

The Harrison Studio

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Introduction

Over many years our work has addressed the co-evolution of biodiversity and cultural diversity most often, though not always, at watershed scale. To begin, we find the boundaries of the watershed, look for emerging patterns, and then often focus on the condition of the river. This process has been followed for the Sava River in the former Yugoslavia, for the Mulde River as it flows into the Elbe in Germany and as it begins in the little Floha Mulde watershed at the Border of the Czech Republic. And for the watershed of the Touch River as it flows through farmland and city into the Garonne River in France, and for the Oder River as it flows down from the Czech Republic through Poland and into Germany, among others. We have proposed a genetic diffusion system for the complex watershed of the Rhine and we are doing one for the Santa Fe watershed in New Mexico. We have spent considerable time pondering boundary conditions for the Green Heart of Holland, which conditions are alternately accepted in part or in whole or are rejected, depending on the government in power. We have proposed for the natural purification of the headwaters of most of the rivers in Europe by restoring the forest, meadow, and grasslands of the high grounds, in a work entitled Peninsula Europe supported by the European Union and the Deutsche Bundes Umwelt Stiftung, the Schweisfurth-Stiftung, Munich, as well as foundations and museums, and galleries in four countries, so far. Always the strategy has been to impact the planning processes in a region, as the cultural landscape is so often formed by them.

Work often begins when we perceive an anomaly in the environment that is the result of opposing beliefs or contradictory metaphors. These moments, in which reality no longer appears seamless and the cost of belief has become outrageous, offer the opportunity to create new spaces, first in the mind and thereafter in everyday life.

Our methodology emerges from the interaction of our beliefs.

We believe that in a well-functioning system, cultural diversity and biodiversity exist in a state of mutual interaction – the former self-conscious and able to intend and transform, and the latter the pattern of self-organization from which we all spring and to which we all return, and which ultimately determines the possible.

We believe that every place is telling the story of its own becoming. This story results from the processes of everyday life, emerging from a complex conversation carried on at many levels – physical and biological as well as social and political, economic, and, aesthetic or, in rare cases, compassionate.

We believe that the cultural landscape, in all of its dimensions, is the outcome, in physical terms, of this conversation – mostly determined, or guided, or forced, by the dominant culture or ensemble of cultures in a place. Further, we see ourselves as embedded in this cultural landscape, and responsible, as is everyone else, in some manner for its well-being.

We believe that storytelling is the way of much of normal human discourse. We believe that the loss of the mythic, of ritual and ceremony has impoverished us all. We attempt to employ some sense of the mythic and the iconic, at least in our stories and in the size and content of our images.

We believe that the urgency of the moment must be at play in any act of social change that comes about in a conflicted situation and is not simply the normal morphology of time. Most works that have been successful in some measure have engaged and argued for transformation in a perceived extremely urgent situation.

Our methodology to reveal subject matter begins with the question, “How Big is Here?” The object is to determine the boundary conditions of the place. Within geophysical boundaries in particular, patterns can emerge. These patterns, social, economic, and ecological, determine the course of our research and the forms of texts and images and sometimes work on the ground.

Our methodology for presentation is basically through exhibitions in cultural institutions and their accompanying publicity campaigns, most often in museums or city halls, as well as through a catalog or brochure for each work, and sometimes with work on the ground.

Our methodology for problem-solving takes a variety of forms, expressed throughout this essay, but fundamentally it is designed to address, infect, invade, transform, and expand planning processes.

Our methodology for information gathering is energy expensive and time consuming. It depends on gaining familiarity with places, search and research, and generating trust by meeting with many whose stories and insights often appear in the work, as common ground becomes more apparent.

The question “But who is the audience?” poses certain problems for the kind of work we do. For instance, the work is often necessarily text heavy. Typically what we do must convince planners, politicians, ecologists, and diverse bureaucrats, as well as the art community and everyday people, that what we propose is worth doing. Also, our writing and images are designed to be place specific, and although our references are easily understood by audiences who have a stake in what we argue for, sometimes without modification our texts and images do not travel easily to other places. However, the basic working principles are universal enough; otherwise, invitations would not be forthcoming.

