



Landscape and Contemporary Art: Overlap, Disregard, and Relevance

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Landscape, viewed for centuries by the art world as either an inspirational source for art or as a kind of decorative art, emerged with a new prominence during the twentieth century. Artists and landscape architects now share a realm of overlapping practice.

By understanding contemporary art as a body of knowledge and art itself as a 'mode of knowledge,' students, educators, and practitioners of landscape architecture can compete more effectively with other 'form-givers' in 21st century culture.

Art as a mode of knowledge is often disregarded within landscape architecture, in favor of seemingly more analytical approaches to design research dilemmas. Using examples of 20th and 21st century urban art, I argue for art as a mode of knowledge relevant to current landscape architecture practices. I demonstrate the results of applying normative artistic research to a student design project.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overlap of Landscape Architecture and Art

Landscape, viewed for centuries by the art world as either an inspirational source for art or as a kind of decorative art, emerged with a new prominence during the twentieth century. Artists and landscape architects now share a realm of overlapping practice². Both artists and landscape architects are concerned with ecology, urban conditions, perception, timelessness and the ephemeral.

The practice of contemporary art does not exist in a narrow field. Artists are critically aware of philosophy, literature, science, the design fields, and mainstream media. Neither should the practice of landscape architecture occur in a narrow field of vision. By understanding contemporary art as a mode and a body of knowledge, students, educators, and practitioners of landscape architecture can compete more effectively with other 'form-givers' in 21st century culture.

1.2 Disregard of Art as a Mode of Knowledge

In the 1960's cultural critic Herbert Read brought attention to Anglo-American disregard of art's significance to society. As Read defined the problem, "Centuries of moral prejudice and of that scientific arrogance which is one of the by-products of Puritanism have made us essentially art-shy" (1966, p.6).

The same disregard of art is also a characteristic of contemporary discourse in landscape architecture. This disregard has been recognized and addressed by at least a few thinkers in landscape architecture and allied fields, but these tend to be solitary voices.³ In the words of urban planner Ric Stephens, planning (like landscape architecture) wants to be seen as a profession

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² One of many examples is the practice of Vito Acconci, who began his career as an experimental video artist and now has a practice encompassing landscape, architecture, and urban design (Collin, 2009).

³ For example, see Elizabeth K. Meyer's article insisting on the inclusion of beauty in sustainability, "Sustaining Beauty: the performance of appearance, a manifesto in three parts" (2008).

adhering to scientific principles. He asks, "This model may build a functional machine, but will it yield a vital community?" (2009).

Landscape architecture is in a necessary phase of intellectualization of our practices; the discipline is rapidly developing a much needed theory base. However, a reactionary quality of this growth is a distancing between landscape architecture and art, which is now at least implicitly regarded as an insufficiently analytical approach to the problems of design. Just as some 20th century thinkers trivialized art as "ornament," "expression," or an "outlet for surplus energy [akin to sports]" (H.G. Wells quoted in Read 1966, p.6), some landscape architects now regard art as a veneer, the dressing atop more critical conceptions of place, or as a minor aspect of community engagement. Read argued that the historical record of civilization proves the importance of art across time and culture. He made this passionate call to re-examine the place of art:

"Art must rather be recognized as the most certain mode of expression which mankind has achieved. In every age, man has made things for his use, and followed thousands of occupations made necessary by his struggle for existence....And yet all the time, in every phase of civilization, he has felt that what we call the scientific attitude is inadequate....[Beyond] objective facts is a whole aspect of the world which is only accessible to instinct and intuition...."

Art is a mode of knowledge and the world of art is a system of knowledge as valuable to man as the world of philosophy or the world of science. [We must recognize] art as a mode parallel to but distinct from other modes by which man arrives at an understanding of his environment..." (1966, pp.6-7, italic emphasis is mine).

Read identified several characteristics of art which reveal its significance to society. These characteristics will be discussed in the following section.

2 RELEVANCE OF CONTEMPORARY ART TO LANDSCAPE

I originally conceived of this paper as an exploration of three broad content areas I developed for a seminar and studio examining the overlap between contemporary art practice and landscape architecture⁴:

- *Art and Embodied Landscape*: parallel trends in art, geography, and landscape centered on the human experience as mediated through the body.
- *Art, Time, Perception and Landscape*: parallel developments within contemporary art, architecture, and landscape regarding phenomenological ideas of time and perception.
- *Landscape as Change, Art as Resistance*: parallel interest and actions around issues of urban decay and reinvestment in art, sociology, and landscape architecture.

