

Nature, Error, Babies

August, 2013

Competition of Competitions
Storefront for Art & Architecture
Registration: 10035

Introduction

At the outset of this process we aimed at a set of criteria which would constitute a critique of the architectural competition. This challenge soon became an exercise in proposing an alternative to the typical scenario of a vested interest such as a development corporation or municipality seeking a specific, targeted audience within the urban realm. In order to get outside of this logic, we decided to begin with a series of pointed cultural observations and provocations. We purposefully contrast opposing or clashing market forces in order to tap into abstract social, psychological, and perceptual realms of human relations and initiate the process based on a focused cultivation of attitudes and phenomena. And in this way, we hope to implore competition entrants to find spatial consequences which reach beyond singular, vested programs and approach a more collective urbanism which speaks to broader constituencies within the city.

Nature

As evidence for the totalizing forces of global warming mounts, we continue, doing very little, almost nothing. How is this possible? The answer lies in how we think ourselves: how we understand and represent the relations between the human, the human, and nonhuman. The “natural world” has always been an ideological construct: “nature” as balanced and harmonious, perturbed and distorted by man’s dirty interventions. Oil! Rainforests! Antibacterial soap!

Ecology – or, rather, a popular, watery, non-scientific form of ecology – has become the new opiate of the masses. Advertising campaigns, recycling centers, and urban planning schemes draw on the rhetoric of *a return to* (the rhythms and perfection of the natural world). This “natural” matrix soothes, comforts, and entertains us. For Slavoj Žižek, this is precisely the *sublime object of ideology*; we recognize what is happening and we continue to do it anyway; we disavow – “I know very well, but...” – and abide in illusion.

As Graham Harman and Timothy Morton suggest, “Nature has never been natural and it will never be naturalized.” If we were to release the fantasy of ecology and embrace the notion that ~~nature~~ is not nature or even natural, we might pursue an existence—and the spatial articulation of that existence—which is less utopian and more abstract, more artificial, more human. In Harman’s words, such a release might allow us to “speak in the same way of the relation between humans and what they see and that between hailstones and tar.”¹

¹ Harman, Graham. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. Melbourne: re.press, 2009: 124.



George Inness, "The Lackawanna Valley" (1855).



Prosthetic feet, ready to be fitted onto artificial limbs, are seen at a camp organized by the Jaipur Foot Camp on Wheels (AP 2009). Vincent

Van Gogh, "A Pair of Shoes" (1886)



Error

Keller Easterling writes that humor emerges from the clashing of divergent cultural logics and attitudes. There is something funny and convulsive about witnessing the rupture of perceived cultural logics. This difference produces new matrices, new vocabularies, new spaces, and new possibilities for concern. Error is not only evidence of a mistake. When errors are combined, related, rubbed, they teach. Instance: card games. Two losing hands played alone will both lose, but two hands played simultaneously can win. The double-bind yields an advantage; the space of the game changes the rules.

Zachary Sng suggests that the transgressive potential of error appears in the rhetoric of spatial and textual crossings (and crossings-out): "... error points to something that stands outside of dialectical and binary opposition, an insistent and transgressive crossing, recrossing, and crossing-out at the rhetorical register that produces an explosion of nervous movements within the texts that attempt to contain and master them." Nervous movements are often anathema to architecture, to the structural integrity of containment and mastery. But not always.

If two seemingly divergent urban scenarios were introduced and hybridized, perhaps out of error or luck, what might be possible? If urban speculation pursued an artificial and abstract formation of ~~nature~~ and the city, crossing and recrossing the boundaries between hailstones and sidewalk, tar and citizen, how might our understanding of human interaction change? This question moves beyond the hip clusterings of new-age programming, common integrative spaces, the multi-use green-staging of urban areas; it seeks a purposeful contradiction of intentions not only for new performative and social capacities but also new desires, new ephemera, new constituencies and predilections. Instead of moving in the direction of a utopian ideal of the ecological city, we double cross the foundational images of the tabernacle in the desert, the Vitruvian tree house, and the primitive hut and turn to artifice.

Artificial

Etymology: < Anglo-Norman and Middle French *artificial* (French *artificiel*) skilfully made or contrived, **brought about by human skill or intervention**; cunning, **seeking to deceive** (1532), **unspontaneous**, **affected** (c1537) and its etymon classical Latin *artificialis* made or contrived by art, in post-classical Latin also prescribed by art, scientific (4th or 5th cent.; 14th cent. in a British source), produced by human skill (from 9th cent. in British sources), skilled, artistic, involving craftsmanship (from 12th cent)

1b. Originally: designating **a device made to replace a missing or abnormal body part**; = prosthetic

adj. 2. In later use also: designating a device or machine which performs or assists the function of an organ.



From top: Titan II Nuclear Missile Silo, Green Valley AZ (2008); Arizona Cactus Farm, Green Valley AZ; proposed hospital in Green Valley AZ (December 2012).



Babies

Project: Birthing Center & Productive Agriculture Facility

The economic logics and biopolitical control of the body at play in the American healthcare system meet the alternate reality of a different type of cultivation. The difference in cultural and political logics which construct the meaning and relevance of nature in both scenarios is the disjunctive tissue from which to develop an urban scenario which both exacerbates and relieves the tensions involved. How could the role of ~~nature~~ in food production dislocate and re-form the conception of ~~nature~~ in child birth? How would the incorporation of a birthing center change the attitudes toward productivity involved in the in growing of food? How does one preserve and promote dignity and safety in the combined scenario? What formal and spatial logics emerge when existing social paradigms are transposed and reformed? How does the relationship between these programs change over time?

