



# **Cities, Public Spaces, and Social Imaginary**

Topic Chair

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## Streaming the City: The Lucas Creek Park, Albany City, New Zealand

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What a difference it makes if nature, instead of being a huge reservoir of forces and a bottomless repository of waste, turns suddenly into something that interrupts any progression: something to which you cannot appeal and can't get rid of. (Latour, Bruno, 2005).

This paper investigates the making of a new public space on the edge of the contemporary city. The first part of the paper starts with a discussion of contemporary thinking about the urban conditions that are found on the margins of many western cities. The paper looks at the writing about this new city, starting with the publication of 'Edge City' (Garreau, Joel. 1991) in the early 90s, to recent writing in the 'The Landscape Urbanism Reader' (Waldheim, Charles. Ed. 2006). The paper then considers the essay, 'Making Things Public, Atmospheres of Democracy' (Latour, Bruno, 2005) and discusses some of the ways in which Latour's discussion could contribute to the making of new public space.

The second part of the paper is a description of a design case study for a new park in Albany City, Auckland, New Zealand, designed by the author. In this case study, the author addresses one of the central concerns in the development of the contemporary city, the making of public space in a private world.

The edges of Western cities are often places of intense and extraordinary building programmes; malls, offices, apartments, and suburban housing are making new hybrid urbanisms, driven by real-estate speculation and the location of favourable transport infrastructure. Although conventional architectural critics deride these new cities, they have their own, particular, contingent urbanism. The question that this paper poses isn't so much how do we make the suburbs 'urban', that is, how

can we make this deracinated structure conform to a new urbanist criteria of density, but rather, can we move the essentially private nature of the edge city towards the public realm? The private house and garden, the private 'public space' of the mall, the private space of the car and the car network. How do we make this world public?

Joel Garreau, in 1991, describes the new city developing of the margins of American cities in the 1970s and 1980s as an Edge City (Garreau, Joel. 1991). Garreau articulates a set of amusing yet accurate laws which govern the possibilities of this new urbanism, the city must be located next to a major freeway intersection, it must have a combination of office and retail space which is connected by a road (not a pedestrian) network, the city cannot have existed twenty years ago, and so on.

The growth and ubiquity of this new city, now on the margins of many established cities around the world, has undergone an equally well-rehearsed critique. Michael Sorkin (Sorkin, Michael. ed. 1991) attacks this city for three pernicious features; firstly the new city effects a studied disconnection with any particularity of the site on which it is located. Secondly the new city is obsessed with surveillance, this is manifested at every scale from the CCTV camera in the mall to the gated suburban community. These two themes coalesce within the trope of the theme park to form new kinds of urban 'public space'. This space, created out of the modernist *tabula rasa*, invested with an invented narrative and continually watched, is contrasted with traditional kinds of urban public space, the democratic sphere of the citizen, the public realm of free expression, not only political, but also the space of the personal.

Concurrent with this critique of the contemporary

city, is the attention that paid to the space left over from the totalising force of the new city. Even the relentless control network of mall, car parks, street and suburban housing, has some left over space. This left over space has been theorised, notably by Ignasi Sola Morales, as *Terrain Vague* (de Sola-Morales, Ignasi. 1995). Sola Morales characterise this space, outside of the totalising surveillance of the contemporary city, as being open, fugitive of meaning or means and thus able to represent the possibilities of a new kind of public space.

This thinking about the new city in the 90s has developed into a curious dialectic, where both these critiques of the new city are still defined by the presence, however ghostly, of traditional ideas of urban form and space. Thus the problem with the *Edge City* is that it doesn't have meaningful public spaces with a history of democratic participation. The production of *Terrain Vague* occurs because meaningful public space has disappeared. Both these critiques are defined against traditional urban ways of building and enclosing space.

It is not until the advent of a new way of thinking about the city in the late 90s, *Landscape Urbanism* that fresh and more open-ended ways of both critiquing the new city and engaging in a meaningful way with the particularities of this city, start to be explored.

*Landscape Urbanism* (Waldheim, Charles. Ed. 2006) is of course a 'big tent' and encompasses many acts, but we can locate some of its most important and useful ideas in landscape ecology. This science posits that we are all living in a constantly moving environment of many open-ended networks. These networks encompass both the environmental, such as, water flows and plant and species diffusion, and the social, like human movement systems. LU offers us a new way of critiquing the new city. Rather than bemoaning the fact that an *Edge City* doesn't work like traditional city, LU reconceptualizes the city as network system with non-particular inputs and outputs, a system in which we can observe the potential interaction of other systems. Since this hybrid ecology is not fixed and is always changing, the designer's role is to expose new network systems, to encourage and activate environmental systems that are often elided by the development and to suggest new social systems that combine social

and environmental goals. The materiality of these systems can be visualised by specific computer software such as GIS, which can both map existing systems and model future possibilities.

However, recently a number of critiques of LU have emerged. One important criticism has been that the process model that we see in many LU projects can come perilously close to a neo Mchargism procedure, evincing an ecological determinism, in which a native restoration is seen as the only answer. The liberation found in the pragmatism of many of the processes has also been criticised as shying away from the political. This modified pragmatism avoids the too hard questions, preferring the easier problematic of, how can we clean pollution up? rather than, why is there pollution?

