product can never be an innocent act. One student suggested that perhaps making something new doesn't always make sense when you consider the amount of material and energy that were required to build what we now have. The analysis of the production of materials frames a series of questions that cannot be addressed within the current modernist utopian dream of endless resources, and a place called "away" to which we throw our unwanted things.

Love Canal, Niagara Falls, New York

In the same studio on waste, the students struggled with what to do with hazardous waste sites, especially those inhabited by humans such as the classic story of Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York. Most people have heard about Love Canal—a neighborhood built on toxic wastes buried by Occidental Chemical and the U.S. Government. The people who built their homes and community in this suburb of Niagara Falls were evacuated in 1978 because it was too dangerous to live there—too many cancers, deaths,

birth defects, pain, and fear (Levine 1982). The evacuation happened because no one knew what to do about such places.

The government and corporations now want to rewrite the history of Love Canal—they want to "normalize" it, and at the same time, create new "standard operating procedures" of how to manage toxic neighborhoods to avoid resettling populations in the future. So there is an unrelenting effort on the part of the State of New York and the federal Environmental Protection Agency to "resettle" Love Canal on the premise that the clean-up has resulted in some areas being "habitable." Enormous amounts of public monies are being used to rehabilitate the houses that were left standing. A master plan has been developed under the direction of the Love Canal Area Revitalization Agency to restore the neighborhood located around the fenced off area dotted with signs, "Hazardous Waste Area." If this were not "Love Canal," the government would never invest this amount of money to rehabilitate inexpensive track housing, especially in a depressed area such as Niagara Falls which has substantial open space and sufficient housing.

Questions had to be asked: Why resettle Love Canal? Who is benefiting? What kind of a symbolic act is being made? Why are people living in hazardous, toxic places? Which people? Why do we have toxic waste sites?

These questions are relevant for all professionals in environmental design because we often use materials which have required some toxic process in the production. Further, there is an urgency is bringing the shadow of production into the professional discourse and public discussion because, even if we stopped producing and using hazardous materials tomorrow, we will still have a legacy of hazardous waste for hundreds, if not thousands of years.

The students struggled with ways to address the questions raised above within the discourse of environmental design. We are not scientists seeking technological responses to these problems. Rather, we are architects seeking to use our tools of *imaginative possibilities* and *design as a form of inquiry* to reveal and critique the conditions we find. If, as professionals and citizens, we are unwilling to accept erasure as the address to hazardous waste sites as proposed by the State of New York and EPA, what else might we do?

Leigh Wagner used the existing waste storage area as an "open green" and located very exclusive homes around the open space. The irony is, of course, that people of means do not, and will not, live in hazardous areas in the United States and other countries. People residing in these places are mostly poor, and mostly people of color.

Chris Payne prepared an elaborate brochure for the extensive tourist trade in Niagara Falls, announcing,

> *Love Canal: A Nice Place to Visit!*
>
> *Certainly a trip to Niagara Falls would be incomplete without a visit to Love Canal—the latest hot vacation spot. Come and see the home of the man who refused to fall into the trap of peer pressure and stayed in his home and neighborhood; visit the Visitors Center and* ***learn how technology can solve all of our problems****; stay in the homes of former residents who were evacuated, now bed and breakfasts for honeymooning couples.*

Another student chose to mark the site by re-constructing the skeletons of the destroyed homes (which had been bulldozed into the canal and covered with a clay cap as "toxic" material) in their previous location and placing silhouette statues of families on the lawn [Elizabeth Gast]. Robin Beane chose a graphic newspaper technique that shows some of the houses which had been boarded up and are now for sale, superimposed with a snake, a symbol of the fear and power of this condition (Fig. 1). Jim Magnuson used a gigantic imaginary beast to stand at the edge of the site—as a symbol of a

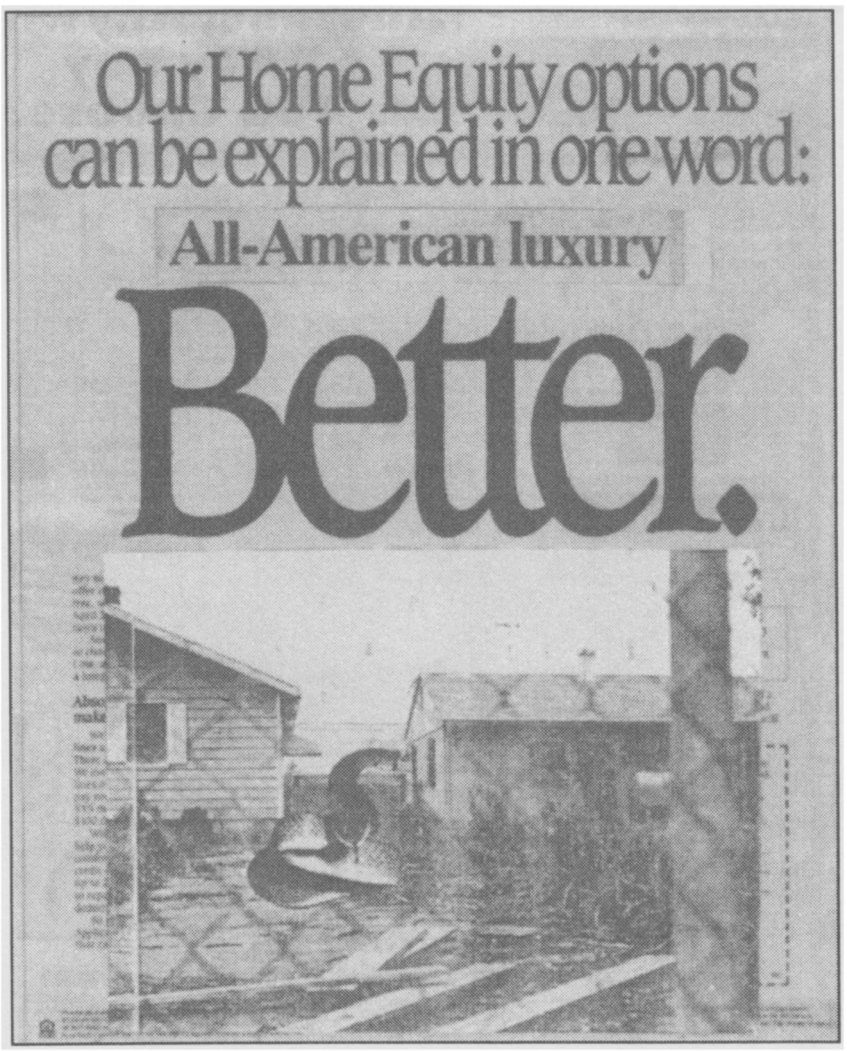

Figure 1. *Buy a home in "Love Canal"!* [Robin Beane, 1993]

fearful place, and to protect it and to keep humans away. Michael Convertino employed a very different strategy and designed a new hazardous waste research center directly over the disposal site, taking advantage of the waste, and symbolically seeking to heal and repair the damage (Fig.2).