“We bear witness to the crisis that in our sheer preoccupation with technology we do not yet experience the coming to presence of technology, that in our sheer aesthetic-mindedness we no longer guard and preserve the coming to presence of art.”²

² Heidegger, Martin. “The Question Concerning Technology.” *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans. William Lovitt. New York: Harper, 1977.

Process

1. Be specific and consider structural elements of the typical healthcare experience such as length-of-stay, room occupancy, scheduling, food preparation, consumption, and proximity of mothers with other mothers. Relate these to the ways in which a production-oriented agricultural facility cultivates, introduces artificial light, air, and nutrients into their products. How can this place of the artificial become a meaningful site from which creative new platforms can be established in the traditionally ~~natural~~ birthing center? Submit diagrams of the overlaps, attitudes and techniques that your project aims to develop and exacerbate between the birthing center and agricultural program. Be ready to explore scenarios which are difficult and not easily resolved.
2. This competition is not based on a site-specific solution. Consider a generic, suburban site where the overlap of urban populations/attitudes and rural agricultural scale come to bear on one another. The power of each entry will come from a careful analysis of the elements listed above and the applicant's ability to cunningly hybridize them into convincing diagrams and illustrations within this in-between suburban context.
3. Develop these overlaps/attitudes/techniques into specific architectural sequences and devices which are geared to the hybridization of these two groups and which create new types of events, behaviors or opportunities.
4. Show in urban-scale plan, architectural plan/rendering, and sectional relationships your interventions as an overall scheme. The large-scale plans should show the relationships formed between this new facility and the community while diagrams illustrate the formal and spatial implications of the double-binds and opportunities created by this project. Remember that multiple errors have the possibility of creating success. Beautiful renderings are appreciated, but the key to success in this competition is specificity and a willingness to commit to the potential of failure.

Political Agent

Below are fictional descriptions of the two major agents involved in this project. Once a winning entry or group of entries is selected, representatives from a shortlist of potential agents will be assembled based on the type of relationships that the entry assembles. These groups will be invited to continue the conversation toward developing a proposal and plan for further development.

Big Deal Agriculture:

Large, production-minded agriculture company looking to open itself up to a new mode of management and community engagement. This company should be familiar with current, efficient global agriculture practices and be looking to experiment in the realm of urban speculation. This will benefit the agriculture company in terms of public image, but most importantly in terms of the learning potential leveraged through bold research into the relationship between food production and community-based agriculture.

Homespun Birthing Centers:

A group of birthing professionals, nurses, and doctors prepared to engage a new attitude toward what has become an over-determined, commodified version of the relationship to perhaps the oldest human program in existence: giving birth. This group will have a vested interest in not only the technological and professional standards of practice but in opening up the actual definition of the practice itself in the interest of engaging the notions of human and ~~nature~~.

Users/Subjects

Expectant mothers, their families and community-supported agriculture patrons.

Scale & Site

There is no geographic site for this competition. Since the energy toward realizing the winning project will require the input of agricultural and birthing professionals *after* the architectural and urban mechanisms are

developed through the competition, site should be considered abstractly as occupying the edge of the suburban and rural. Though it is siteless, the scale of each entry is very important; a dense urban agricultural site would be considered very differently than a larger, sprawling facility and the expansion or contraction of the intervention will acknowledge this. It should also be considered that this project could have multiple sites; that these urban attitudes could be utilized and modified for multiple suburban locales.

Timeline

1. Two month entry period in which the brief is advertised and entries are accepted.
2. Two week, quick-response publicly-held (virtually) question-and-answer session.
3. Two month work period.
4. Selection of three finalists: public display of the three finalists and critique by review panel. The three finalists will be given the option to combine thinking into a final project or whether they would like a single winner to be chosen.
5. Winner(s) announced.
6. Once a proposal is selected, entrants and the competition body will contact potential agricultural and birthing center stakeholders and invite them to discuss the successful conclusions of the project at the Storefront for Architecture. The discussion itself will be an event, but will also be aimed at pursuing an actual project.

Economics

If the three finalists choose to combine entries and hybridize their projects, each will receive \$2,000. If they choose to work separately and a winner is chosen, the runners up will receive \$1,500 each and the winner \$3,000.

Rules/Laws

Applicants will divulge all members contributing toward their submission as well as citing any and all research sources necessary for the proposal. No cheating.

Eligibility

Entry is open to all disciplines, ages, and backgrounds but it is recommended that teams be formed of architects and urbanists in combination with critical/artistic thinkers from outside the realm of architecture.

Jury members

The jury will be composed of architects, urban-designers within academic and professional practice as well as birthing professionals and agricultural professionals. Special care will be given to select jury members who are interested in the urban realm, food, and issues of the body.

Evaluation Guidelines

Primary focus will be given to entries who are able to identify and clearly illustrate the relationships and overlaps between the birthing center and agriculture production facility and how these concepts will play out formally and spatially.

Questions

There will be a speed-round of questions held on the competition website for two weeks. Questions and answers will be available for the duration of the competition.

Registration

Registration will be during the first two months and will cost \$100 per competition entry. All registration fees will contribute to the staging of the final entries and winner's prize.

Anonymity

The three finalists will be notified of their status but remain anonymous until they have decided whether they will combine their observations into a super-group or continue as individual projects. Once a winner is determined or the three finalists have decided to combine, the winning entry will be announced and publicized on the website.