To use the liberating discoveries that LU has made, without falling into a technical quietism, we need to expand the discussion to include critiques of the larger public realm. To help broaden the conversation I use Bruno Latour essay, *Making Things Public, Atmospheres of Democracy* (Latour, Bruno, 2005). Latour rethinks, or reconceptualizes, the composition of the public world as a phantom, rather than the traditional public world, which has been represented since the European enlightenment as a solid body, the *Body Politik*. This incorporeal body, is composed of a multitude of bodies not just a unitary all-encompassing body.

Latour makes several important points about the composition of this new public body, firstly that it is not just composed of humans but all the issues that surround our contemporary lives. He describes how the matters of facts that face us, transform under the complications of the world, to become matters of concern. Latour goes on to describe the deficiencies in the traditional means of assembly, the parliaments of the world, that are no longer capable of representing the public, in their place are a multitude of ways of assembling, in a world where everything is contemporary, a world of space, not time.

Public space must now accommodate all the different types of assemblies that we make for ourselves from the most banal and humble to the important. These assemblies are not just our social worlds but also matters that concern us, the environment, the diversity of species, the pollution

of waterways. We represent these assemblies as a multitude rather than a unitary whole. The question that Latour poses for us is, 'how many contemporary elements can you build side by side, generating a series of simultaneities' (Latour, Bruno, 2005). Latour sets out a series of practical challenges in how the making of a new public world can be represented. The following design case study explores the pragmatic implications of Latour's ideas in the making of a new public space.

#### **DESIGN CASE STUDY, LUCAS CREEK PARK.**

The design case study is a plan for a new park located in Albany City, Auckland, New Zealand. Albany was a farming settlement to the north of Auckland City, before undergoing rapid urbanisation in the 1990s. The topography of Albany can be defined as a basin catchment system. The southern side of the basin gently rolls down to a small stream, the Lucas Creek, that runs east to west, the northern side of the basin is a much steeper topography, in fact an escarpment, broken by a valley running north through the centre of the cliff.

Albany City is located on the southern side of the creek, next to a major motorway junction with the main state highway of New Zealand. The new city of Albany is a far cry from the traditionally dense 19<sup>th</sup> century city. Albany City follows the edge city model, not a traditional civic centre of public building and parks, but rather a series of isolated buildings, a shopping mall, big box retail, and apartments, all connected with a road based infrastructure. With the building of Albany City, the North Shore City Council (NSCC) approached the authors to help in the development of a new public space for Albany City, centred on the Lucas Creek.

The Lucas Creek is the main tributary of the Albany catchment, running east west, at the base of the Albany escarpment. The creek is joined in the centre of the escarpment by another stream from the extensive northern catchment. This catchment extends in a series of small valleys that stretches up to Lonely Track Road. The topography south of the river is divided into roughly two levels, the first rises to the Oteha Valley Road, the main feeder road for the area, and the second from the road to the southern edge of the Albany Basin. The lower zone is characterised by a broad river

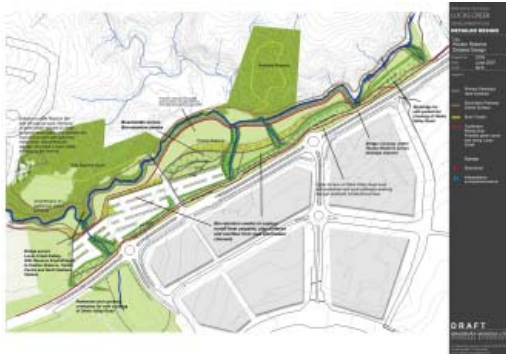
terrace/flood plain, which rises between 8 and 10 metres to Oteha Valley Road. The vegetation in this area is mostly grass with a little native regeneration around the stream, and some native planting. There is also extensive car parking for the North Shore Stadium.

Above the Oteha Valley Road, lie the two largest developments in the Albany catchment. The North Shore Stadium and Albany City. The North Shore Stadium is a sport complex comprising a stadium and two playing fields. Appian Way divides this complex from Albany City. Albany City follows a roughly concentric plan; at the centre of the development is the largest mall in New Zealand adjacent to a large stormwater-cleaning pond. Set in rings around this centre are a collection of buildings, both civic and commercial with no particular hierarchy, a new court complex is situated next to a small retail centre, a new and successful bus park and ride station is located next to apartment towers. All these developments are connecting by a road network. Probably the only consistent urban structure in the development is the two-store big box retail sheds that line the western and northern boundaries of the site.

To the north of the Lucas Creek is a relatively untouched landscape of regenerating native bush, some pasture and macrocarpa pines. The topography of this landscape is characterised by a steep embankment, rising up from the stream. In the centre of this embankment is a deep valley, which runs to the northern edge of the Albany Basin. This area forms a green background to the intense urban development of Albany City. There are a number of existing sites and reserves in this area. The reserves and sites on the north side of the Lucas Creek are classified as Natural Environment Sites. They are part of the Albany escarpment, which is an important part of the North-West WildLink corridor. The sites and reserves on the south side of the river are classified as Community recreational sites where the focus is on integrating the spaces with surrounding land uses.

