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THE CONTEXT ISSUE

Things as we are, not as they are.

SYNTHETIC ROMANTIC

THE ALTRUISTIC AESTHETIC OF ARCHITECT PHILIP BEESLEY

CORBIN KEECH

'If we look at the earth as a territory devoted to life, it would appear as an enclosed space, delimited by the boundaries of living systems ... In other words, it would appear as a garden.'

—Gilles Clément, *The Planetary Garden*

The word *garden* is derived from the Indo-European root *gher*, meaning 'a place set apart, walled off'. Originally conceived as symbolic and rich with sacred value, the garden is paradoxically a reminder of what was once there. Reflecting on our collective relationship with the natural landscape reveals a long and vexed journey, evolving from a sacred and magnanimous abstract matriarch to instrumentalized Cartesian Anthropocene. As we continue to modify and alter our natural surroundings, they become inherently more complex—and interestingly, allows the landscape to elude definition.

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This expanding rhetorical range is both advantageous and problematic, as architectural designers and theorists alike see a blank canvas on which they can project their respective speculations. As a material practice, social register, representation, and cultural construct, however, this range is also ubiquitous, recalling Walter Benjamin's characterization that architecture, much like landscape, is an art form received by a collective in 'a state of distraction'. Meanwhile, the natural world is rapidly being supplemented and enhanced by synthetic biology, adaptive building components, and ecologically-sensitive infrastructure projects, transforming our physical surroundings into hybrid landscapes where

the inert matter of the past is being slowly replaced by animated architectural substances of the future. These projects are not simply well-intentioned urban brownfield developments, or even artful representations of pastoral uninhabited landscapes, but rather oneiric visions and tangibly responsive sculptural bodies that are imbued with sublime, even alien qualities. Their presumption is that our common material surroundings—buildings and landscapes—are alive and conscious, a concept ancient in its formulation and immeasurable in its ambitions. Needless to say, the future looks promising.

'In addition to describing the natural world in terms of its biological components, we must now include the mechanical, the digital, and the biotechnological as equally forceful agents actively changing its identity'

In addition to describing the natural world in terms of its biological components, we must now include the mechanical, the digital, and the biotechnological as equally forceful agents actively changing its identity. Consciously or not, the spiritual center of these radical new forms of design is the notion of *hylozoism*, which is essentially the ancient philosophy that all matter has life. This is an attitude with sizable implications for the built environment, in large part because it steers designers of landscapes and buildings toward one another, with their respective material palettes no longer defined by their consciousness or lack thereof. While this concept is hardly new—hylozoism dates back as far as the Milesian school of pre-Socratic philosophers—it has become the driving force behind the radically uncategorizable work of Canadian architect Philip Beesley and his collaborators.

Beesley, for his part, operates in the overlapping domains of sculpture, fash-

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ion, and architecture. Fueled by hylozoic virtues, he is pioneering a new multidiscplinary trajectory, in which the imagined and mystical not only take a physical shape, but have *behavior*. His sprawling sculptures, composed of acrylic components, sensors, and other delicate alloys, respond to the movement of the visitors that engage and interact with them. As a consequence, new paradigms are implied where humanity is seen as a participant in the complex negotiations between nature, culture, and technology. Conceptually speaking, in a world that is becoming increasingly dematerialized, the physicality and interactivity that distinguishes Beesley's work reminds us that both architecture and landscape, as spaces of encounter, still posses great value.

Beesley's work is less about structure, and more about atmosphere. It involves fewer objects of desire, and more spaces of contingency. It is less cynical, and more altruistic. The interdisciplinary nature of his work fits into a long tradition of participatory and collective design, which he claims 'is a practical necessity, as well as perhaps a very interesting aesthetic language to practice'. To achieve these ends, static materials have been replaced with dynamic, adaptive assemblies of non-living matter that behave as though they are alive. Each design, whether it is a wearable membrane of precisely-detailed polymer, crystal, and leather components created in collaboration with couturier Iris van Herpen, or sprawling skeleton of acrylic tendrils and lively microprocessors, elicits a feeling of delight and points toward a future in which human behavior and our respective ecologies are more interlaced. In Beesley's words, 'these environments raise fundamental questions [about] how we might visualize the

dynamics of open, evolving systems [and] how might new models emulating living systems and ecologies be translated into effective tools for design?'