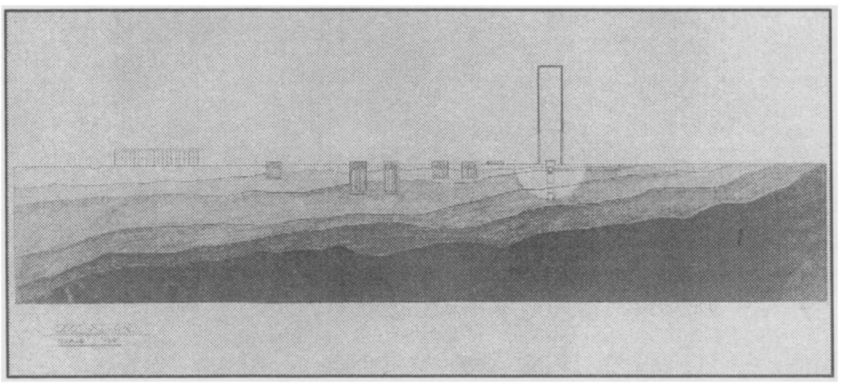

Figure 2. *The Love Canal Research Facility designed to sit directly on top of the "area of containment" to study the effects of hazardous material on human health.* [Michael Convertino, 1993]

The tragedy of Love Canal is a symbol of the dangers of a society dependent on chemicals and the creation/deposition of toxic waste.[3] Love Canal has changed the lives and attitudes of millions of Americans who live on top of and next to hazardous waste sites, and the rest of us, who fear such places (Edelstein 1988). It is easy to cast blame. But it is not "them" who have created the unhealthy conditions of the last decades of the 20th century —it is "us." As a society we have chosen a life that is chemically and fossil fuel dependent, and we have not paid the full cost of the production and disposition of the products we want in our lives. We have assumed that there is an *away* to which we can throw our waste and it will disappear. But it has not disappeared. It has been returned to us in places all over the country and world such as Love Canal. As environmental designers and as a culture, we must find ways to bring the shadow of waste and unmaking into our lives so that "cleaning and repairing and passing on the world might become as important as using or making it" (Lynch 41).

The Space Under the Bridge
Anywhere, U.S.A.

> *Man loves to create roads, that is beyond dispute. But . . . may it not be . . . that he is instinctively afraid of attaining his goal and completing the edifice he is constructing? How do you know, perhaps he only likes that edifice from a distance and not at all at a close range,* ***perhaps he only likes to build it, and does not want to live in it.*** (Berman 6 quoting Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man)*

In our frenzy to build and make we often create places we don't want to inhabit. For example, the construction of major highways across the country, and especially in our cities, has resulted in an array of left-over and often uninhabitable spaces next to, around, and under expressways. In a graduate seminar on Landscape Architecture concerned with the contemporary vernacular landscape, students were asked to look carefully at these left-over spaces. The particular location for their inquiry was the overpass/underpass in downtown Buffalo, New York, not because it is unique, but rather because it is ubiquitous and mostly invisible. Their assignment was to give *voice* to the place as it is, to propose some way of healing it, and also to actually "do" something there, to make a physical gesture to the place.

This particular elevated interstate highway was built over the Erie Canal as it terminated in the Buffalo River and Lake Erie, and then turns through what had been the warehouse district and working class homes. It transports people coming across the Peace Bridge from Canada to all points south and west of Buffalo, and has created the all too familiar urban context in which the elevated highway separates the downtown of Buffalo from its waterfronts. And like all spaces under bridges, it is dark and damp and scary; real life passes above. It is a waste space; trash accumulates; it supports essential but unwanted activities such as parking cars; it is also home to street people.

We design and build these kinds of spaces everyday—not intentionally of course. No one designed the space *under* the bridge, they only designed the highway. The students struggled with this left-over, ugly, dirty, and dark place, attempting for perhaps the first time to really see the world of their making and unmaking.

Some attempted to find a way to reconnect the space to the rest of the city, to use it as a gateway between downtown and the waterfront instead of a barrier. Others suggested that we build a structure beneath the bridge, to fill it in so the space is used, a strategy actually employed in Berlin, Germany. On a more playful note, Mark Fisher and Robert Chan designed a gigantic roller coaster that wound up, around, over and under the elevated thruway so that all of it appeared to be swallowed. Riding the roller coaster would reveal all of the spaces around the bridge. One group of students did a photographic essay of the spaces under the bridge and the domestic gestures of a homeless person they had made friends with. Through these haunting photographs they argued that these spaces should not be brought into the light—we need the shadow and the marginal activities which inhabit it.

As part of the educational agenda of really *seeing the world in which we live,* students were asked to make something or do something under the bridge. One group gathered together some of the trash to form a well crafted geometric sculpture and put it on a pedestal (Fig. 3). They placed this making of the left over things under the bridge itself in the path of people who traveled through there everyday from their car to the office [Thomas Breen, Mariko Shioya, Marc Warren]. Another group made large plexiglass replicas

