

Expanded Landscapes

John Roloff

Published: NCECA Journal 2009, NCECA Publications, Vol. 30, pg. 36-37, 114

Approximate text for Roloff portion of Panel Presentation: *Perils in the Sublime (A Poetic Consideration of Ecology, Landscape and Reconstruction)*, NCECA 2009, Phoenix, AZ, Moderator: Neil Forrest, Panelists: Kim Dickey, John Roloff, Clare Twomey.

Section I

Introduction: An Imaginary/Exemplary Tour in Time, Material and Place

Terrestrial structures, whether natural or human-made, can be characterized and understood as a function of many different but intrinsically related landscapes in geologic time. The term paleogeography is used to describe the terrain and environmental conditions of past landscapes. An exemplary material or object such as a brick, in the side of a contemporary building, as a generational ambassador or representative of multifarious terrains, relates to its current landscape by geographic and temporal coordinates, altitude, weather, relationship to proximate materials, tectonic or structural context, relational botanical and zoological habitats, etc. The chronology of this brick's situational and depositional environment may be considered as Anthropocene (the human era in geologic terms), a unit of altered earth, configured by architects, law, need and aesthetics, deposited by masons in a complex though ordered matrix of cementaceous material (mortar), creating a larger tectonic structure within this landscape.

Working backwards in time, the brick was transported to its current location from its last site of alteration (ostensibly a brickyard) that may be near or very far away. This alteration included extraction as clay, mudstone, shale or siltstone from a likely stratigraphic section of earth, mechanical processing, mixing with other materials (representing other landscapes), compression, forming and metamorphism in the kiln (the kiln, fuel and related elements also as ambassadors). The origin and depositional environment of the clay, shale, mudstone or siltstone, was very likely littoral, estuarine or marine, the bottom of a lake, estuary or sea -- another landscape with its own environmental conditions, scale, chronology, flora and fauna.

Going further back in time, the origin of the clay, shale, mudstone or siltstone was likely a product of erosion and chemical transformation of feldspar and related minerals, constituents of granite, diorite, monzonite or other sialic crustal rocks forming a mountain range such as the Sierra Nevada, with its attendant biomes, glaciers and morphologies. This granitic proto-clay, shale, mudstone or siltstone, as in the case of the Sierra Nevada or the Andes, was likely the result of plate tectonics and the melting of oceanic seafloor being intruded as a plutonic body at a continental margin. The seafloor landscape, initiated at a mid-oceanic ridge by deep-welling magma plumes, having all the mystery and wonder of oceanic abyssal and pelagic environments: layers of globigerina and radiolarian ooze, coelacanth, sediment-laden turbidity currents, and submerged atolls with seething, individuated micro-environments. And so on...

The brick at the end of this genealogy may as well have been a Pueblo Grand pot shard, Arneson portrait, Dogon or Herzog and deMuren building, or a terraced farm in Indonesia, each with their own lineage, complexities, transports and transformations, whose generations may have crossed paths in some way in earth's history, more than once.

Section II

Selected Works that Consider Geologic Narratives

Selected artwork documentation and project proposals from the past 30 years of work will be shown in the context of the "Perils of the Sublime" panel to elaborate on how this approach has evolved and is manifest in my work. These projects include: *Land Monitor/Fired Volcanic Boulder*, 1980, *Devonian Shale (Aquifer I)*, 2000, *Yerba Buena Complex*, 2008 and *Pier 15-17 Complex*, 2008-09.

Land Monitor/Fired Volcanic Boulder is the second large environmental performance/ kiln work after *Fired and Glazed Earth Piece*, 1979 an experimental work devised to fire the in-situ ground plane of the kiln. For *Land Monitor/Fired Volcanic Boulder*, the steel and ceramic fiber blanket kiln was removed at the peak of the firing to expose a mafic (high iron/magnesium – low silica) basalt boulder, from the adjacent volcano, fired to a near-molten temperature, in an attempt for the viewer to physically re-experience the boulder's birth/origin by returning it to a molten state. The cooled, altered, boulder and fused volcanic sand remained after the firing as a “land monitor,” of similar proportions to the monitor ships (ironclads) of the American Civil War, an on-going image and theme since the early 1970's.