In this amalgam of architecture, science, art and biology, two factions are crystallizing. The intelligence of the natural world is harnessed in different ways by its designers: landscape as designed, and landscape as un-designed. While the respective points of entry of these two groups are unique, they are united by a shared interest in re-introducing what previous generations of architects have sought to exclude from the built environment: the natural world itself. Beesley's assemblies tend to place him in the former group, given the immersive yet synthetic qualities inherent in his work. Meanwhile, designers interested in deploying the un-designed landscape are subject to the constraints and complexity of different ecologies, thereby providing a strong counterpoint to the notion that we can standardize and predict natural processes in the service of design.

'the pragmatic is in tension with the picturesque'

In relation to our collective engagement with the landscape, this dialectic is arguably not without precedent, in which the pragmatic is in tension with the picturesque. The former concept, *landschaft*, is defined by intimacy, physical engagement, and functionality. This set of values resembles the emerging desire to engineer nature and natural processes. Conversely, *landskip* is distinguished by its preoccupation with the inherent visual pleasures of the natural world. The division between these two concepts reflects a corresponding tension between scientific and aesthetic values in the discipline of landscape architecture, which began to separate in the nineteenth-century and have not been reunited since.

As it pertains to the discipline itself, even Le Corbusier—arguably the most

prolific contributor to the Modern architectural canon—could not reconcile this conspicuously large fissure between landscape and architecture. Despite efforts to conceptualize a working theory of architecture and landscape operating together, architecture has continuously been conceived as a counter-form to nature. Indeed, it is essentially a forgone conclusion in today's climate that environmentally progressive systems be incorporated into a built project, but these efforts are consciously non-polemical, frequently gestural, and are simply a response to the relentless external pressure of the market economy.

'Beesley's sensorial and environmental experiments aspire to shift perceptual conventions'

Beesley's sensorial and environmental experiments aspire to shift perceptual conventions and conjure images of an overdue accord. They represent a paradigm shift in the ways by which cities, neighborhoods, buildings, and even our clothes are designed. This shift, by his argument, could be defined as simply a desire to create a mutual relationship between humans and the structures that surround us. When asked about the latent altruism visible in his work, Beelsey replied, 'the work does have the purpose of creating a field in which [human] empathy may be possible, and also a kind of expanded mechanical empathy, in which mutual relationships might be found between humans and creatures in the inorganic world, as a vitally integrated and distributed kind of soil: a pluripotent field'. Through this materialization, his conceptual framework is no longer fiction, and yet the dilemma of adaptive spaces remains intractable. Nevertheless, he has taken the first steps in imagining more contingent architectural systems.

It must be stated that before anything can be built, it must first be imagined,

illustrated, and modeled. The image precedes all construction. It is the objective, a prophecy. The relation between the image and the built *thing* is closely linked to R.E. Somol's theory of *graphic expediency*: the power of the graphic shape that is 'imageable but without reference'. Because of the radically inventive nature of Beesley's work, it resists critical reading and symbolic interpretation. This is precisely the moment in which landscape design can be liberated from the risk-averse technocratic metrics that hinder its advancement. Moreover, this is where landscape design can reclaim the picturesque, the surreal, and the unknowable poetic qualities that we associate with landscape.