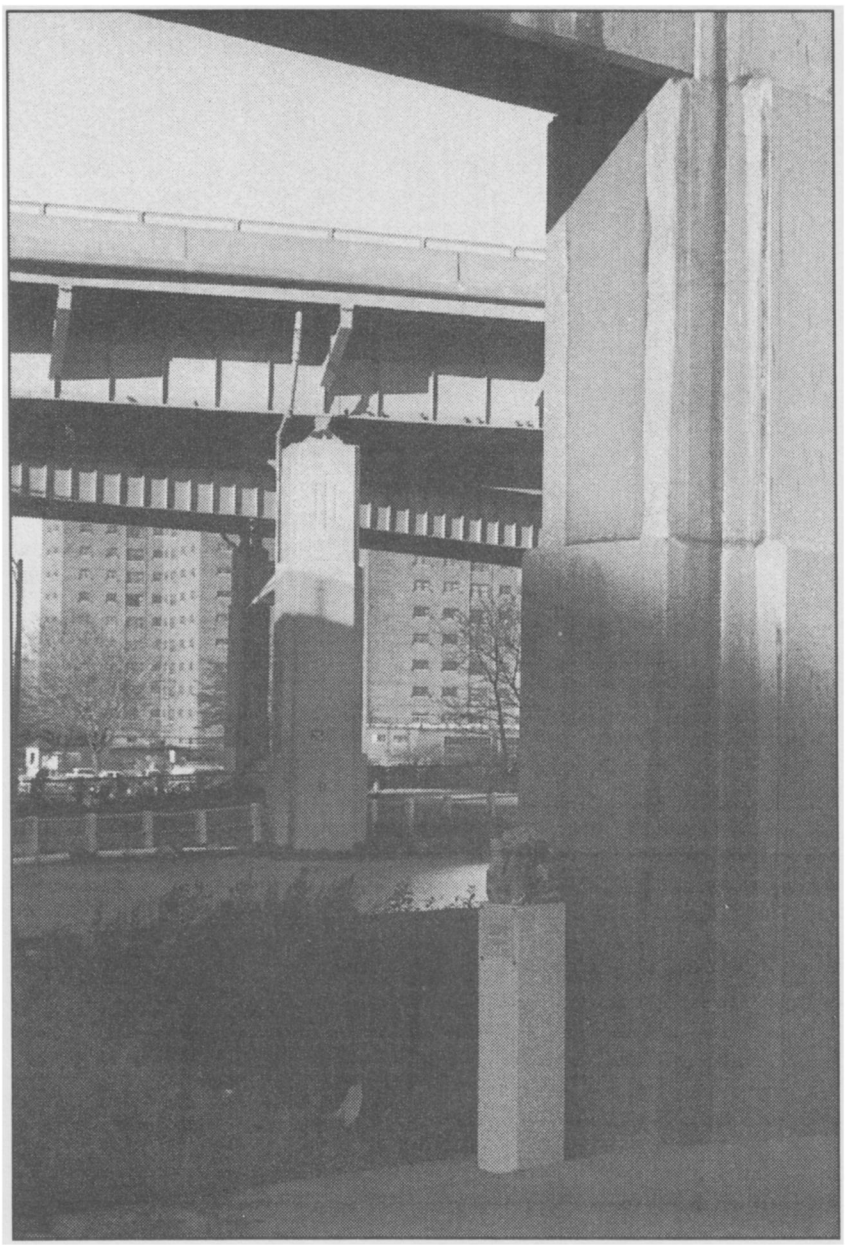

Figure 3. *Sculpture made from the trash found under the bridge, reconfigured, and placed in "... the underside of a bridge (the place of secrets, of trolls, tramps, wanderers, the smell of water, earth, stone, concrete, of hasty sex, of faeces and urine)."* Peter Bishop [Art project by Thomas Breen, Mariko Shioya, Marc Warren, 1995]

of the landscape that had been there prior to the expressway, and hung the panels as a reminder of what this place had been [Jay Woodcock and Michael Miller]. Holly Sinnot enlisted some friends to create and video tape a performance under the bridge. Michael Thier arrived early one morning and posted "No Parking" signs throughout the area, totally confusing early morning commuters for whom this place had become invisible.

This place under the bridge reflects the casual disregard of the world and the willingness to waste space. Before the highway this area was one of the most productive parts of the city—filled with people, warehouses and barges moving up and down the Erie Canal. The unmaking of the Canal and the making of the highway has resulted in this left-over space; an unwitting result of attending to only some things and refusing to see the world in front of our faces. The under-the-bridge space is also the shadow side of our modernist utopian fantasy of speed and unlimited access; of always going somewhere . . . instead of being here. We scar the landscape, throw away regions, abandon cities, and leave our trash everywhere, believing that there is always someplace else to go, someplace that will be better than this one. We are a dissatisfied and restless culture.

Part of the modernist preoccupation with "progress," with the new and with change, is an impatience with anything that is about here and now. Nothing, including our vision of "the good life," is adequate; no wonder utopia is never achievable. We simply consume one vision after another, always unsatisfied, *unwilling to believe* as traditional cultures do and always have, that this life is good and worth reproducing, this place nurturing and worthy of our care.

What to do with places we have trashed; with things we don't want; with people we don't care about. Back to unmaking, destruction, and erasure. Unmaking and wasting are natural processes, a part of the cycle of the earth and of human endeavor. But it appears as if a recognition of the unmaking inherent in all making cannot exist next to the brightness of our utopian dream of endless progress. It is a taboo subject. It is the shadow of desire; it is space out of place; it is used up things; it is the by-product of things we do want; it is the fantasy of "away."

To look seriously at the unmaking of the making as these students have done is a critique of the current culture and suggests that things ought to be, and could be, different. It is a way in which environmental designers contribute to the ongoing activity of cultural production by critiquing their own practices, and those whom they serve as professionals. It is recognizing, as Le Guin suggests, what is in fact being lost or destroyed as we rebuild and reconstruct the world.

Making

> *Creation is always perilous, for it gives true life to what has been inchoate and voice to what has been dumb. It makes known what has been unknown, that perhaps we were more comfortable not knowing. The new is necessarily dangerous.* (Piercy, *He, She and It,* 67)

Making is what people in the design fields are about. We make new towns, buildings, tourist resorts, football fields, magazines, new products, packaging—and theories and ideas about making as well. Of course, designers do not do this by themselves; we work with clients, corporations, communities, and so on in our makings. We must work within zoning and building codes, follow health and safety regulations and so on. Further, we use materials that are available to us through various types of production, adopt available technologies, and employ business practices such as "the bottom line" delimited by the larger cultural enterprise. And so the fantasy of architect as worldmaker must be recognized as highly constrained by the dominant culture. Yet we do, to a large extent, provide form to much of the physical and imagistic world—often simply reproducing what exists, but sometimes raising questions about *what is* through the creation of the "dangerously new."

Each act of material restructuring of the world makes the world, adds to it. Designers are engaged in the ongoing activity of making the present. And the making of the present constructs the field from which tomorrow is made, and next year—the future. In an interesting way, our activities of making also actively remake the past. Through our selective erasure of the material world and our additions to it, we construct what is possible to know of the past and how we came to be where and how we are.

This essay presents *utoping* work within the context of making in three sections: Making the Present or *Placemaking;* Remaking the Past; and Imagining the Future. The projects range from theoretical inquiry to practice. Included with each project is a short discussion which offers some thoughts on issues relevant to the practice of environmental design, and descriptions and representations of the *utoping* explorations.