But these content areas beg the question of *why* art is important to landscape architecture. In addition, all three content areas cannot be explored in the short format of this paper. At the urging of my colleagues that I substantiate the claim of 'art as a mode of knowledge,' I have focused this paper on demonstrating art's utility to landscape architecture. Using examples of urban art from the content area of *landscape as change, art as resistance* and their application to an educational project, I argue in support of Read's assertion of the significance of art and its particular importance to the current practice of landscape architecture.

I advocate for art as a mode of knowledge by first summarizing Read's argument for the relevance of art to society. I then describe how art knowledge is accessed, either through research, art practice or a combination of both. Next I present 'cases' of *landscape as change, art as resistance* studied in a graduate seminar to inform design production in an accompanying studio course. Finally, I evaluate the studio outcomes as the products of normative artistic research.

2.1 Art and Society

Herbert Read identified several characteristics of art that if examined, reveal the importance of art to society (1966, p.2-5). As they apply, the characteristics of art will be noted in examples of urban art later in this paper.

- *Dialectical activity*: Art is a dialectical activity that confronts one thesis with its antithesis to synthesize a new unity in which contradictions are reconciled.

⁴ *Landscape and Art* seminar and studio offered in fall 2009 to students enrolled in the MLA degree program at Kansas State University.

- *Solitary activity*: Art begins as a solitary activity; it is integrated into the social fabric through recognition.
- *Sometimes linked to society's mythology*: Art is sometimes linked to a society's mythology, but not always. Despite obvious examples of art's service to religion, Read cites research by anthropologist Ruth Benedict in early American cultures where art and religious objects were distinctly separate.
- *Original, not derivative, element of society*: Art is an original element that forms a society and must be examined in relationship to other cultural traits of the period.
- *An instinctive force*: Art is an instinctive force that may "recoil" if treated too deliberately.

2.2 Humanities Research

Landscape architects can access art as a mode of knowledge by studying the record of art (artifacts and documents) and by addressing design problems as an art practice. The first is humanities research, the other is artistic research. Art historian Erwin Panofsky makes clear the distinction between humanities and science research: "When the scientist observes a phenomena he uses *instruments* which are themselves subject to the laws of nature which he wants to explore. When a humanist examines a record he uses *documents* which are themselves produced in the course of the process he wants to investigate (Panofsky, p.471). While science reduces "transitory events to static laws," the humanities endow "static records with dynamic life"(Panofsky, p.477).

Traditionally, the humanities involve objective, descriptive research. But just like scientific case studies, art case studies can be either exploratory (intended to gather information and help narrow a question of inquiry), descriptive (informative), or normative (evaluative, intended to propose improvements).

According to Pentti Routio, professor emeritus at University of Design Helsinki, there are three basic types of descriptive humanities research: history, aesthetics, and semiotics. The goals of descriptive research are purely informative and objective, with no desire to influence the future outcome of art (Case Study, 1995 and Artistic Research, 2003).

Normative research in art, on the other hand, consists of evaluative study of "exemplars," commendable earlier works that can serve as models for future practice (Routio, Artistic Research, 2003). Normative research has the practical goal of improving future efforts. The normative model makes sense for art research applied to design, where audience preference (or taste) is a key consideration and an improved outcome is always desired (Figure 1).

