'Assimilation, though Design'

Gavin T. Renwick

Provocation document for Design Latitudes 'Counterpoint' Panel

Provocation: *Looking Back*

> The development of post-modernity in western culture, and 'the loss of the legitimizing power of the narratives of Western emancipation and enlightenment … [has meant] modernism is rediscovered in the formerly colonized, peripheral world'[1].

In the Canadian north the general global change from self-reliance to dependence on culturally inappropriate, and geographically distant, industrial processes has been particularly concentrated, many people experiencing 'all or most of the variety of forms that we label modernization'[2] in considerably less than a single lifetime. The diverse cultures of the north have also had to deal with modernisations presumption of 'mastery' on many levels, including constructing a stereotype 'traditional' society through which indigenous identity, knowledge, and scholarship could be covertly debased and overtly assimilated. However, the complexities within arctic ecosystems and the perceivably empty landscape (at least to the Euro-Canadian eye), starkly and literally evidences how imposed developmental strategies and design processes are in rude contradiction to the supposed intention of 'improvement'.

Traditionally a First Nation community had the potential to 'create its own conceptions of the nature of the space or the cosmos which it inhabits'.[3] Localised social processes evolved from expansive notions of kinship and communal territory, as understood, defined and conveyed within traditional knowledge and naming of a homeland.

---

[1]   Said, Edward W. 1993. 'Culture & Imperialism'. Chatto & Windus, London. P.68.
[2]   Pelto, Pertti. 1978. Ecology, Delocalisation and Social Change. In: 'Consequences of Economic Change in the Arctic'. Boreal Institute for Northern Affairs/University of Alberta, Edmonton. P.32.
[3]   Soja, Edward W. 1990. 'Postmodern Geographies - The reassertion of space in critical social theory'. Verso, London.

Indigenous homeland can therefore be understood fluidly within both space and time, and places within it defined or remembered through an activity or event, mythical or experienced. The subsequent rationalised landscape is an 'abstract mould classifying and separating people and place'[4], by definition *an imperial territory*. Central to the physical and conceptual conflict that exists between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian values is an 'opposition [that] implies two different perspectives, two historiographies; one linear and subsuming, the other holistic and contrapuntal.[5] This partition of function and event was integral to the design and planning processes that created homogenous and largely suburbanised northern communities (where southern domesticity is presented as a template).

A metophor for such misguided design is the contraditction between the provided house, 'a physical unit that defines and delineates space for members of a household', and the idea of home, which is 'more than a territorial core than an ordering of space, but a complex entity that defines and is defined by culture, sociodemographic, psychological, political and economic factors'.[6] If territoriality is the method through which space is classified, communicated, and enforced,[7] and the primary human territory is home,[8] then design for the north that universally implements Euro-Canadian values must be considered as much a contested territory as the land itself. As Elijah Harper has commented, 'anyone can come into your home and use it, even abuse it, but they don't have the final authority, the moral authority over the used space.'[9]

We must come to terms with how design has been an integral part of the colonial project.

---

[4]   Sack, Robert David. 1986. 'Human Territoriality - Its Theory and History'. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. P.62.
[5]   '… contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded'. In: Said, Edward W. 1993. 'ibid'. P.79.
[6]   Lawrence, Roderick J. 1987. 'What Makes a House a Home'. In: 'Environment & Behaviour', Vol.19 No.2. P.155.
[7]   'Classified', i.e. when we say that anything in an area or room is ours, or off limits to you, we are classifying or assigning things to a category such as 'ours' or 'not yours'. 'Communicated', i.e. it requires a marker or sign, a boundary. This may be only in symbolic form that combines direction in a space and a statement about possession. 'Enforced', i.e. the physical or legislative control of resources or things. In: Sack, Robert David, 1986. 'ibid'.
[8]   As defined by Gaston Bachelard in 'The Poetics of Space'. Beacon Press, Boston.
[9]   Scott, Patrick. 2002. Personal communication.

Conclusion: *Looking Forward*

Traditional knowledge as a dynamic tool that helps shape our relationship with the environment in today's world. If ideas from such ways of knowing are combined with a contemporary collaborative design practice the result could be design that generates social, economic and environmental sustainability in northern communities. Therefore:

- How do we evolve the recessary cross-disciplinary dialogue between indigenous knowledge and contemporary design practice to develop an effective relationship between contemporary design and the needs of northern communities?

- Can design be an intermediary between ways of knowing to facilitate a fair and inclusive discussion about our environment?

- Can design work with communities to create innovative and sustainable hybrid design applications that nurture cultural continuity, community wellness and self-determination?

- How do we Indigenize design?