Placemaking

Probably one of the most radical acts of resistance or subversion to the modernist vision of life is to stay put; to put down roots; to decide to be someplace rather than anyplace, to *dwell* (Heidegger). Placemaking is the way in which humans transform the places they find themselves into places where they can truly live. It is about connection, about taking responsibility. It suggests that people can love their places, find meaning in living *here,* instead of anywhere. It also means that people will, and do, attend to their places.

> Without our attention, our places are endangered. And when our places are endangered, as revealed in the current ruins of our inner cities, our poisoned rivers, our inhospitable offices, and our dilapidated houses, we are at risk. (Schneekloth & Shibley, 18)

One of these endangered places is the Buffalo River, one of our nation's "urban trash rivers." Its most recent past has been as a sewer for formerly prosperous industries; before this time, it was the home of the Seneca of the Iroquois Nation, and much earlier, a floodplain during the last ice age. Because the Buffalo River has been so surrounded by industry, and so polluted, it has been invisible. Since industry has left, its invisibility has protected it so that the banks of the river have been regenerating, and diverse wildlife habitats now exist inside the city along side of abandoned industrial buildings and grain elevators.

In 1986 the Buffalo River became one of the first rivers in the U.S. and Canada to participate in the Remedial Action Planning (RAP) process sponsored by the International Joint Commission. The Buffalo River was one of the 42 Areas of Concern, affectionately known as "toxic hot spots." The goal for the Buffalo River adopted during the RAP process was to restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Buffalo River ecosystem. In 1989, a group, "The Friends of the Buffalo River,"[4] was formed to be a public advocacy group and voice for the river, attempting to bring the river into the awareness of the people of the region, making an invisible landscape an area of concern and care.

The work of the Friends is "place-based." This has profound implications for the practice; the work is not about an issue or an abstraction, but is about EVERYTHING. And so the Friends have sponsored clean-ups along the River, tree plantings, and habitat restoration. We have done environmental education programs with children who live along the River. We have worked with the "Buffalo River Rats" (as the young people call themselves) in the classroom, held a regional summit of upstream and downstream schools, done water testing, and greenway planning with the young people (Fig. 4). The Friends were also instrumental in establishing an "urban canoe trail" which goes from the industrial areas into regenerating wild areas that are naturally coming back (Fig. 5).

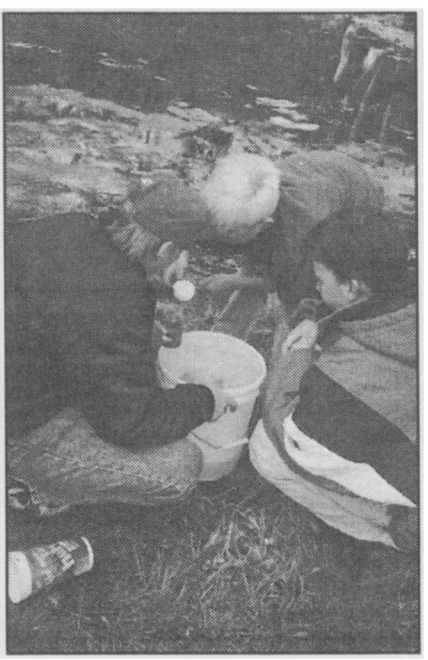

Figure 4. *Young people doing science studies along the Buffalo River, an environmental project of "The Buffalo River Rats" sponsored by the Friends of the Buffalo River.* (Photo by Author, 1994)

As part of the daily activities of constructing the present, the Friends have received grants and

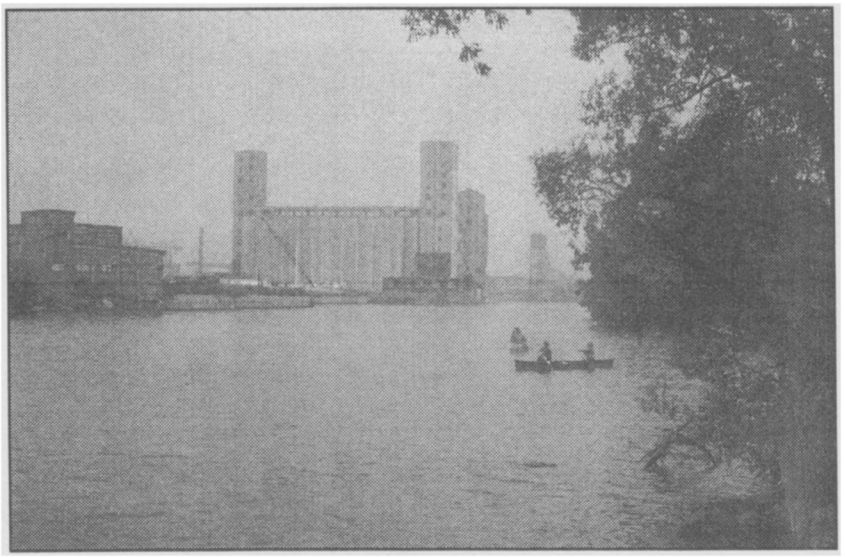

Figure 5. *A day on the Buffalo Urban Canoe Trail which passes through abandoned grain elevators into a restoring natural habitat in the City of Buffalo.* (Photo by Author 1996)

contracts to do environmental analyses along the River and greenway planning. The City of Buffalo has adopted the Greenway trail proposed by the organization, and the Friends as an organization has design review on all plans and changes along the River in the City of Buffalo. And perhaps most important, the group has written design guidelines and policies for the federally required Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan that have been adopted by the City of Buffalo. The institutionalization of a vision into a legal structure insures that the vision of the river will survive changes in administrations and politics.

Students frequently use the Buffalo River as a site for projects, and the Friend's organization as a client group. This abandoned landscape is provocative and alluring, especially the gigantic grain elevators which inspired architects such as Le Corbusier (Banham). These behemoth structures invite engagement. But it is not only the industrial ruins that stir the imagination; the unkempt landscape itself invites participation because it is the site of so much activity. It is, as one would expect, the playground of choice for the young people who live there, even as their parents wish it "cleaned-up" and made into a park. Chris Payne's design proposal addresses both of these concerns by carefully articulating a manicured edge while leaving the rest of the site to grow as it will and remain a place for unsupervised play (Fig. 6).