For Beesley, the process starts with drawing by hand, which 'seeks to push and pull the remapping of individual components'. Through this process, 'a prototype emerges quickly … perhaps in the same hour … in parallel it might be … sketched by using digital modeling' and subsequently fabricated, assembled and tested by Beesley and his design team. 'The prototype might be physically worn … or might be suspended above and sketched as a possible fresh dimension that exists at an environmental scale'. Through this continuous feedback loop, facilitated by means both analog and digital, Beelsey makes the case for a new landscape: a garden of the future. This is an attitude that holds ecological values in high esteem, but also revives a certain romanticism that is conspicuously absent from academic and industry circles alike.

'Beelsey makes the case for a new landscape: a garden of the future'

The similarities between Beesley's creations and Gilles Clément's portrait of the garden cannot be ignored. Clément designed public parks across the

world, and as a designer, ecologist, and botanist his objective was to explore a mutual partnership with nature through the energy and resilience of the landscape. Beesley aims to stir a similar feeling of wonder, despite the synthetic nature of his tools and building materials. Since the behavior of their respective creations remains both coordinated and purposeful, a wholeness with a discernible edge becomes legible. And through this visual coherence by which they are defined, they take on the character pieces are animated by a runway model or a visitor at the Venice Bienniale, this intelligible being envelops the inhabitant viewer, allowing his work to transcend its sculpture-state and become a hybrid proxy for nature.

'the immediate utility of Beesley's creations is to foster new relations between humans and the built environment'

While the immediate utility of Beesley's creations is to foster new relations between humans and the built environment, the long-term effect is the birth of a new aesthetic and architectural benchmark. The mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems that constitute the guts of contemporary buildings are now analogous to the innards of a living being: they too are responsive, intelligent, and adaptable. The various permutations of his *Hylozoic Series*, in particular, can be described in terms typically reserved for science fiction. Composed of digitally fabricated units fitted with microprocessors and sensors, these lightweight sculptures are typically suspended in a large, dark space. They exhibit a dramatic luminescence that is extraterrestrial, fertile, and even chthonian. Despite their tendrils and leaf-like components that desire human contact, the sculptures are mysteriously otherworldly, which arguably locates this groundbreaking work in a territory that is ironically neither alien nor familiar. Beyond the practical craft of his work and its material physics, Beesley deliberately shifts from 'tribal clusters and social scales' to 'enclosed landscapes and weather systems' in an effort to expose or discover a new quality about the material and its behavior.

'the aesthetics of biological organization are easy to replicate'

The primary ambition of Beesley's *Hylozoic Series* is to imagine environments that feel, know, and respond to their occupants, coupled with a secondary concern, which is the formalization of these environments. Conveniently, the aesthetics of biological organization are easy to replicate with today's design tools. Moreover, the rhetorical tropes designers often invoke—repetition, aggregation, modularity—are even easier to deploy. With these technological assets, despite typically abstaining from using so-called natural materials, Beesley's projects evoke a certain reverence for the natural world. While their materials are deliberately synthetic, their procedure of manufacture and subsequent behavior is informed by established design methods. Their artifice diminishes when upon assembly they detach from the systems of digital fabrication from which they originated, as Beesley's systems are useless without an agent—the human body.

While his constructs exhibit both material efficiency and practical resilience, the methods by which they are created are born out of a desire to also explore the fictional and narrative-based boundaries of architecture. This mixture of fact and fiction illustrates the importance of considering how future landscapes can be simultaneously pragmatic and instrumental creations, in addition to being visually pleasurable. And herein lies the significance of Beelsey's formal synthesis of hylozoism: if no one

'Beesley has leapt into the future, where buildings and landscapes converge'

proposes a realistic alternative to what exists, we continue to produce what we have already seen. With *Hylozoic Series*, Beesley has leapt into the future, where buildings and landscapes converge, and he has shaped this mutant system into something that is equal parts mystical and visually coherent.

