Challenging rural contexts

Leaky pipes and philosophical flows

Conditioning coasts

The relationship between design and research in architecture has not always been happy, through necessity, having to serve a range of constituencies holding to quite different agendas. **arq**'s article *Coastal Conditions* (15.4, pp. 312–26) is thus warmly welcomed as a contribution to a fruitful discourse in which reflective practice and design-based research are critical to infusing a sense of wider relevance to academic debate that might otherwise seem abstruse. Christopher Platt, Alan Pert and Gordon Murray are all significant architects in their own right and their careful dissembling of a series of individual housing projects is useful to understand contemporary sensibilities in the production of rural architecture. The three dwellings, all different, in terms of context and latitude share a reverence towards site, with Murray's Dundarave 'touching land lightly' viewing existing stoneworks as a 'trace of the past'. On Linsiader, Christopher Platt writes that 'everything on site had a role to play in this narrative', Alan Pert then writes of a 'rigorous examination of Dungeness's unique architectural expression'.

This fieldwork research closely informs the design of each building. All the case studies show a great skill and dexterity in seeking out and articulating metaphor as a means of informing the design of the dwellings. In this sense, the authors' regard to context, climate and the vernacular are all processed by way of the same metaphorical lens. For example, in respect to climate, a distinct characteristic of a northern rural vernacular is a sharp boundary between inside and outside worlds with little in the way of mediation

East End Saw Mill, NORD

at the building skin between interior and exterior. Both Linsiader and the Dungeness House echo such a sentiment sitting foursquare in the landscape. Metaphor is perhaps most declared at Linsiader where Christopher Platt reflects on how he manipulates the form of both existing building fragments and a living landscape to produce a twisted envelope that reflects the primal force of the elements as they scour the site. Alan Pert's work in Dungeness benefits from some strong contemporary cues in the form of Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage and Simon Conder's Black House. Here there is a significant architectural context of the coastal hut revisited and reinvented. Where NORD captivates is in an impeccable process of investigation and refinement that then adds to a series of notable contemporary reimaginings of a south coast vernacular.

Of the three declared preoccupations of context, climate and vernacular, it is perhaps the last term that raises some questions for debate. The vernacular can be a difficult term to navigate. The Norberg-Schulz observation of the vernacular presenting an 'image of the world' is phenomenally constructed. Paul Oliver offers a definition as being the 'architecture of the people and by the people, but not for the people'.[1] This interpretation consciously excludes architects and other design professionals from contributing to a contemporary vernacular. Sadly, such logic entails manoeuvring the vernacular simply to become a historic or visual device to provide a backstory to contemporary interventions in rural landscapes.

The vernacular is often seen as being representative of a continuity of values and as the authors put it a 'symbol of sheer obstinacy or

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persistence'. In contrast, our cities are often celebrated for their sense of reinvention and fluidity. Are we too solicitous to context when working in the countryside? Many visual and literary narratives place great emphasis on the contrasting virtues of the rural and the urban. This was astutely described in Raymond Williams' book *The Country and the City*, an exhaustive exploration of the way in which the rural is defined very much as the 'non urban'. It becomes a haven of bucolic tranquillity and respite from the relentless stimulation of the city. Christos Zografos examines this further,[2] setting out the countryside as a strange combination of the utilitarian and hedonistic. The hedonistic landscape can celebrate an open panorama of moorland – its value has been, since Queen Victoria's grand tours of the Highlands, in putting a price on seclusion. On the other hand the utilitarian countryside, whether the flatlands of East Anglia or the Flow Country in Sutherland have, in their times, been subject to intense, unsentimental exploitation since the Agrarian Revolution. Anyone who strays off the well-beaten track on the west coast of Scotland can sometimes be astounded at the lack of any sensibility many crofters have for their environment in search of a decent living.