The Buffalo River, like many other toxic spots in our world, could simply be erased and forgotten, a place to avoid. But many in the community have decided to cherish this spot on the earth, to inhabit it, to clean it up, to attend to it. This activity of placemaking constitutes the practice of "radical

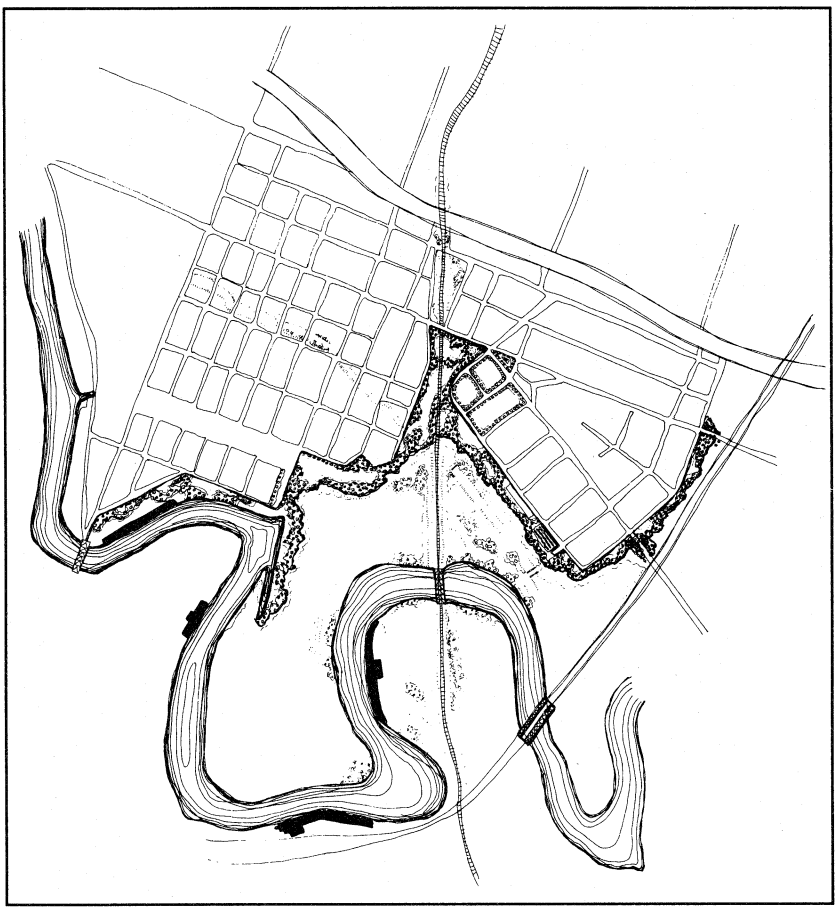

Figure 6. *Proposal for preserving the wildness of the river edge along the Buffalo River for both natural restoration and the play of children while manicuring the city edge to protect the "unkempt."* [Christopher Payne 1993]

permanence" (Durning) in a concerted effort to protect the restoring habitats and remnants of history of the Buffalo River.

The active creation and restoration of an ecologically based landscape is work that sits between the "natural" world and the world of artifice. To reenter the given world would reveal to us that nature is not "out there" but here and always present. We are permeated with the world. This rather subversive thought would probably change the way we regard our cities, our landscapes, and our species; it would require us to think of this place and this time. Our need to protect beauty and wilderness would be as much about our front yards, our streets, and our urban rivers, as about Yellowstone Park and the tropical rainforest (Hillman, *Natural Beauty Without Nature).*

Placemaking is a way to construct the present, to make ourselves a home on this earth. It is about the relationship of us to *others;* it is about accepting and repairing a place even as the larger culture is communicating that we should be someplace else. Placemaking helps us, as Sardello says, ". . . to awake each morning with the small exercise of remembering that you are here, not everywhere" (41).

Remaking the Past

> *One is still being exhorted to live in the "present", or to have faith in the "future", as if these categories of fantasy are more privileged or ontologically more real than that of the "past."* (Bishop 8)

The question poised to students of a graduate design studio, "The Landscape of Public History" for discussion and discovery was the possibility of imaginatively engaging the past through processes of resurrection, interpretation, and reconstruction. What is the role of designers in remaking lost landscapes? Can we remind ourselves and our communities of alternative public histories?

The landscape in which we live is made by ceaseless activity—moving and changing, preserving and staying. Much of the earth and all of the constructed landscape is a record of human action and inaction in the world. It is upon the landscape—built and given—that the history of our collective lives is written.

There is no doubt that the activity of ceaseless development which marks modern life makes it difficult to maintain traces and indices of previous actions. Most often we totally *erase* and *unmake* the work of others as if they had not existed. This happens to us personally when the place we grew up disappears under a new development, or when a building we had seen everyday in the city is taken down and replaced with a parking lot. And it happens to us culturally when what had been the Italian neighborhood is supplanted in a urban renewal project or when the makings of others are eliminated as has occurred on this continent with the erasure and sequestration of native peoples. We forget, and in our forgetfulness, find ourselves in a lonely space without connection to those of the past who have been rendered invisible, losing our sense of community and public history.

The series of studio projects had to address the condition of knowing that we can never re-place that which has been erased and further, that any landscape is an imaginal re-construction of something and someplace. Yet, in this context of loss and change, is it possible to create remembrances of previous activity that open a space for re-connection? This question is complex and utopian; it must be responded to *imaginally* (Bishop 8). There is no authentic past, only a way to imagine the past that is more or less inclusive. Can this be done without trivializing it and turning the world into Disneyland?

In this studio, we investigated several histories of our Western New York region and their erased/invisible landscapes such as the activities of the underground railroad and the 18th/19th century Native Americans settlements.

We worked with existing local groups and held exhibitions of the student/community work. This was an exercise in "exploring what it means to remember and what to do with memories to make them active and alive, as opposed to mere objects of collection" (Frisch 17).

From among the work of this studio, I will present some of the projects related to the Seneca of the Buffalo River. When the Seneca moved to the Buffalo region after the "scorched earth campaign" of General John Sullivan in 1779, they settled along the Buffalo River which flows into Lake Erie close to the mouth of the Niagara River. This area, currently within the city of Buffalo, was guaranteed to the Seneca through a series of treaties that created the Buffalo Creek Reservation. During the early 1800's, the reservation was "sold" to the city and various industries. The farming, villages, and sacred locations along the River have disappeared.

There are native people in Buffalo working to reinsert their story into the history of the city. The Seneca of the Haudenosaunee have established a walking tour of the Buffalo River/Cazenovia Creek area which presents the places of importance to them, including the Native American grounds in which Red Jacket and Mary Jamison were buried [although the bones of both were later moved to the distress of native peoples and to stated fear of Red Jacket who foresaw such an event].