Lucas Creek is subject to periodic flooding, with floodwater reaching the edge and in some cases crossing the existing car parks. There are three stormwater outlets on the south side of the creek. Two of these outlets come from Oteha Valley Road; the other is from the Albany Lake.

The design project, while defined by the contingent



limitation of professional practice, seeks to utilise the very pragmatism of the project to investigate ways of making a new public space for Albany City.

Our first action is to recognise the existing and contingent social and environmental assemblies present in the site and surrounding landscape. Things like playgrounds and car parks, the event assemblies such as the car boot party after the sports match and the temporary takeaway truck stop, and environmental events, the flooding of the creek, and the stormwater run off from Albany City.

Our investigations try to imagine all the possibly public implications that the new city will present; sport fields, nature trails, cross valley connections between suburb and city, exercise trails, increased stormwater run off, and increased flooding from the loss of impervious surfaces.

Our next action is to reconceptualize the site as a landscape rather than an arrangement of buildings and voids. Utilising ARCGIS software, landscape conditions both present and latent are accurately charted across the site. Native ecologies are mapped, as are overland waterflow paths and flooding models. A social map was simultaneously built to present the existing and future social networks. This data enables us to visualise both contemporary and future landscape orientated events.

Given the configuration of the different water systems we proposed a reshaped topography for the site. Our first suggestion is to build a one metre high terrace on the edge of the one hundred year flood plain. Bio retention swales are constructed on the edge of the flood plain terracing to catch the overland waterflow from the rest of the site. We then proposed to form an upper terrace level with

the Oteha Valley Road. This terrace will be shaped in such a way to allow the existing stormwater discharge points from the road, to form a series of small valleys. Remediation ponds are located in the valleys, helping to clean the contaminated stormwater.

The effect is a series of three terraces descending from Oteha Valley road to Lucus creek. This newly reconfigured topography offers the possibility of a new social network, connected by a three-path system running parallel to Lucus Creek.

We propose a joint bike and pedestrian track next to the creek. This will enable the site users to directly engage with the creek as it passes through different ecotones along its course. This flattened flood terrace can also be used for informal sports activities and picnics. As the stream floods more frequently, these events can be monitored from the upper terraces, the aftermath judged by the debris trails. Under the conditions of a 100-year flood, the lower path and terrace will become completely covered by floodwater.

The second track runs on top of the one metre high terrace, above the flood plain. Along this site are placed the traditional social amenities of a park, playgrounds, sports fields, car parking, and toilets. The path connects these different assemblies with each other and the activities of the upper and lower terraces. Boardwalks break into the paths, leading the users across the stormwater wetlands and allow views to the upper terrace.

The third path system is a double pedestrian and bike path along the top of the new terrace, parallel to the Oteha Valley Road. These paths are carefully placed away from the edge of the busy road, running through the newly planted terrace. Users of the top paths are simultaneously





part of the road network yet at the same time actively engaged in the site and its social and environmental networks.

Carefully planted groves open and close views of the northern escarpment to the viewer. The paths converge at the head of the three stormwater valleys giving the users a visual connection across the site to the stream, in effect, seeing the stages of stormwater remediation.

We propose to turn Oteha Valley Road into an extension of the site. By commandeering the median strip and the council owned property adjacent to the proposed big box retail sites, we can densely plant these margins with selected specimen trees, the effect for the motorist will be like travelling through a dense grove.

These three tracks are complemented with two north /south connections, from Albany City across the Lucas Creek to the Albany escarpment. The first path connects the North Shore Stadium with the existing overflow car parking by making a pedestrian tunnel under the Oteha Valley Road. The path then bridges the Lucas Creek to a natural amphitheatre on top of the escarpment, then on to connect with the growing subdivision on Gills Road. The second connection is located at the eastern end of Oteha Valley Road. A new 'Main Street' is to be built on Cornerstone Drive linking the new apartment buildings with Oteha Valley Road and the new Lucas Creek Park. We suggest bridging the busy road and building a new sport field on northern side. A second bridge takes the citizens across the Lucas Creek to the steep, native clad northern escarpment.

We want to make use of the existing water systems; the potential of flooding along the length of the creek and of the three stormwater outlets. We suggest that these dynamic systems be expressed



in the design of the site, rather than being hidden or elided. We propose that a topographical change is made to the edge of the 100-year flood plain and the installation of three wetland systems to decontaminate stormwater from the road. We want to connect the different social activates that already exist on the site with the new uses that can be predicted with the growth of the new city. We propose a network of tracks, east/west and north/south will help animate the site, by connected it to the city and the natural world.

The result of this landscape based design process is the development of a new kind of public space, one that escapes the limitation of both the privatised space of the mall and traditional park space, which is defined by building.

The Lucas Creek Park project proposes a way in which the citizens of Albany City can engage in the public world that the new park presents, a new structure for social assembly and a re-presented environment, the remediation landscape of floodplain and stormwater wetland.

## ENDNOTES

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