A training in architecture instills a reverence for elegant realisation. When allowed to in the hands of a talented designer, a building becomes an exquisitely considered and controlled whole. In some of the best work in rural contexts, an almost timeless story held by a site is synthesised into a beautifully finished summation of generations of cultural and physical accretion. In the countryside, a landscape of the sublime might coerce architects to be over-reverential in their approach to design. We often like our architecture to be provocative in the city, but the economic, social and cultural tensions can be as sharp and exhilarating in the Northern Highlands too. A contemporary vernacular built 'by the people not for the people' is often found in the spaces peripheral to the home, as in a fluid, ramshackle hinterland so well described by Alan Pert.

To those looking to a productive rather than a sublime landscape, good architecture is underepresented and often unreported. However redress is certainly not to be achieved by being critical of the authors' approach. Instead, it is unforgivable that so much countryside has been given over to the kit house and tin portal. Some architects such as Alan Dickson of Rural Design work across the boundaries of the protected and productive landscapes on the West Coast addressing a wide client base and diversity of programme with buildings that sometimes challenge context. NORD's work at East End Sawmill shows dexterity and ambition in delivering architecture from a more utilitarian brief. I therefore have no doubt that all of this article's authors could engage with this agenda. However, we also need braver patrons making a living on the countryside who can go beyond simply saying 'It's a fine view but you can't eat the scenery'.

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Notes

1. Paul Oliver, *Dwellings : The House across the World* (Phaidon: Oxford, 1987).
2. Christos Zografos, 'Rurality Discourses and the Role of the Social Enterprise in Regenerating Rural Scotland', *Journal of Rural Studies* (2007), 38–51.

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On water, landscape, and architecture

It was a pleasure to read the three articles in **arq** 15.3 on water in early modern garden theory and practice. As an outsider to the fields of European garden history who works on Mughal waterworks of roughly the same period, as well as water in contemporary landscape architecture, I learned much from these papers and was once again impressed by the wealth of extant historical texts, drawings, and scholarship.

Designers from Palissy to the Perraults, da Caus, Evelyn, Whately, and Morel inspire reflection on the current state of research on water in architecture and landscape architecture. Interestingly, they convey relatively few of the mundane modern concerns about water as the 'enemy' of the architect,[1] though they must have faced the age-old problems of leaking roofs, windows, and basement foundations – and associated hazards of mold, rot, and corrosion. Anyone who has chased leaks knows how consumingly important, aggravating, and technically fascinating they can be. Of course many modern architects celebrate water in design, as exemplified by Charles Moore's life-long passion for water from his doctoral dissertation to a late-career volume on *Water and Architecture*.[2]

Do the fields of landscape and garden design embrace water in more broadly appreciative ways? Perhaps, though it is worth recalling that the common law doctrine of drainage treats it as a 'common enemy' that every landowner has a right to repel.[3] Modern grading and drainage plans must meet grade at boundaries, accept runoff from upstream properties, and not unreasonably alter the quantity, velocity, or quality of flows downstream. Stormwater drainage is a field of competition and creative engagement among landscape architects, civil engineers, environmental scientists, and regulators. Contemporary landscape architects have produced studies of iconic waterworks, water experience, and functional aspects of water in design.[4] Indeed, some place water at the centre of their practice.[5]

I imagine the editors curated these three essays, but they must have been fascinated by the many points of comparison that they raise. Juliet Odgers' essay on John Evelyn's house at Wotton (pp. 237–47) may feel most familiar for a modern reader. Evelyn's practical attention to leaky pipes, cisterns, and pipe networks concern designers today. These practical matters were part and parcel of his broader conservation philosophy of improvement, *oeconomie*, stewardship of domestic possessions, and perhaps even his ideas about the 'History of the Trades' in Book 2 of the *Elysium Brittanicum*. His emphasis on the significance of the trades brought to mind current efforts to shed light on virtual water trade (i.e., flows of water embedded in the production and international trade of goods and services), in which the former secrets of the industrial water supply chain are being quantified and managed.[6] Odgers' discussion of Evelyn's struggle as a translator of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* which ran counter to his personal convictions underscores the intellectual level of design inquiry, a central characteristic in each of the essays.

John Dixon Hunt's essay

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