To support the walking tour, Dale Parks has proposed a special sidewalk design based on the wampum belt to mark the interpretative trail. Its existence will also remind people in their daily lives that the Seneca once lived here. She also designed a Telling Circle as an insertion to the Olmsted designed Cazenovia Park (Fig. 7). A more radical proposal was offered by

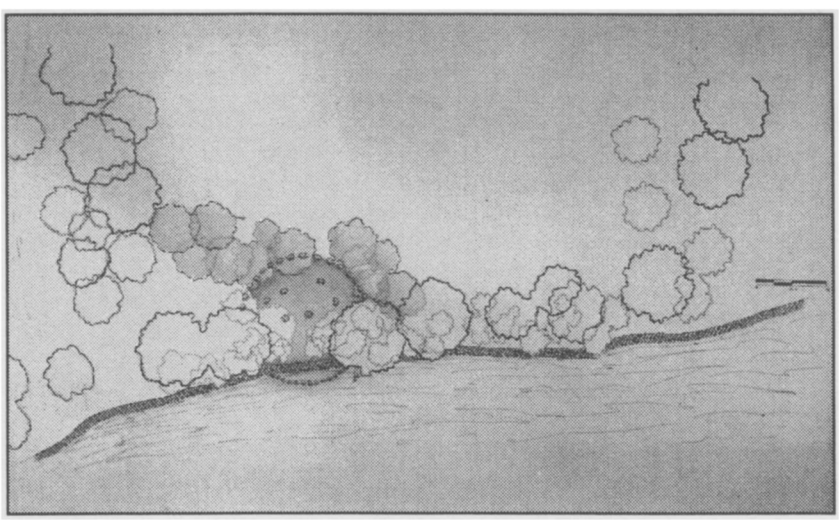

Figure 7. *A Telling Circle proposed for Cazenovia Park, Buffalo, New York, to reinforce the interpretative trail offered by the Haudenosaunee regarding the historic presence of the Seneca along the Buffalo River.* [Dale Parks, 1995]

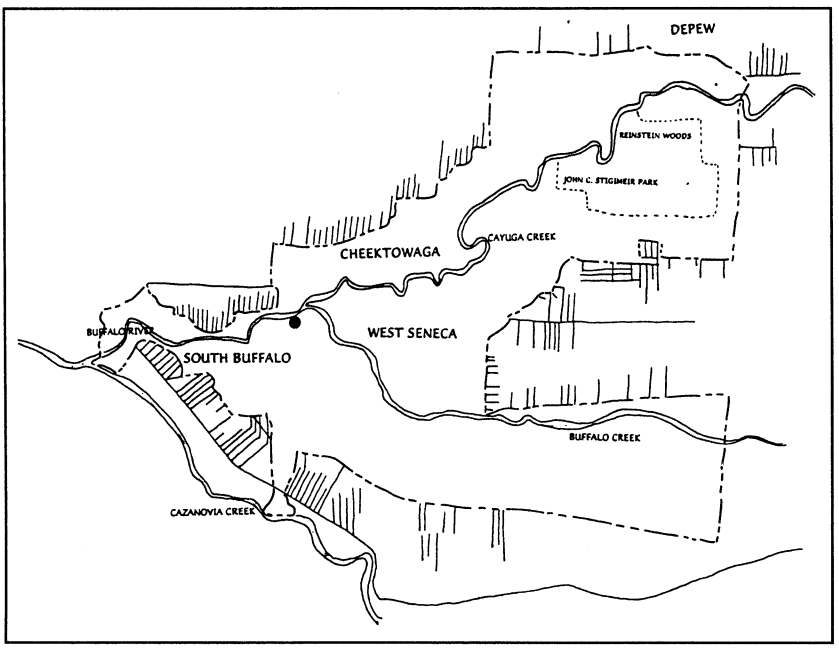

Figure 8. *"The Big Woods": A proposal to return the Buffalo Creek Reservation to the Seneca.* [Maureen McBride, 1995]

Maureen McBride who suggested that lands which had previously belonged to the Seneca be returned as "The Big Woods"—interestingly enough much of which is still forested (Fig. 8).

Each of the project proposals was an attempt to see beneath the existing patterns of settlement to remake a past, to re-member the events and people who proceeded. The modern proclivity for erasure is boundless—not only of the history of subjugated peoples, but of its own previous acts. Nothing is sacred except the process of building, changing, modifying, erasing. Permanence and remembrance are not valued; change and newness are. Our culture rejects not only specific historic events and peoples; we seem to reject the idea of history and a past altogether. It is as if everyday we arise anew without connection to those who lived before us with nothing to do but to create the world. In such a world, each act of historic preservation, each group attempting to find a place for its voice, each construction of imagined public history, is an act of resistance and critique.

The Imagined Future

The final type of utopian work in the environmental design fields that I will present has been called various names such as visionary architecture, paper architecture, utopian planning and so on. In this type of work, there is

no aspiration for the work to be built or implemented. The intention is to give visual form to a critique of current conditions, or to create an imaginary world of "as if." Architects and other designers such as Darden, Beaumont, Wolf, and Woods presented in this issue, seek to envision a fundamentally different place.

One way for designers to engage in imaginative worlds is to explore the visual implications of literature. Jim Magnuson's (1991) rendition of the dystopian world of McInytre's science fiction novel, *Exile Waiting,* done as a part of the "Waste" studio, is one such example. The apocalypse has come, and the two protagonists, Chris and Mischa, have chosen different forms of escape from "The Center"—leaving the world for other places, or death. Mischa escapes, but Chris refuses to leave. His death is the transformation he wished for. Magnuson designed Chris's final resting place in the ruin of an ancient missile silo at the end of the River of the Dead (Fig. 9). Here the "paradox of birth-death permeating his world will be embodied in his tomb; his mummified chrysalis will hang in the apse of the cathedral of the missile silo like a slumbering larval butterfly in the innards of the mechanism that both ended our reality and began his" (Magnuson). The novel reveals the logical conclusion of our current life style; the designer gives images to that end.

