Waste(d) Opportunities: Designing America's Waste Landscapes

A Review by Gale Fulton

Garbage is the result of a lack of vision.
Recycletown motto from *Designing America's Waste Landscapes* (p 146)

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'We will eliminate the need for raw material and banish all waste.' So begins the section on 'Manufacturing Economies' in Bruce Mau's recent book, *Massive Change*. Having come upon *Massive Change* and Mira Engler's *Designing America's Waste Landscapes* concurrently, I found it interesting that the above Recycletown belief, suggesting the elimination of waste through human ingenuity, finds resonance with Mau's utopic vision of a more peaceful and sustainable future achieved through the visionary pursuit of design. Also significant, and a central theme to Engler's book, is that both movements occupy, and perhaps even draw their strength from, the margin. In the case of Recycletown, this margin is low-tech and dependent on a grass-roots approach to realise its vision, while Mau works at the opposite pole – his vision will come about primarily through design innovation at the leading edge of the techno-scientific world. Central to his optimism is the instrumentality of design, which is made all the more potent by its newfound ubiquity. Design in Mau's world is liberated from the narrow intellectual confines and rigid disciplinary boundaries that have hampered it in the past. The new global design project is undertaken broadly by individuals and fields who have left behind the laws and forms of classical design in favour of systems, organisations, programmes, infrastructures and collaborations that cross boundaries in search of untapped potentials.

Engler uses the term 'supermodernity' to describe this current design age, and it is into this context that she puts forth *Designing America's Waste Landscapes* – not only a timely and provocative addition to the literature on the history of waste in North America, but also a primer of sorts for effective design practices of future waste landscapes. But while Engler at times embraces the phenomena of 'supermodernity' and its potentials, there is also present in her account, perhaps because of its historical depth and geographic breadth, a reminder that while technological innovation is compelling, it has also been the means to some of our most destructive failures, exemplified in many of the issues surrounding waste landscapes.

Waste Landscapes is organised simply, moving from the general/theoretical to the specific/practical as a whole and in several chapters. Chapter one, 'Contemplating Waste: Theories and Constructs', is an in-depth discussion of waste as a cultural construct – both physical and mental. Chapters two to five focus on specific locales and institutions of waste production, management and disposal. Engler breaks these into four domains beginning with the private, which centres primarily on the evolution of waste management in and around the private residence. She then deals

with aspects of waste more generally considered part of the public domain in chapters titled 'Dumps', 'Waste Recycling/Reuse Institutions' and 'Sewage Treatment Plants' respectively. Each of these begins with a theoretical/historical discussion of how the particular institution has evolved both physically and in the public imagination. This discussion usefully integrates specific physical examples of waste-related practices with the overarching conceptual understanding held by society at the time. The second part of each of these chapters contains the subtitle 'Projects and Critiques' in which Engler proceeds to critically analyse projects pertinent to each of the waste subjects. The author provides the reader with a solid foundation of the historical, ethical and practical underpinnings of each waste topic then discusses specific projects, including the realised and the visionary. This background knowledge allows the reader to critically assess the successes and failures of each project, rather than simply accept Engler's criticism outright.

Despite the evolution of technology and cultural attitudes towards waste, as detailed in the later chapters, Engler asserts that it is waste's ambiguous and 'dialectical' nature that is its 'true source of power' (p 12), and an in-depth discussion of these concepts is the focus of chapter one. Here, Engler traces the evolution of waste through 'four broad chronological cultural projects' beginning in the Renaissance with 'premodernity', followed by 'modernity' and 'postmodernity', and ending with 'supermodernity' (p 7). Each of these eras is defined by its particular practices for managing waste, as well as by its accompanying attitudes towards waste. The shift from one era to the next may have been due to technological innovation, as in the case of the development of plumbing infrastructure in modernity, or through the onset of a critical cultural discourse, as was prevalent in postmodernism. The ambiguous and shifting nature of the concept of waste is further complicated by its relationship with the margin. As Engler says, 'waste is always marginal, and margins almost always include waste; in fact, they invite waste' (p 29). This marginalisation of both the concept of waste and its physical reality serves to reinforce the gap that much of western culture has placed between itself and its waste. This separation also further complicates the design of a more integrated future.

With shifting cultural attitudes towards waste have come shifting design approaches. Surveying the modern period, Engler says, one would have seen the 'camouflage' and the 'utilitarian' approaches – the first was content merely to disguise the unwanted sites as part of pastoral scenery, while the second sought to redeem the site by returning it to some form of productive use such as recreation, agriculture or redevelopment (p 37). Neither of these approaches acknowledged the site's past as a waste landscape, but instead sought to simply cover over the unspeakable aspect of culture hidden below.

The postmodern project was also characterised by two major schools of design theory, the 'oppositional' and the 'dialectical' (p 38). These two ways of thinking about and designing the landscape are still readily apparent in much contemporary landscape design – especially the oppositional – and this is true for all landscapes, not just those dealing with waste. Engler says that the oppositional approach is founded upon 'pervasive social and ecological despair' which maintains distinct

divisions between nature and culture (a despair she believes many landscape architects are still carrying, p 101). Projects dominated by this form of thinking are often termed 'restorations' or 'mitigations' and are usually based on a scientific understanding of the landscapes involved. The designs do little to reconcile culture and waste (centre and margin), as the underlying cultural processes at work in the landscape are often replaced for the more acceptable 'natural' ones (p 38). Engler believes the more important of the two approaches is the dialectical, which resists the simplistic interpretations of the oppositionists and instead seeks to engage in the processes of the waste landscape on its own terms. This approach, which the author breaks down into the 'educative' and the 'celebrative', works to reveal and interpret landscape process, form and experience, with the intent of fostering a greater awareness of cultural processes such as the manufacture and management of waste (p 39).

However, as a landscape architect, it is the last of the design approaches Engler describes, the nascent 'supermodernist', that I find most compelling as a way forward for a discipline which perhaps too easily (uncritically) falls victim to designing from the outdated modes of thinking described above. Instead of coveting a lost 'nature', the reactionary cause championed by so much of today's landscape design, the supermodernists pragmatically pursue 'a resilient view of reality, which seeks workable schemes in which people play a creative and participatory role' (p 40). Characterised by 'flexibility, adaptability, multilayering, and functionality', Engler demonstrates in each chapter how these designers and strategists apply creativity and innovation to the ideas and matter of waste producing design outcomes that are both novel and practical (p 39). This is not to say that they disregard the lessons learned from postmodern critique and deconstruction, but that they have moved beyond them as the primary aim of their work. Engler's supermodernist designers are crafty opportunists, not unlike the ubiquitous North American coyote that has adapted its lifestyle to capitalise on the previously unknown conditions arising from the realities of continuing urbanisation.

When one steps back to fully consider the implications presented in *Designing America's Waste Landscapes*, it becomes evident that its importance goes beyond traditionally defined 'waste landscapes'. The arguments and evidence presented in the book describe a new way of thinking about design and landscape in its broadest terms that coaxes creative potentials and opportunities from the same situations that traditional design thinking may identify only with waste, ruin and hopelessness. While much of Engler's research focuses on specific waste typologies, the theoretical discussion she engages us in allows us to extend the theories of waste and the margin to a much broader landscape. The waste landscapes are out there, in the clearly defined forms that Engler discusses, but also shrouded in the margins, full of ambiguity and awaiting experimentation. The question for designers then becomes: will we seize the opportunity or will we waste it?

REFERENCES

Engler, M (2004) *Designing America's Waste Landscapes*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Mau, B (2004) *Massive Change*, Phaidon.