Devonian Shale: Aquifer I is a model for a theoretical aquifer system made of processed, extruded and fired shale from the Devonian geologic era deposited in what is now western New York state, coated for each exhibition with unfired local sediment, then fired to cone 08-06 to lithify the coating between each exhibition. This work can be constructed in a variety of configurations representing different flow patterns by using other central cross units that influence the orientation and placement of the appendage structures, studied in drawings shown with the work. The structure as exhibited for the exhibition, *Fluency*, at Alfred University, 2001, was coated with raw Devonian Caneadea shale slip (the same material as the extruded pipe are made of). *Devonian Shale: Aquifer I* is in the collection of the Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art, Alfred University, Alfred, NY.

Yerba Buena Complex shown at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in the Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco in 2008, is an exemplary project for the study of geologic and architectural structures in the San Francisco Bay Area. In this regard, Yerba Buena Gardens and attendant architecture may be seen geologically as Anthropocene structural deposits of various origins resting unconformably on Cenozoic era sediments above the Alcatraz Terrane of the Franciscan Complex. This relationship was initially examined symbolically and materially by the public sculpture, *Deep Gradient/Suspect Terrain...*, in the form of a descending ship made of steel and green glass, containing ocean floor sediments extracted 4 miles off the California coast, installed on the Yerba Buena site in 1993. The sediments in *Deep Gradient...*, are a reference to the primal conditions of geologic deposition and materials related ecologically, physically and conceptually to those materials used for construction of the city's architecture and built environment. In this context, Yerba Buena Gardens, and by extension, the city is seen as a geologic formation, formed by parallel human activities: quarrying as erosion, transport as flow and construction as sedimentation.

Pier 15-17 Complex, is a main element of a research fellowship with the Exploratorium, San Francisco, CA, funded by the Bernard Osher Foundation. This fellowship was preceded by other work with the Exploratorium in the form of a series of proposals for projects for Fort Mason, and its piers, as part of a National Science Foundation grant. The fellowship will fund research and development time primarily directed towards research of Piers 15-17 along the San Francisco Bay waterfront as geologic structures. *Pier 15-17 Complex* similar to several other projects such as *Site Index*, 2001-09 and *Yerba Buena Complex*, by being viewed and analyzed as Anthropocene geologic formations, attempting to locate the piers in larger geologic and Anthropocene cycles of denudation, deposition and transformation, with the research being proposed as consisting of four inter-related phases.

Pier 15-17 Complex - Phase I-IV. Phase I – 3D CAD drawing of Piers 15/17 and seawall/shoreline history relating to current geology. Phase II – Video/data stratigraphic scan visualization/analysis of piers. Phase III – Industrial archeo/geologic study of pier structure, tracing pier materials to their origins in the Bay Area landscape - initial elements shown on this page. In addition to the pier material's paleo-sites, data from Phase I, to be used to calculate the total material volume of the pier structure's constituent elements: cement, aggregate, rebar, piling tree trucks, to arrive at qualitative and quantitative paleogeographic analogs and depositional environment/terrain equivalents for each material. Phase IV – Tagging and tracking (electronic, radiological, data base, etc., - TBD) of removed pilings and pier materials in the transformation from current condition to new a proposed redesign and alteration of the Piers 15-17 – tracking and logging the new resting place (depositional environment) of the “discarded” materials.



Devonian Shale: Aquifer I, altered Devonian era shale, 25 ft. (7.6 m) w; diagrams: industrial Xerox on bond, 3 ft. (1 m) h. A model for a theoretical aquifer system made of processed, extruded and fired shale from the Devonian geologic era deposited in what is now western New York state. This work can be constructed in a variety of configurations representing different flow patterns by using other central cross units that influence the orientation and placement of the appendage structures. Structure as shown was coated with raw Devonian shale slip for the exhibition *Fluency* at Alfred University, Alfred, NY, 2001. The work will be re-coated with indigenous sedimentary material for each subsequent exhibition until the pipe's interior is filled.



Yerba Buena Complex, top: site view of Yerba Buena Gardens, bottom left: *Deep Gradient Suspect Terrain...*, bottom right: *Yerba Buena Complex – Facies Study I (Transport/Erosion/Deposition/Consolidation/ Chronologic Analogs)* variable. 2008. Site information and study of the Yerba Buena Gardens public sculpture *Deep Gradient/Suspect Terrain...*, 1993, onto the architecture of the Yerba Buena Gardens and Center for the Arts as part of the exhibition, Bay Area Now 5, 2008



Yerba Buena Complex: Deep Gradient/YBCA I & II, installation views, green film on existing window, video, drawings, dimensions variable. 2008. A symbolic mapping and interpretation of the Yerba Buena Gardens public sculpture *Deep Gradient/Suspect Terrain...*, 1993, onto the architecture of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts as part of the exhibition, Bay Area Now 5, 2008.