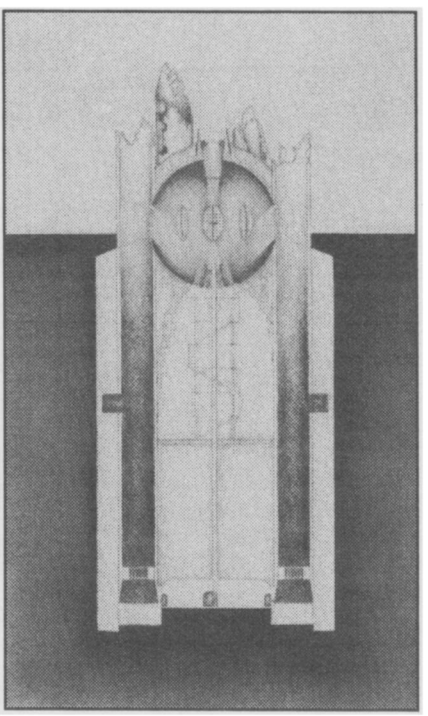

Figure 9. *"The Transformatorium"—a final resting place for protagonist in McIntyre's "The Exile" using a missile silo.* [James Magnuson 1993]

Another student, Jo-Anne Charron (1995), inspired by the out-of-womb form of childbirth described in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time,* designed a Ectogenic Birth Center. Charron made the assumption that out-of-womb gestation becomes the norm by the end of the 21st century, but that humans still want to participate in the process and "bond" with the child-becoming. She designed a ritual celebrating the relationship between the fetus and the parents, culminating in the birthing experience itself. The facility, located in an urban center, is designed not only to accommodate the technical aspects of out-of-womb gestation, but accommodates the ritual and celebrates the birthing of a new life (Fig. 10). The Ectogenic Birth Center dares to imagine what the world could be like, taking what

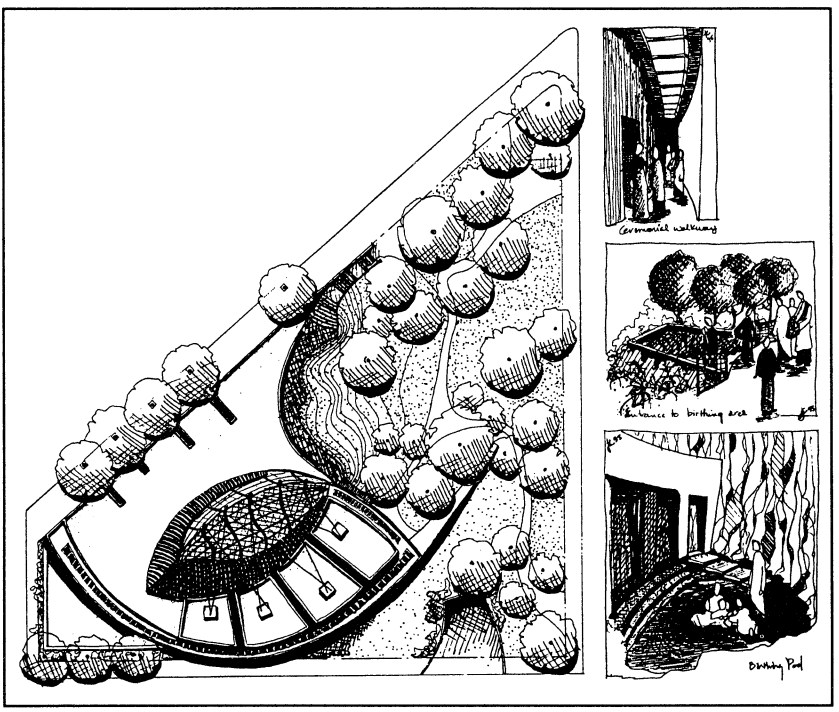

Figure 10. *Design for an Ectogenic Reproductive and Birthing Center where the aspects of technology of out-of-womb gestation and the ritual and celebration of birth co-exist.* [Jo-Anne Charron, 1995]

might be considered a dystopia fantasy of the intrusion of technology into the intimacy of birth, and finding a way to reconceptualize it.

Alan Makalinao (1993) explored a series of visual images for the future of our cities. Using the current fabric of Buffalo, New York, his design inquiry looks at several options. One logical scenario is that we continue to tear down all of the existing fabric and replace the 19th and early 20th century city with large projects surrounded by uninhabitable open space, a rendition the city through the window of a car. Other ideas explored what would happen if the city were more "ecological" and more connected with the native plants and animals that had been here earlier. A third option was to explore what would occur if the existing fabric of the city were invaded by a totally different form, a parasitic form similar to the "freespace" proposal by Woods (Fig. 11). Any of the above ideas is an alternative future, a way we might decide through our culture, laws, political/economic system and so on, to inhabit our cities.

Nothing is predetermined by the conditions we find ourselves in nor by the trajectory we are now on—not even our present and past. And many different futures are possible. One of the contributions that designers can make

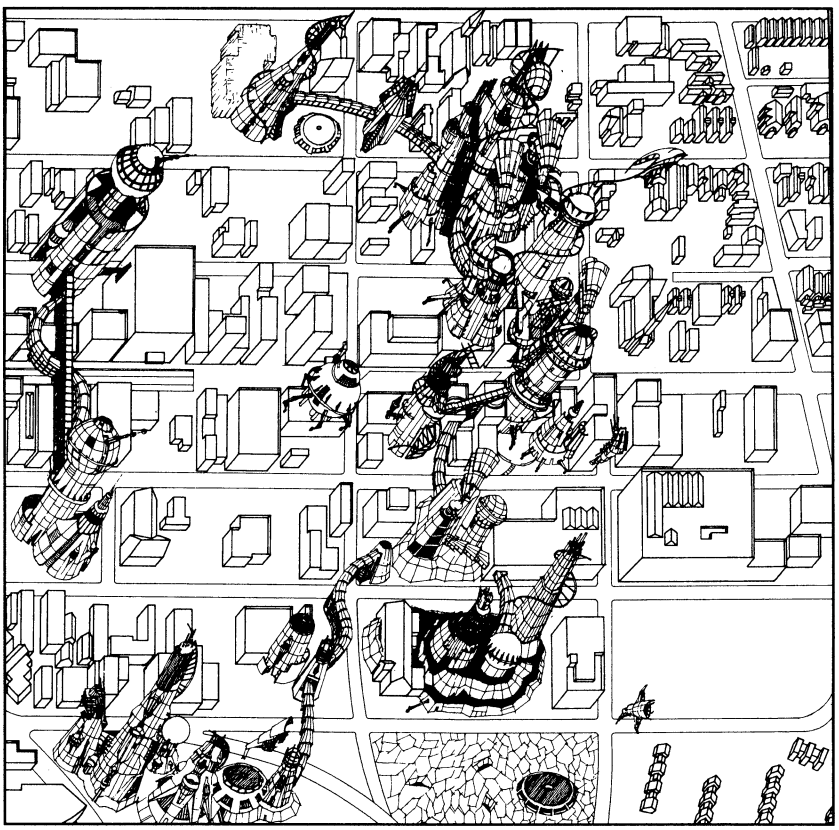

Figure 11. *Future visions of the city based on the insertion of the type of "freespace" proposed by Lebbeus Woods.* [Alan Makalinao, 1993]

to the ongoing production of our culture is to give form and images to alternative futures, pasts, and presents so that we might chose how to be, affirming that which is special and should be preserved, and that which needs our substantive critique and to be unmade.