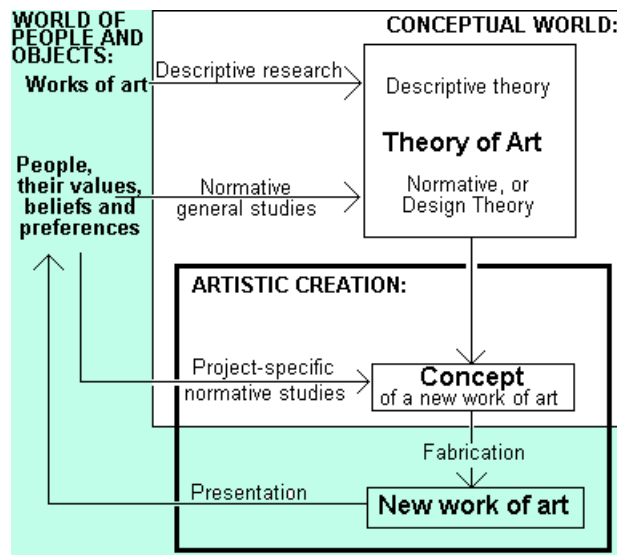


Figure 1. Model of descriptive versus normative research in the arts. From Pentti Routio, *Arteology*, 2003, available online at <http://www.uiah.fi/projects/metodi/133.htm>

2.3 Artistic Research

Routio takes the normative case study in art one step further, by proposing that case study results applied to the creation of a new work constitute "artistic research," combining research with

what I call art practice. “Artistic research means combining some of the procedures of ... research and artistic creation. The goal is usually normative and project-specific but it can be generally normative as well. In other words, artistic research can assist in producing a work of art based on a deeper analysis than usual, and it can also be used for producing theory for the benefit of other artists. In any case, it is research closely intertwined with the practical design and fabrication of a new work of art [or design]” (Artistic Research, 2003).

3 LANDSCAPE AS CHANGE/ART AS RESISTANCE

The overlap of current landscape architecture and art practices is evident in art forms which arise either as resistance to urban decay or as actions to change urban landscapes. The three examples used here can all be described as folk art, but have also received wider recognition in the gallery art world.

3.1 The rise of hip hop culture as landscape resistance

Tricia Rose, in *Black Noise*, her account of hip hop culture in 20th century America, traces the origins of hip hop to the Bronx, New York in the late 1970's. Rose links the destabilization of settled neighborhoods during and after the construction of the Cross Bronx expressway (Figure 2) to the invention of new, original elements of society: breakdance (Figure 3), rap music, and graffiti street art of the Bronx scene. Rose also connects joblessness and obsolete job skills of the Bronx' newly destabilized population to the invention of hip hop culture. Rose presents early hip hop culture as a dialectical activity, one in which the urban decay and economic hardship of late 1970's New York combines with a creative youth culture in the Bronx to synthesize a cultural movement that continues to influence, music, dance, and visual arts today (1994, pp.27-35).



Figure 2. Cross Bronx Expressway: looking northwest at Third Avenue elevated over the expressway, 1973. Taken by Jack E. Boucher for the Historic American Engineering Record's archive (public domain).

The expressway's neighborhood destruction brought in a new mix of lower income residents of Caribbean, Puerto Rican, and African-American ancestry. This new mix of inhabitants in the Bronx reinvented job skills rendered obsolete by automation (in the electronics and printing industries, for example) as cutting edge cultural tools. By wiring into street light transformers, early hip hop musicians and dancers staged huge street shows, creating community centers where none existed (Rose, 1994, pp.34-35).



Figure 3. The Rock Steady Crew, pictured in 1982, led by 'Crazy Legs,' created some of the most influential breakdance styles to come out of the Bronx, available on-line at <http://hiphop.sh/legs>

Dancers, rappers, and graffitists enjoyed at least short term recognition in the SoHo art district and Manhattan club scene, where they were invited to play and dance at clubs or exhibit in galleries (Rose, 1994, pp.46, 51). A famous example, Jean Michel Basquiat became a gallery artist after his start in the New York street graffiti world (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Basquiat, Jean Michel. *In Italian*, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 88x77 inches, © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Image available on-line at www.artstor.org

Rose's account of hip hop culture goes beyond descriptive humanities research and becomes normative research. She evaluates the movement's impact on broader culture as well as the pitfalls of the movement. Many artists were happy to be recognized by mainstream culture, only to later realize they had been exploited to draw huge crowds to clubs or galleries (1994, p.51).

3.2 Urban street art reinvented as high art

Barry McGee and Margaret Kilgallen were both part of the San Francisco Bay area graffiti revival of the 1990's. The couple, who frequently collaborated in both street graffiti and gallery shows, was featured in *Art 21*, the Public Broadcasting Service documentary series on contemporary art. The *Art 21* series is primarily descriptive: each artist presents her work in her own words, without commentary. However, the series also reveals artists as practitioners of normative artistic research, because many artists are openly critical of their own production, implying direction for future improvements.

