

VOLUME 7, NUMBER 4, 2000

ISSN 0967-4608

ECUMENE

A JOURNAL OF CULTURAL GEOGRAPHIES





CULTURAL GEOGRAPHIES IN PRACTICE

*Interventions in the rust belt:
the art and ecology of post-industrial public space*

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Objectives for artists involved in the restoration of post-industrial public space (an expansion on objectives developed by Kirk Savage)¹

Post-industrial public space should:

- reveal the legacy of industrialism, not eradicate it or cloak it in nostalgia; create images and stories, which reveal both the effect and the cause of the legacy;
- unveil social conflicts in the city, not repress them; create works that illuminate and explicate conflict and points of dynamic change;
- reveal ecological processes at work in the city, not eradicate them; build infrastructure which embraces ecosystem processes and a philosophy of sustainability;
- enable an equitable community dialogue, which envisions a future; produce new forms of critical discourse, which provide access, voice and a context in which to speak.

The NMR project philosophy

The Nine Mile Run Greenway Project (NMR-GP) in the Studio for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University engages cultural and aesthetic issues of post-industrial public space, ecology and ideology. The term 'greenway' can be defined as a linear strip of public land with human and wildlife benefits. The project team, directed by three artists, included a diverse group of professionals from academia, industry and municipal government. Over the past three years, the team has endeavoured to generate an informed public conversation regarding Nine Mile Run, a brownfield site in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, being

developed into a mix of housing and public greenway. Brownfield development is routinely the domain of engineers, economists and public policy analysts who work to solve isolated brownfield 'problems'. Alternatively, this artist-led team has defined the NMR brownfield development as a system of opportunities rather than problems. Viewing brownfields as the legacy of the industrial revolution, a cultural event that effectively privatized America's urban rivers, streams and estuaries, the team approached the work as the cultural reclamation of public use, value and aesthetics. The question that had to be asked was: 'What will post-industrial open space look like?'

The NMR-GP conversation was constructed around issues of public space within the context of an urban brownfield (Nine Mile Run) which was about to be developed by private interests. It has been our contention from the beginning of this process that urban brownfields or post-industrial sites are an important public space opportunity, particularly for rust-belt cities like Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh is physically located at the tip of a peninsula formed by two major river valleys. Economically it was an industrial city, weaned on resource extraction and the use of the rivers as part of the transport infrastructure that made industrial growth, expansion and its culminating forces possible. Resource extraction and the use of the urban environment as the sink for the wastes of industrial production were typical of the industrial period. Ostensibly public space was utilized by private industry in the pursuit of profit. Each society and its related means of production (in this case, extraction of resources and industrial production) creates a specific kind of physical space.² The steel industry in Pittsburgh colonized our waterfronts (excluding public uses), transformed our rivers, filled the skies with smoke and the valleys with slag. This was a radical spatial transformation. The land along the rivers became the frame for a giant machine of industrial production. The water, the air, even the people were the fluid in the system. The land once natural became technological, a system to be harnessed in the pursuit of profit. Benefits accrued to the private realm at the cost of the public commons.

Today, we find ourselves immersed again in radical change. The question is, what kind of space will be created? Industry is gone, riverfront properties lie vacant and once again we are deciding the relative value of the public realm. The technological purpose for the land has passed but the economic needs are more pressing than ever. Can we view these properties in the context of a pre-industrial legacy of public access and natural value? Can we integrate economic benefit with public use and ecosystem function? Will we continue to accept the dichotomy of wilderness or zoo as the primary 'spaces' of natural experience? Or is there something new to consider at the place where the land meets the river and the soot of industry continues to stain the soil?

Integrated ecosystem restoration

The unifying theory of the NMR-GP is reclamation as an integrated ecosystem restoration that embraces the complex goal of 'nature' in the context of contemporary urban culture. A recent issue of the Society for Ecological Restoration

reflects this interdisciplinary complexity: 'restoration practices which hold firm to ecological fidelity and embrace social and cultural goals are much more likely to prosper and endure.'³ A.D. Bradshaw, a restoration biologist involved in the reclamation of the Sudbury region of Canada, comments, 'The primary goal of restoration is an aesthetic one – to restore the visible environmental quality of the area.'⁴ Bradshaw also outlines specific scientific methods for ecological restoration: soil-chemical balance, initial vegetative stability and long-term biodiversity. It is quite clear from the preceding statements that these scientific methods are operating within a set of cultural options. Do we identify the 'original condition' and return our brownfields to that standard? At Nine Mile Run, the question of original condition is answered by millions of tons of slag dumped upon a broad floodplain. We need to work within the community to identify a socially acceptable solution that is economic, aesthetically rich and ecologically sound. We must define what nature means within the context of our urban community. The immediately adjacent model is Frick Park, a 600-acre urban forest park. The NMR-GP would suggest that the baseline for our work is circumscribed in the flora, fauna, soils and remnant natural hydrology we see in Frick Park. The starting-point and comparative biodata can be found in the variation of plant succession occurring on the slag and shale slopes of the property today.