Conclusions

The projects and narratives presented under **Unmaking** and **Making** are offered as a demonstration of some of the ways in which architecture, planning, and the other environmental design fields engage consciously in utopian work. The type of questions asked and the kind of design responses are representative of *utoping* work often encountered in academic and professional domains.

From a review of the work presented, and from my personal experience teaching and practicing, I would suggest that there are two different types of

utopian work in the design fields: critical and redemptive. These two forms are related, yet have a different aim. The primary aim of a critique is to make something visible that had been invisible: to use the visual image and forms of representation to "show" us something about the world that we had not seen, or perhaps, do not want to see, often in a startling and "unbuildable" way. The projects in the Imagined Future and most of the Love Canal projects fit into this category.

The redemptive work is focused on the envisioning of something else, a stepping through the critique. It is about showing the ways in which places can be different, suggesting that humans and world can be in relationship in alternative ways, and working to heal the relationship between people and place. The placemaking work on the Buffalo River is about repair, as were the projects from the Space Under the Bridge.

Utopian practices can occur on paper or they can occur in the world in the process of working with communities. The location of utopian design depends more on the public nature of the discussion than on the form of its engagement. The only way to avoid the dangers of "one man's utopian vision" being constructed over the world-as-is and the visions of others, is to have a dialogue and public discussion of the work. In this way, the practice of imaginative possibilities becomes part of the public space and many engage in both the critique of the world and the construction of present/future.

As important as the public engagement in making and unmaking the world is the attitude of imaginal thinking, of "metaphorising" (Hillman, *Revisioning Psychology*). This is a far cry from the rationalistic utopianism that continues to be critiqued as destructive and totalitarian. It is the reality of fantasy, the reality of "what if," the realm of what could be. It is a way of "deliteralizing" the concreteness of our material world, and problematizing the sense of inevitability of the world-becoming.

The utopian gesture in architecture is dependent on an image. Our culture responds to the text of images, "image junkies" that we are (Sontag 24). But perhaps we are not sufficiently critical of the power of images. Mander writes that "[T]he natural evolutionary design is for human to see all things as real, since the things that we see have always been real" (Mander 252). Our experience of the world through our senses has been the foundation of human functioning; we inherently trust and have faith in them. Yet we now live in a world where most of the images we see through various media are "made-up real" and no longer "real" in the sense that the trees in the forest, the shining sun, and the faces of our family are real.

By literalizing the images we experience, we often fail to realize that they are more true than real. Images are true because they can help us "imagine" something, such as the possible existence of a different present, alternative imaginal pasts, and possible futures. Hillman writes that through images "[W]e perform an operation of insight which is a seeing-through or hearing into" (Bishop 13) rather than simply seeing or hearing.

It is in this sense that some would argue that much of the work of professional and academic environmental designers is truly a-utopian. It does

not help us *see through* the material world as we encounter it daily; it simply reproduces it. And the constant reproduction of the existing material culture normalizes a world filled with left-over spaces, poisoned landscapes, and abandoned cities juxtaposed to bright and new shining malls, endless suburban sprawl, and gated communities. Existing ecologies are destroyed, and the history of people and places rendered invisible.

I argue, however, that architecture is *unredeemably utopian* because when we make and unmake the world we always work within a vision of what "ought-to-be." To be sure, this ought-to-be can be the uncritical reproduction of what already is. To unmake and make the existing material order is not therefore, a-utopian; it is rather uncritically accepting the modernist utopian vision of progress and the supremacy of humans. To challenge this utopian vision with a different "ought-to-be" is "necessarily dangerous" as Piercy says—at least dangerous to the existing social and material order.

As a cultural practice, the environmental design fields sit at the border of convention and subversion depending on whether or not the work seeks to help us *see through* or whether it seeks only to reproduce the existing material world. In this paper I have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which architecture and environmental design through the *conscious process of utoping* both critique and offer healing visions of the world-becoming. Even though much of the utopian work we see in architecture and related practices today is critical rather than redemptive,[5] the process of "seeing through" the material world and cultural practices frames "imaginative possibilities." The practice of imaginatively *utoping* in design provides powerful visions of making and unmaking the world—visions that both frighten, and offer hope.

NOTES

**I would like to thank all of the students who have worked with me in studios, seminars, and community projects for their imaginative creativity in "seeing through" the world. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the many communities and brave souls who have permitted me to work with them in their struggle to put down roots and make beloved places. Thank you to Karen Franck and Robert Shibley for their critical comments on this paper and to Jo-Anne Charron for helping to organize the graphic material.*

1. The student work presented is from the School of Architecture and Planning, State University of New York at Buffalo. The academic projects have been developed in two locations: design studios, the primary mode of education in which students and faculty meet between 10–15 hours/week around themes in the field; and more traditional courses and seminars but with student competence demonstrated in design rather than writing.
2. Two of the most provocative books regarding unmaking related to the fields of environmental design are Scarry (1985) and Lynch (1990).
3. See Brill 1994 for a fascinating presentation of the results of a project by the Department of Energy to engage a diverse group of professionals in the question of the disposal of nuclear waste that will be active for at least 10,000 years.
4. I have been on the Board of Directors of the Friends of the Buffalo River since its founding in 1989 and participated in most of the activities. I have also had the opportunity to work with many design students over the years who have done public service projects with the Friends.

5. The trend to engage in critical work without proposition for what may become is a characteristic of postmodern criticism. The power of this standpoint is that it has profoundly uncovered the modernist utopian fantasy; its impotence is related to its unwillingness to offer any other standpoint from which to create culture. "If postmodernism offers no way out of our current condition, we must now ask why. Why is postmodernism unable to get beyond the fragmentation it critiques so compellingly?" (Rushing and Frentz 23). Rushing and Frentz suggest that the answer is that postmodern writers endorse many of the foundational beliefs of modernism and therefore, cannot "see through" to an alternative vision. See also Giroux 1988 for a critique of postmodernism and its relationship to the modernist project.

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