While the work of McGee and Kilgallen differs in formal qualities and influences, both draw from street art (McGee from graffiti and Kilgallen from sign-making and folk art) to create their gallery work (Figures 5 and 6). Kilgallen, who died tragically young in 2001, emphasized the immediacy of making by hand, a trait of both her graffiti and her large scale works. Her description echoes Read's idea of art as an instinctive force:

"I like things that are handmade and I like to see people's hand in the world, anywhere in the world; it doesn't matter to me where it is. And in my own work, I do everything by hand. I don't project or use anything mechanical, because even though I do spend a lot of time trying to perfect my line work and my hand, my hand will always be imperfect because it's human....From a distance [a line] might look straight, but when you get close up, you can always see the line waver. And I think that's where the beauty is" (PBS, 2001).



Figure 5. Kilgallen, Margaret. Installation at the Drawing Center, New York, 1997. Photo by Larry Qualls, available on-line at www.artstor.org



Figure 6. McGee, Barry. Installation at Liverpool Biennial, 2002. Image available on-line at www.artstor.org

3.3 Resistance and change: the urban art of Tyree Guyton

Tyree Guyton's *Heidelberg Project* is an open-air sculpture installation along a residential block in Detroit. In Guyton's words, he looked around Detroit in the 1980's and saw devastation. Nearly 30,000 homes stood vacant in the core city. He looked at the people living in blighted neighborhoods and they "looked the same. This is madness" (*Heidelberg Project*, 1999).

On Guyton's block of Heidelberg Street, many homes stood derelict and vacant. He decided to make a difference, at least a visual difference. He shared his idea with his grandfather Sam, a commercial sign painter, and his sister Karen, who had studied art in school. They began making art on their block of Heidelberg Street, adding color and life (Figures 7 and 8). They used found scrap and objects, modified with bright paint. In a passage from the documentary video on his work, *Come unto Me*, Guyton reflects on rusted parts in a salvage yard: "These parts are all twisted up. How do you make them whole?" He answers his own question by quoting scripture, "Come unto me....I don't care who you are, what you are...and I wanna give you life" (Heidelberg Project, 1999).

The project reflects several societies' mythologies. Speaking in the *Come unto Me* documentary, Guyton references the rebirth of the New Testament Bible. His work also continues West African, Caribbean and African-American traditions of tree and yard adornment with recycled, reflective and light colored materials. Art scholar Robert Farris Thompson sees these practices as an enlivening tradition, intended to invoke the "flash of the spirit" (1983, p.142). Thompson traces yard adornment from Kongo culture to the Caribbean, to North American folk art (pp.142-159).

Like the Bronx hip hop movement, the Heidelberg project began with two opposite forces, on one hand refuse and blight, on the other, hope and dreams. Guyton's art unites the two, attempts to reconcile contradictions, and create a new neighborhood unity. In Karen's words, "We did this so people can kind of come out of their darkness and see there's life here" (Heidelberg Project, 1999). Over the years, the Heidelberg project has included a jazz café, guided neighborhood tours, and art for youth programs.



Figure 7. Tyree Guyton. Heidelberg Project, 1980's–present. Photo by Eyemaze Photography +Design, available on-line at http://www.eyemaze.net/blog/uploaded_images/HeidelbergProject08



Figure 8. Tyree Guyton. Heidelberg Project, detail of Dotty Wotty House. 1990's–present. Image available on-line at http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/b/b8/Heidelberg_Project_-_Dotty_Wotty_House.jpg

While the Heidelberg project began with a few people's activity, often solitary activity for Guyton, it gained international recognition. Positive attention came from outsiders interested in the project as folk art, and some neighborhood residents who understood Guyton's intent. But other residents disliked the project, considering it hazardous and trashy. Despite words of support from at least one Detroit mayor, the city twice bulldozed the project in response to petitions calling for its removal (Heidelberg Project, 1999).

4 THE APPLICATION OF ART KNOWLEDGE TO A STUDIO PROJECT

4.1 The Lots: Proposals for Vacant Lots in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward

In the wake of New Orleans' 2005 levee failures, rebuilding homes and helping neighbors return to the Lower Ninth Ward is a long term process. "Before Hurricane Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward contained 18,000 residential plattes. Today, there are only 1,100 homes in the Lower Ninth Ward. Wholesale clearance of damaged homes by the Army Corps of Engineers and the Marine Corps has left a desolate landscape dotted with homes" (Duggan, 2009).