Reconstructive postmodern art

Another important theoretical foundation can be found in our artistic intent which is informed by evolving contemporary ideas of socially based art practice and the last 30 years of reclamation art. Our process is rooted in ideas of reconstructive postmodern practice. 'The attempt is to move the dominant model of humans in opposition to nature toward a more integrated aesthetics of interconnectedness, social responsibility, and ecological attunement.'⁵ This paradigm shift is also described in the context of evolving artist media and expanding public practice as new genre-public art. Suzanne Lacy clarifies this approach: 'New genre-public art-visual art uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives – is based on engagement.'⁶ The history of this work is rooted in some of the early ideas of 'social sculpture' developed by the German artist Joseph Beuys (1921–86). 'He sets out from the premise that although great and definitive signals have emerged from the traditional concept of art, the great majority of human beings have remained untouched by this signal quality.'⁷ Social art, or social sculpture, Beuys believed, is art that sets out to encompass more than just physical material. 'We need a foundation of social art, on which every individual experiences and recognizes himself as a creative being and as a participant in shaping and defining the world. Everyone is an artist.'⁸

'Reclamation art' is a term used in an electronic document examining 'artworks proposed or constructed by contemporary artists as a means to reclaim landscapes that have been damaged by human activities'.⁹ This type of artwork goes back as far as the 1960s, when a significant number of artists moved outside their studios and galleries in a movement known as Earthwork. Initial work

in the field, relative to reclamation art practice, was done by Robert Smithson, who actively searched out industrial land users for collaboration on his projects which explored formal/sculptural reclamation solutions to strip mine sites, slag piles, etc. Another important artist with a more ecologically integrated approach was Allan Sonfist, who actively 'reclaimed' the native vegetation of New York City in a public park/art work begun in 1965. This time landscape, as it is known, is still flourishing at Houston and La Guardia Place in New York City. Numerous artists have followed this path of contemporary practice. Common names in the field include Helen and Newton Harrison, Agnes Denes, Donna Henes, Herman Prigann and Buster Simpson.

US municipalities have also recognized the value of reclamation artists. In 1979, the city of Kent, Washington, brought in a team of artists to consider various quarry and dumping sites, resulting in two celebrated works. Robert Morris created an elegy to industrial use, while Herbert Bayer created a 'sculpted' park, which is more integrated into the community. In 1990, the meaning of reclamation art was debated at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The NEA awarded, rescinded and then reinstated funding for a 'revival field'. Artist Mel Chin had developed the project proposal in collaboration with USDA agronomist Rufus L. Chaney. This is an art-science work that explored how plants can safely remove metals and materials from contaminated soils. Chin sees his work in two forms: as a formal planting on the landscape and as a complex series of 'systemic sculptures' that occur as the plants and roots act on the contaminants in the soil. An interesting component of the 'Revival field' is that it has travelled to a variety of highly contaminated sites around the country and more recently to Europe. The integrated work was among the first to introduce viewers to the relationships and concepts of phyto-remediation aesthetics.

Democratic discourse

The final theoretical approach is defined as 'Community Dialogue', based on the philosophy and ideals of democratic empowerment through discourse. We are a culture that has fractured the complex experiences and understanding of life into specific disciplines and independent specialties. (In other words, the quantitative evaluation of experts has taken precedence over the layman's ability to use experience and general qualitative analysis as a method of making decisions.) We have learned to leave our decisions in the hands of experts, yet at the same time we have learned to mistrust those experts depending on who is paying for their opinion. The NMR-GP team would argue that brownfield sites provide an ideal environment to 'reclaim' the individual's role in the discursive public sphere. We need to reclaim our relationship to complex public issues. The enormous potential for significant changes in thinking about urban development, public space, ecology and sustainability make brownfield properties ideal subjects for democratic discourse. The real and perceived contamination issues surrounding most brownfield sites suggests that informed public discourse is a prerequisite for brownfield development. Recent brownfield literature identifies community involvement as an essential component of brownfield devel-

opment.¹⁰ The NMR-GP programme has used academic, municipal and private resources to enable and inform the public discussion.

Jurgen Habermas, author of a groundbreaking work on the historic evolution of the public sphere,¹¹ suggests that the autonomous self emerges and democracy is enabled by participation in the discursive context (public discussion). 'Participation develops an individual's capacities for practical reasoning, as well as the kind of mutual respect . . . entailed in the very possibility of discourse.'¹² This notion of autonomous self or 'public man' has been suggested by some theorists to be a psychological function of humanity increasingly lost to modern culture.¹³ The project team attempted to devise a programme that would provide context, method and opportunity to explore the function of public discourse in relationship to Nine Mile Run. We see this public discussion as an important precursor to the spatial development of a greenway and its goal of sustainable stewardship. To accomplish this, we needed to reorient the position of the expert in relationship to the community. Our process was to enable interdisciplinary discussion through which to clarify the issues and language that permeate the 'expert' discipline-specific discussions. With this new public language (freed of jargon) we then devised a series of workshops, tours and public discussions in which we manipulated the normal client-expert relationship. We tried to provide the information tools to help the public understand the complexity of the issues and then devised events where the experts and the public could interact on a design basis of shared interests.