Our enquiry does not have a single base, such as aesthetics, theory, philosophy, politics, or morality. Critical engagement, transformative action, and aesthetic expression are completely interwoven and not easily separated. Works emerge from such different situations that one or the other of several of these (and/or other categories) may take a dominant role, although all are usually present in some measure. Underlying our works are respect and concern for the well-being of the planet on which we live and all of its inhabitants; Compassion and empathy, as best we can evoke them in ourselves and in others; and awe at the infinite variety of possibilities spread before us.

On Conversation

Typically, any work that we do is based on an invitation to go somewhere and think. The invitation is always offered by a person or a group who have come to believe that our engagement in their domain of thought and discourse and their domain of action, transaction, and transformation in a given environment will be of value. We have chosen, over many years, to not do work “on spec” or simply because it appears valuable to us personally to do. It is rare for us to enter a competition, as the space, time, context, and agenda are determined by others.

The Harrison Studio is designed to form and re-form itself for each work, since the people with whom we work become the Harrison Studio for that place. Thus, there is the Harrison Studio Santa Fe, or Harrison Studio Borna in the former East Germany, or Harrison Studio Bauhaus at Dessau, or always, the overarching concept is envisioned by ourselves in response to a period of study in the environment. Often, it grows out of interaction with the group with whom we are in a teaching and learning relationship about place, a mutually fructifying set of transactions. The empowering element that emerges is a new and viable set of possibilities that add value to place. This way of working in any place begins with three questions: How big is here? How can what’s happening here be understood and engaged? What patterns are forming or reforming? And how can we, and those with us, add to the well being of the now of this place? And the question, “How big is here?” must also include, “How long is our Now?” Now may also be understood as an instant, but the instant may be 250 years long.

Lately, we have been thinking about such things as the creation of stability domains.

Our initial working tactics are: Stay simple, focus on what to us is the obvious, and understand that the invitation itself is only a beginning. Make clear that the working agenda is to be set over time by ourselves and those working. Generally speaking, we regard the environment itself as the client. (The best commentary on the way our Harrison Studio works and the practices that form around it can be seen in the enclosed essays, written by the studio manager and the project manager, in the “Green Heart Vision” catalog.)

By using the conversational form, with diverse proposals embedded in it, we have been able to, in the main, avoid much of the sense of the authoritarian or the coercive that can be present in public projects or planning operations. This is the basic strategy underlying our use of the “He said, She said, You said, I said” format when working with conversation as well as citing people’s commentary, without personal attribution, in the work. When we actually make a proposal, we often use the “If this, Then that” form, which typically includes both a viable vision and its potential consequences, and the undesirable consequences of its converse or absence.

On Conversational Drift

We employ a method that puts our propositions in a conversational form, often poetic. The reasons are many. For instance, the conversation we begin, and often evolve in elaborate ways, can then be more easily adopted by others. Thus it can drift away from us and develop a life of its own. It can also, on occasion, drift back. Conversational drift is a useful way that we have found to describe or, indeed, encourage diverse outcomes for any work. (Dare we say, Chance Operations?) But first of all, it is a way of being non-possessive and sharing authorship quickly and easily. Moreover, the form itself has a certain shape-changing quality that keeps the basic concepts intact in the presence of dismissive forces.

