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*Emerging Landscapes: Between Production and Representation*  
(review)

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## Emerging Landscapes: Between Production and Representation

University of Westminster, London, UK  
June 25–27, 2010

Reviewed by Alan Tate with an addendum by César Torres-Bustamante

Jointly organized by the School of Media, Art and Design (SMAD) and the School of Architecture and Built Environment (SABE) at the University of Westminster, this three-day event involved over 150 delegates from more than 20 countries. It comprised four keynote addresses and 75 presentations given in seven parallel sessions. The principal organizer, Eugenie Shinkle from SMAD's Department of Photography, did an admirable job of coordinating this diverse collection of presenters and delegates.

It was clear from the outset that we were going to experience multiple applications of the word “landscape.” Professor Murray Fraser from the Department of Architecture opened by noting the interest of the SABE in landscapes—which he defined, somewhat loosely, as “hybrids in which mythical, ideological, and technological factors intersect with each other”—and describing the intention behind the event of addressing, somewhat ambitiously, questions of “what exactly are these contemporary landscapes we are creating, who is making them, how are they responding to global forces, and how might they possibly better serve human needs?”

What was being suggested was landscape as part of “the expanded field of architecture”—reminiscent, ironically, of what Jeremy Till, Dean of Architecture at Westminster, described in his *Architecture Depends* as the propensity to redefine architecture internally in the face of any historical crisis or changed social circumstance (Till 2009, 20). Throughout the event we experienced an eclectic collection of perspectives from the keynote speakers, and intersections of views and values from the panel presenters, but unsurprisingly few answers to those big questions, and little evidence of the mooted hegemony of architecture over “landscape.”

First of the keynote speakers, Gabriele Basilico from Milan, graduated in architecture in the early 1970s but became a photographer after visiting British New Towns, particularly Cumbernauld. Speaking through a simultaneous translator with his monochrome images being projected on a loop, Basilico described his fascination with abandoned open spaces

and voids which are not part of buildings. The images provide a record of declining industrial areas in Milan and in post-war Beirut—haunting, largely unpeopled reflections of abandonment.

The suavely cosmopolitan Christophe Girot, Chair of Landscape Architecture at ETH Zurich, gave an oddly alarmist presentation, describing landscape architecture as having “a deep crisis of representation” and of ruminating through “stuff from 300 years ago.” He talked about point clouds and showed recent video work by his students, arguing that there will be “a paradigm shift to three dimensional teaching within the next 10 years.” Citing Virilio and Barthes, Girot described landscape as having “disintegrated into an informal background medium upon which other events are played,” arguing that it has been “relegated to the margins of our vision.” Frankly though, his students’ somewhat facile video work, much of it through moving windscreens, seemed to conflate routes and destinations and did little to support his argument that 3D video technology will supersede, supplant, and suppress all other modes of vision and forms of representation. Girot gave an unconvincing response to a straightforward question about the capacity of video to facilitate design decisions. Again, if landscape is relegated to mere background (a case of submergent landscapes?) there might be no such thing as a designed landscape.

Jonathan Hill, from the Bartlett School of Architecture in London, described as “the only Professor of Architecture and Visual Theory in the world,” gave a delightful overview of his forthcoming book *Weather Architecture* (homophone intended). Distinguishing between architecture (a broad field) and what architects do (a much narrower one) and between climate (averages) and weather (what we experience on a daily basis), Hill addressed aspects of the picturesque through the work of John Locke (who kept a weather diary for 20 years), William Kent (particularly at Rousham), John Soane’s house, Turner’s paintings (and weather-beaten house) and Derek Jarman’s garden. It seemed somewhat strange to hear a Professor of Architecture (and Visual Theory) proclaiming the durability of the picturesque after a Professor of Landscape Architecture had consigned it (as part of “stuff from 300 years ago”) to the dustbin of history.<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Daniels, Professor of Cultural Geography at the University of Nottingham talked about the importance of narrative in the recording and representation of landscapes, including landscape histories. And for Daniels too, video does

not seem to have killed earlier forms of comprehension and communication about landscapes.

It is, of course, impossible to summarize the panel presentations. They seemed to be like the proverbial curate's egg. Among the better bits for this reviewer were Thomas Moran, William Muschenheim Fellow in architecture at the University of Michigan, talking about "Hoax as Design," and Andy Clayden, Senior Lecturer in Landscape at Sheffield University, addressing the woodland burial movement in Britain. Design as hoax involves students in the production and promotion (which is where the hoax comes in) of apparently real projects—like a high-speed rail hub ("VPL") in the desert between Las Vegas (V), Phoenix (P) and Los Angeles (L), obviating the need to fly between these cities. Clayden, in a strangely comparable way, drew attention to the emergence of a new landscape type as a medium to maintain connection between the living and the dead.

Lasting impressions? Architects (unsurprisingly) making territorial claims in an area that at least one landscape architect (surprisingly) suggested is in demise; the universality and ubiquity of the word "landscape" leading to it becoming an umbrella for a cornucopia of artists and designers; disappointment that so few students attended the event; and admiration for Eugenie Shinkle and her colleagues in staging such a complex conference on a hot weekend in June in London, against the counter attractions of Wimbledon and World Cup.

César Torres-Bustamante noted of the conference that:

- The high number of applications from the call for papers led the organizers to set up additional, very effective presentations in the form of slideshows and posters.
- It was regrettable that Gabriele Basilico's arresting photographs were not addressed directly rather than being shown as a looped background to his lecture, and it was unfortunate that Christophe Girot did not discuss the potential of video in designing and

constructing landscapes, thereby leaving a gap that might be closed by experimental video.

- The contributions from landscape architects did not fully address the topic of "emergence" and only a handful of presenters approached landscape as a structuring medium that shifts from the pictorial to the operational, or that privileges processes over static form.
- Very few presentations addressed contemporary approaches to the perception, representation, and design of global, contested, natural, virtual, and everyday landscapes.
- Overall, the video, audio, and moving imagery presentations started to disclose innovative possibilities in landscape representation, but did not set a solid framework for the construction and actualization of landscapes.

## NOTES

1. This was redolent of Susan Herrington's essay "Framed Again: The Picturesque Aesthetics of Contemporary Landscapes" (Herrington 2006).

## REFERENCES

Herrington, Susan. 2006. Framed Again: The Picturesque Aesthetics of Contemporary Landscapes. *Landscape Journal* 25 (1): 22–37.

Till, Jeremy. 2009. *Architecture Depends*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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