The transformative vision (empowering change)

The team developed the Nine Mile Run Greenway project in three stages:

Year One: The goal was to expand the alternative approaches to the development of the public space and work with the community to define a research agenda.

Year Two: The goal was to follow through with a range of study. We worked to develop an exhaustive biological study. This study provided (1) a baseline upon which further work could be judged and (2) the content for design alternatives in year three.

Year Three: The goal was to present design alternatives to the community, finalize a design guideline and develop an economic and institutional plan. It has been our intention from the beginning to (1.) expand the intellectual content of the public realm, (2.) enable an alternative dialogue which provides access and a context in which to speak, and (3.) infuse the results of that community dialogue with sufficient power to move the design forward. As of the year 2000, our partners at Pittsburgh City Planning have announced an intensive stream restoration programme with extensive funding from both the state and federal government. This restoration follows much of the outline of our community consensus design. The community dialogue continues in the form of a citizens' watershed alliance which is attempting to transform an existing city facility into the champion for a restored ecology along Pittsburgh's rivers and

streams. The project has been carefully documented in a series of published texts, websites and a CD-ROM.¹⁴

We believe that the process of urban ecological restoration offers a natural context for the reconsideration of the form and function of the post-industrial public realm. The application and value of our practice in the area of art and restoration ecology is one not found in a renewed landscape or an expanded body of knowledge. We have a broader intellectual agenda, a generalist's critical engagement targeting human values and relationship to nature. Beyond this platform of eco-art, we are committed to a cultural dialogue. We focus on the discursive public realm, by which individuals, communities and societies begin to rethink the perception and values of nature within the legacy of post-industrial society. With our production of images and symbols we endeavour to create a discourse of curiosity, care and involvement in the changing meaning, form and function of nature within the public realm of cities.



Photographs

Above: *Conversations in the Rustbelt*, multimedia exhibition (Nine Mile Run – Greenway Project, STUDIO for Creative Inquiry) pp. xx–xx: Slag-dumping, altered historic photograph (NMR-GP, SFCI; (original photograph, *US Bureau of Mines Bulletin 479*, Washington, DC, 1949) pp. xx–xx: Nine Mile Run, a slag valley (Bob Bingham, NMR-GP SFCI)

A Nine Mile Run project text, by Tim Collins. The Nine Mile Project Team includes Bob Bingham, Reiko Goto, Richard Pell and John Stephen. Nine Mile Run is a project of the Studio for Creative Inquiry, Carnegie Mellon University. NMR on the web: <http://slaggarden.cfa.cmu.edu>

Notes

- ¹ K. Savage, 'Nature and the city: rethinking the civic ideal in a postindustrial landscape' (lecture, Cornell University, 1998), p. 10.
- ² H. Lefebvre, *The production of space* (Malden, MA, Blackwell, 1994, pp. 30–33).
- ³ E. Higgs. 'What is good ecological restoration?', *Society for Ecological Restoration News* 10 (1997).

- ⁴ A.D. Bradshaw, 'Goals of restoration', in Gunn, ed., *Restoration and recovery of an industrial region* (New York, Springer, 1995), p. 105.
- ⁵ S. Gabelik, *The reenchantment of art* (New York, Thames & Hudson, 1991), p. 22.
- ⁶ S. Lacy, *Mapping the terrain: new genre public art* (Seattle, WA, Bay Press, 1995), p. 19.
- ⁷ H. Stachelhaus, *Joseph Beuys* (New York, Abbeville Press, 1987), p. 66.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ H.A. Frost-Kumpf, 'Reclamation art: restoring and commemorating blighted landscapes' (<http://slaggarden.cfa.cmu.edu/weblinks/frost/FrostTop.html>)
- ¹⁰ E. Pepper, *Lessons from the field: unlocking economic potential with an environmental key* (Washington, DC, Northeast-Midwest Institute, 1997).
- ¹¹ J. Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1989).
- ¹² M. Warren, 'The self in discursive democracy', in S.K. White, ed., *The Cambridge companion to Habermas* (New York, Cambridge University Press), p. 172.
- ¹³ T. Collins, B. Bingham, R. Goto and J. Stephen, *Ample opportunity: the community dialogue* (Pittsburgh, STUDIO for Creative Inquiry, 1998).
- ¹⁴ T. Collins, S. Flom, R. Reaves and J. Stephen, *The Nine Mile Run Greenway project: an institutional and economic plan with conceptual design guidelines* (Pittsburgh, STUDIO for Creative Inquiry, 2000); T. Collins, B. Bingham, R. Goto, R. Pell and J. Stephen, 'Nine Mile Run' (<http://slaggarden.cfa.cmu.edu>)