Another aspect of conversational drift has to do with time, in the sense that with it we are able to surrender the idea of closure, or finishedness, which is usually understood as a necessary condition for a work of art to be recognized as a work of art. For instance, "Green Heart Vision" in Holland was accepted by the environmental minister almost in its entirety in 1995, put into the government plan, and discarded almost in its entirety by a new government in 1996-97. The operating principles in it reappeared in the planning process for Holland in 1998-99; the conversation drifted back to us in 2000 with an invitation from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Environment to do a master class, in which our whole concept was re-presented and exhibited yet again. This led to other works, and later to the Groeneveld Prize for 2002 for our work on the Dutch landscape. We are now informed that a Dutch landscape architect, to whom we had presented the work in 1995, is taking many of the ideas forward under his own name. He has taken ownership, gaining benefit to both himself and the countryside. So did the cities of Pasadena and Baltimore, among others. The work continued to be ours in the catalog or exhibition or brochure, but, in order to be adopted, it has to reappear as the idea of others who take ownership. (How does one sign a river?) Of course, work that is the outcome of a conversation that we have set in place, or contributed to setting in place, can drift back to us, and anyone can call upon us to re-engage.

So the basic terms of our practice, although we prefer the term "work," are quite simple: to be invited, to be networked, to let a vision emerge for transformation of place if it wishes to, to be non-possessive, and to always insist that whoever pays us or engages with us understands that our fundamental client is the cultural landscape itself, as best we, with the help of many, can perceive it.

We have found it useful to refuse the seduction of ordinary model-making. We always attempt to work at the scale of the issue or the problem. Hence, our founding question, "How big is here?" The answer to this may be a 3.3 million square kilometer peninsula, such as Europe, or a 10,000 square foot street corner intersection, as in California Wash, which connects the city of Santa Monica to the Santa Monica Promenade and the beach at the terminus of Pico Boulevard. Or it may be The Endangered Meadows of Europe, which began as a one-acre roof garden, whose conceptual reference was to the meadowlands of Europe, but whose seed now continuously adds biodiversity to the parklands of the City of Bonn.

We tend to avoid using the specific culture and the dialects of disciplines in favor of the conversational mode. However, it behooves us to understand those dialects and to be able to employ them with the practitioners of the disciplines.

Aside from the influences of our basic education in literature and mythology, the visual arts, and ecology, we consider ourselves the beneficiaries of systems theory and systems thinking, as they emerged from Norbert Wiener in the late '40s, clarified in the '50s by Von Neumann and others. In the '60s and early '70s, systems thinking was elegantly applied to biology by Maturana and Varela, as reflected, in their exposition on intelligence in all life, using the cell as a model to understand and express both the pattern of organization and the process of autopoiesis. Second-generation cognitive scientists, Lakoff and Johnson in particular, have applied advanced systems theory and complexity theory concept formations to cognition itself. They go so far as to redefine the unconscious as a far more complex, far less accessible part of ourselves, calling this the "cognitive unconscious." The theory goes even further, pointing to the biological processes that underlie the formation not only of belief but also the formation of metaphor itself, which is so fundamental to the processes thinking, expressing, creating, and being.

However, we often remind ourselves not to confuse systems thinking, which points to new space of mind, and systematization, which leads to the overproduction of sameness, which bureaucrats in our experience often confuse – giving lip service to the former, while obeying the dictates of the latter.

Reflecting on Globalization from the Particular Perspective of Art Making

Aside from the obvious economic problems and inequities, loss of languages, and the like, we take issue here with globalization, particularly that aspect that massively overproduces sameness in most dimensions of biology and cultural behavior. There are such consequences as a dramatic reduction in the possibilities to improvise and create with the materials of everyday life. An obvious example of this is the building industry, whose system of manufacture and the building code laws, in transaction with a rather warped financial system, produce a form of development that permits little exploration of new forms, while discarding millennia of old forms that were sustainable, and in the process creating profound environmental disorder.

Such a continuum of beliefs and values generates certain problems for ourselves, as well as for many other artists who are jostling to be expressive within both large and small systems. This is especially true of socially, ethically, and ecologically concerned artists who are working in the public interest, often doing work that appears suspect to mainstream critics, writers, and collectors. The problem with this overproduction of sameness and often concomitant rigidity in planning systems is that the conformities involved reduce our much-cherished and now much-eroded abilities to freely improvise. That is to say, invent and create improbable images that affect or transform places, norms, paradigms, and icons of one kind or another.