Environmental injustice, based in racism, is a significant obstacle to the rebuilding process. The Make it Right Foundation is working to rebuild and return residents to their homes. Make it Right has set a short term goal of completing 150 energy-efficient homes. Even after this goal is achieved, acres of vacant lots will remain; in some parts of the ward, vacant lots currently out-number homes twenty to one (Duggan, 2009).

In the near term future, low cost interventions on vacant lots can symbolize hope in the Lower Ninth Ward and combat an appearance of neglect. The opportunity to collaborate with Make it Right led to a fast-paced, three week studio and seminar project for fourth-year landscape architecture students, titled, *The Lots: Proposals for Vacant Lots in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward*.

The students were asked to create modular proposals for vacant lots that can be applied as properties become available. Several themes were suggested by community members of the Lower Ninth Ward and Make it Right: rain water collection, settings for art, vantage points over the flat landscape of the ward, and the expression of economic development as art.

The Lower Ninth Ward was last accurately platted in the 1920s. Ownership and lot boundaries are constantly shifting. Make it Right owns only a few of the vacant lots of the ward. It is impossible to predict which lots they might acquire, and when. The systems-based site analysis approach favored by landscape architects was thus not appropriate to this problem. Instead, the students first immersed themselves in a study of cultural context, and then designed modules that were essentially 'site-less,' able to be adapted to multiple locations within the ward.

4.2 Process of Student Artistic Research

Designing from a distance (we studied in Kansas while designing for New Orleans) has its drawbacks. As Pentti Routio makes clear, the question of audience is critical to the study and application of normative aesthetics (Normative Study of Beauty, 1995). To put it simply, different segments of the population and different individuals have different tastes. First hand contact with neighborhood residents and the milieu was impossible, due to the short timeline of the project. Artistic research was our substitute: it offered the students some understanding of the culture of the Lower Ninth Ward.

The cultural context was framed both locally and more broadly: The students researched New Orleans' and Lower Ninth Ward history of jazz, funk and pop music, gardens, nightlife and festival, as well as street art from other ruptured urban settings. The yard and tree adornment practices of West African cultures re-oriented the students to yard art traditions of the United States. Tyree Guyton's *Heidelberg Project* in Detroit introduced students to the notion of art as resistance and rebirth. We also considered the larger problem of urban decay, across the United States, from New Orleans to Kansas City, Cleveland,⁵ and Detroit, asking "What does it mean to return home?"

Students presented their research verbally to the group, with reflection on its relevance to *The Lots* project, and archived their research digitally at a shared network location. I asked the students to apply what they had learned from evaluating other examples of urban art and to act as artists to design a 'lot module.' Each student was constrained to the typical 40' wide by 100' deep lot dimensions of the

⁵ A 2008 study found the cost to the City of Cleveland for maintenance and policing of vacant properties is a staggering \$35,000,000 per year (Mansur, 2009).

Lower Ninth Ward. In addition, each lot proposal included a cost estimate which had to conform to an established budget of \$4000.

4.3 Outcomes of Student Artistic Research

Artistic research within a studio learning environment connected students to art as a mode of knowledge. It impressed upon the students the similarities between landscape architects, architects, and artists as cultural workers. The resulting designs are minimalist healing gardens (Figure 9), community parks (Figure 10), hybrid gardens mixing vegetable farming and community space, and site-sculptures (Figure 11). While the studio produced thirteen diverse proposals, I selected three for discussion that most clearly combine functional needs and the results of artistic research.