In his explorations of natural and synthetic landscapes, Beesley's bravest invocation is in assigning the life-giving qualities of soil to his work. His attraction to the term lies in its ability to provide a valuable and provocative definition of contemporary architecture because 'soil implies an immersive field out of which organisms and coherent systems arise'. Digital technologies and synthetic biology can be coupled in creative new ways, which, according to Beesley, can together 'be seen as a soil that makes a deeply saturated open space for action. It acts by framing a space, and also filling the space … so that the ground is full of possibility'. Certainly, a conventional garden is not only nurtured by man, but it also produces new life. This argument would be a mere rhetorical gesture if it did not recall the aforementioned concept of *landschaft*, in which individuals directly engage with the landscape, calling to question the conventions of the natural world, its future materiality, and its potential scale.

Additionally, in 1969, Gordon Pask serendipitously channeled hylozoic virtues in his prophetic essay 'The Architectural Relevance of Cybernetics'. He argued for a shift from a strict functionalist paradigm towards an era characterized by fuzzier edges between the natural world and the so-called built environment, 'with which the inhabitant cooperates and in which he can

'Groves of meshwork columns framed the darkened inner end of this space. Scented wicks and glands attracted visitors to the lower details of these columns, where delicate glass spines glowed in response to approaching visitors. Shivering patterns of vibration and rustling sound moved upward when individual clusters were stimulated by viewers … layers of undulating seaweed-like filter clusters housed protocell flasks … lying just below the roof trusses that enclosed the space, clusters of gauze bladders opened and closed in rolling, tide-like motions, responding to the larger movements of viewers below.'

externalize his mental processes' (i.e. mutualism). Indeed, existing industrialized agricultural systems implicitly link us to the landscape, but Pask and Beesley suggest a new kind of partnership, one that is defined by greater interdependence. In *Radiant Soil*, Beesley asks viewers to consider how the assembly of metal and glass objects produces a near-living figure, that is not only physically responsive but is, in his terms, fertile.

Today, the formalization of hylozoism is concretely manifest in synthetic biology, given its shared interest in giving life to inert materials. Martin Hanczyc at the Centre for Integrative Biology (CIBIO) at the University of Trento has developed several types of artificial cells, or so-called 'protocells', with life-like characteristics that include self-propelled movement, self-division, biochemical transformation, group dynamics, and even more alarming, self-identity. These proto-cells are presumed to be a proto-building module—a brick of the future. Beesley's assemblies borrow this logic, and are essentially unitized systems of pre-fabricated synthetic units that can easily aggregate in order to create a larger intelligent network. This idea of 'bio-logic' is a central theme in his experiments, placing Beesley in a small group of architects that bridge the scientist-designer threshold.

'the architectural discipline's new project is to rebuild the bridge between nature and culture'

One could argue that the architectural discipline's new project is to rebuild the bridge between nature and culture that steadily deteriorated since the beginning of the industrial age. Focusing on the static building does little to advance critical thinking about the built environment. Instead, the landscape surrounding these buildings—the innocuous background—

which was relegated to the role as the 'other', is actually rich with cues about what lies ahead for architectural and landscape design.

' this 'other' will no longer be the exception, but rather the new fabric of the city'

Additionally, as the built environment accrues more adaptive spaces and buildings that are more 'alive', at some point this 'other' will no longer be the exception, but rather the new fabric of the city. Beesley's work argues that our respective creations need to be imbued with something more meaningful. In other words, performance is boring, but romance lifts the spirit. Beesley proudly says his work is 'unapologetically romantic and scientific'.

As the laboratory and the design studio become intermixed, a transformative design process is legitimized and a new physical context emerges. Moreover, a signature style that reveres experimentation implicitly supports renewal, reinvention, and a fearless embrace of the unknown. Technology has liberated Philip Beesley and others to experiment with their respective blends of architecture, science and art, resulting in new species of design practices. And as their work develops, will the collective definition of 'second nature' correspondingly evolve with it? One has to assume so.

Phillip Beesley's experimental architectural installation, *Sentient Chamber*, is currently on exhibition at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC, until May 31, 2016.

All the images that accompany this essay are of *Hylozoic Series: Sibyl* taken in 2012. These and their descriptive caption are provided courtesy of Philip Beesley Architect Inc.