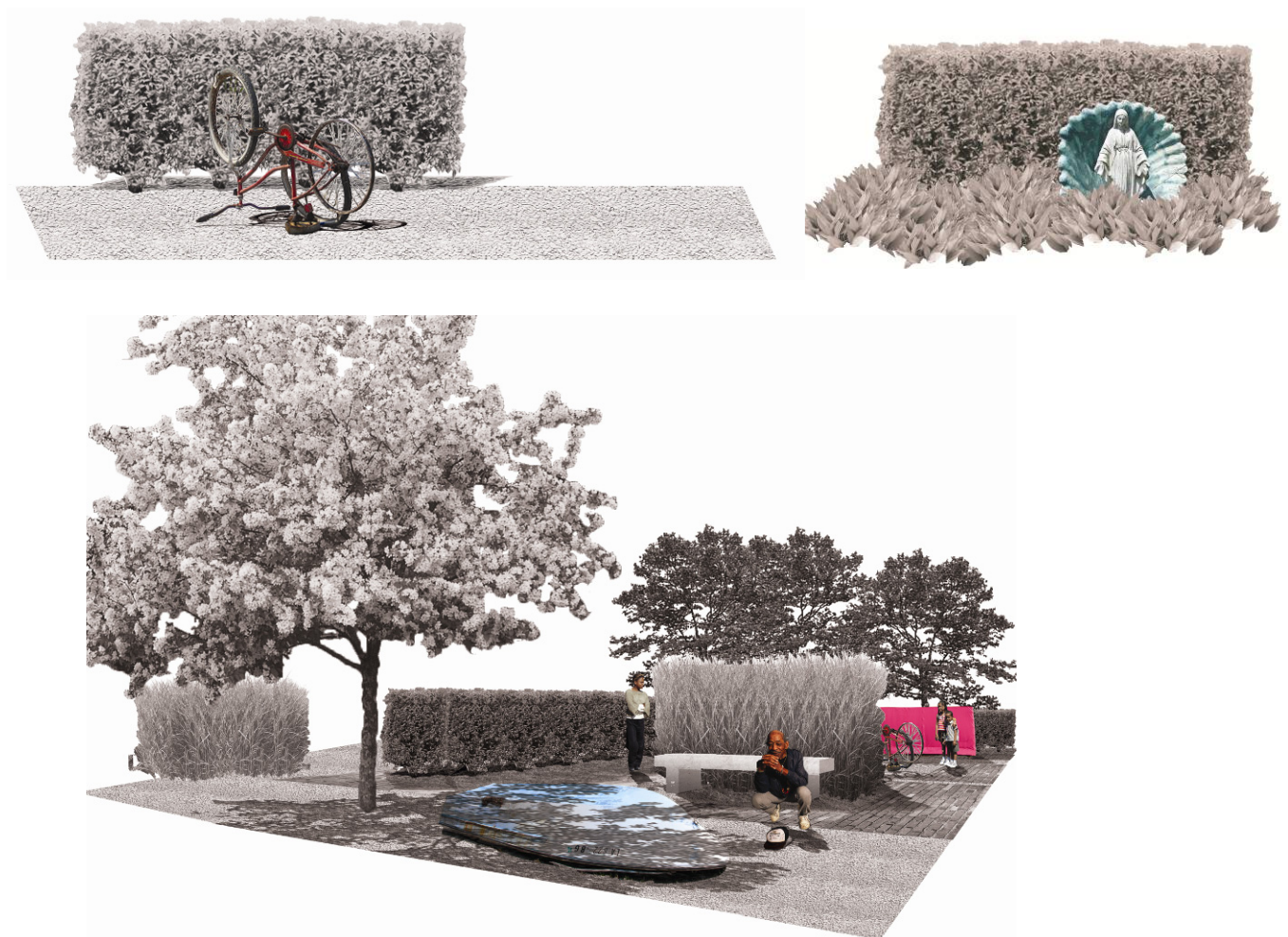


Figure 9. Ploutz, Russell. *Memory Labyrinth*, 2009. Image courtesy of student.

Memory Labyrinth, a proposal by Russell Ploutz, combines practical elements, such as shallow dry wells to assist with drainage, with a contemplative setting for found 'memory objects' (Figure 9). The site is organized as an orthogonal labyrinth of paths, easy to navigate due to open sight lines through most of the site. Small amounts of vegetation (minimized due to lack of budget for maintenance) provide some definition between different contemplative sub-spaces.

Learning from the negative attention given to the Heidelberg Project, Ploutz was careful to provide cues of care within this healing garden. The groundplane around each setting for 'memory

objects' is cleared of clutter and made of either recycled brick or crushed brick fines. Objects are to be selected and brought to the garden by neighbors, for reasons that evoke memories, future hopes, or some other meaning determined by community members. Ploutz proposes a seasonal cleanup of the garden, when plants can be cut back and weeded and found objects can be changed out by community members. An overall aesthetic of minimalism, in contrast to the richness of the memory objects, defines the found objects as 'different,' set aside for a special purpose, and not to be confused with 'junk.'

Jonathon Ryan's proposal, *Message Board*, was inspired by the accretive, layered visual effects of both the Heidelberg project and graffiti art (Figure 10). Ryan proposes a small park centered around the idea of a community 'message board:' a durable wall intended as a medium for news and self-expression. Ryan's idea recognizes that the community needs a place for many activities, including protest. The wall is composed of a minimal steel frame covered by barge boards, large timbers reclaimed from New Orleans maritime industry. Over time, the wall will become a thick palimpsest of paint, paper signs, stickers, and other materials nailed to the board.

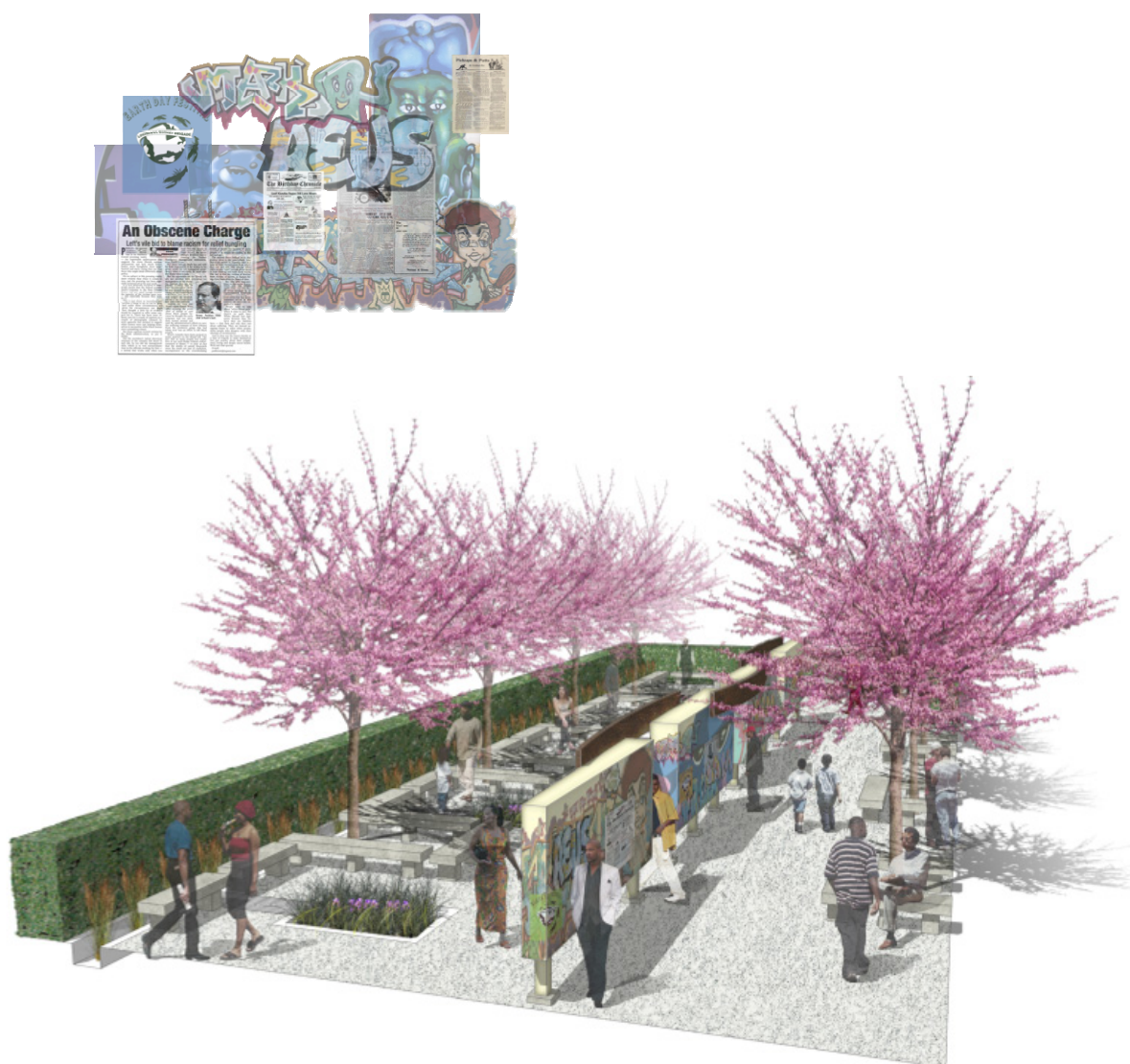


Figure 10. Ryan, Jonathon. *Message Board*, 2009. Images courtesy of student.

Like Ploutz, Ryan was careful to create a place that looks cared for, but includes a rich, 'messy' element that can be used and reused as the community sees fit. Another key consideration is safety, as both research and common sense indicate that a neighborhood with a high degree of vacancy can

become a setting for crime. Ryan edited the ‘message board’ wall repeatedly to find a balance between visual access and an opaque, usable surface at eye-level. His eventual solution proposes several breaks in the wall, so visitors will not feel trapped on one side and can have sporadic sight lines to the other side. The wall is also designed with an open zone above the ground plane so that visitors can observe foot traffic on the other side of the wall and be aware of others through subtle cues, such as shifting ground shadows.

Ryan layers visual ideas, social ideas, and safety concerns over ecological function. A carefully planned sequence of bio-infiltration cells overflow to a runnel along one edge of the garden, which eventually outlets to the curb and gutter system of the street. While many students initially proposed draining adjacent lots to their proposed lot, essentially creating rain gardens to drain future home sites, city ordinance currently prohibits this practice. Students reworked their designs to provide infiltration of rainwater falling on a given lot, without accepting rainwater from adjacent properties.

Of all the student proposals, *Hide and Seek*, by Krystal M. Schuette, most strongly merges site and sculpture (Figure 11). Schuette originally developed an idea inspired by repurposing junk, a part of



Figure 11. Schuette, Krystal M. *Hide and Seek*, 2009. Image courtesy of student.

the Bronx hip hop culture, Guyton’s Heidelberg project and the art of McGee and Kilgallen. *Hide and Seek* is an arrangement of maritime scrap metal, readily available near the Lower Ninth Ward. In her proposal, Schuette specifies that the arrangement of materials may vary, depending upon the lot orientation, but the brightly painted scrap walls should be placed at the back of the lot to keep children away from vehicular traffic and to allow for a large raingarden at the front of the lot.

A setback around the perimeter of the lot is unobstructed, to allow open sight lines into the paths between walls from all sides. This configuration was Schuette’s compromise between desirable clear zones of visibility and the competing objective of mystery and play around the walls. Schuette detailed post and footing construction for the walls (not shown here) to ensure a sound structure.

The lot proposal includes a few trees to provide some pockets of shade and inundation tolerant plants for the raingarden, but is otherwise a minimalist scheme of metal and recycled, crushed concrete paths. Like in Ploutz’ *Memory Labyrinth* design, the use of a minimalist aesthetic is Schuette’s response to the negative responses to urban art studied in the seminar. Her hope is that by minimizing the chaos of other elements, the material qualities of the maritime scrap—its fabrication details and surface variations, changing over time and with the aging of paint—will be appreciated against a simple backdrop of paths and minimalist green vegetation.

All three proposals attempt to use recycled materials in a visually clear and orderly way. The use of these materials is important for the same reasons seen in examples of urban art: first, they have a prior history and therefore contain inherent meanings to be either determined or decoded by visitors to the lots (depending upon the proposal); second, the recycled materials are lower cost and therefore more feasible for a limited budget; and third, these materials evidence a practical ethic of re-

use.

The last reason for carefully incorporating materials with history is symbolic, as well. Re-use and reinvention, what Tyree Guyton calls “rebirth,” is a message of hope, a statement against abandonment of devastated communities, and an alternative to the ‘whitewash’ of gentrification. The students proposals are *landscape as change/art as resistance*. The lot proposals recognize a need for change and rebirth while simultaneously echoing the call for residents of the Lower Ninth Ward to claim their homeground, either by staying and prospering, or by returning home.

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