# NEW GEOGRAPHIES 08

## Nine Islands: Matters around Architecture

Neyran Turan

Strata of the world is a jumbled museum. —Robert Smithson, *Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects* (1968)

Buildings are the very reverse of rocks. They are absolutely in our power, both the species and the situation; and hence arises the excess in which they often abound. —Thomas Whately, *Observations on Modern Gardening* (1770)

In 1972, Architectural Design published an article on the recently built, 50-story One Shell Plaza in Houston, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. The editors described in detail the lavish materials incorporated in the building, which came from every part of the planet and included primavera mahogany from Guatemala, Italian travertine quarried near Rome, and Persian walnut from Iran. They criticized the building's use of such rare and expensive materials as irresponsible in light of the "increasing worldwide concern over the use and conservation of the earth's natural resources." One material drew particular scrutiny: real leather, used to sheathe the nine-foot-tall walls of the building's 26 elevator cabs. "The architects," the article reported, "wanted no seams or joints horizontally so had to search the world for nine-foot cows"—the largest raised at the time.<sup>01</sup>

In the context of the widespread critique of late modernism and the emerging environmentalism of the 1970s, the tone of this article is not surprising. More striking are the specific connections the article portrays between architectural materiality and resource geographies. How do we understand the materials of architecture in relation to resources today? For some, resources are natural and thus need to be preserved and protected. For others, resources are systemic and thus need to be managed and maintained. In the context of the new geological epoch posited by the Anthropocene, can we conceptualize resources-in this case, materials around architecture-not as merely natural or systemic but geological and geographic? If discussions around materiality in architecture and urbanism usually focus on performance in relation to the material conditions of the building or the city with an instrumental or managerial tone, might a conceptualization of the material as raw matter-both with its (wider) geographic and (deeper) geologic dimensions-bring a new conception of materiality for architecture?02

## **Geologic and Aesthetic**

When considering material as matter and resource, the evident historical relationship between the geological and the aesthetic provides important clues. In his book *Romantic Rocks*, literary theorist Noah Heringman shows how the

development of the discipline of geology in the Romantic era created a very specific "aesthetic geology," a material and aesthetic appreciation of rocks. To the Romantics, the formlessness of rock compositions dramatized the recalcitrance of raw matter and triggered associations between the Picturesque and geology.03 Similarly, in his book Romantic Landscapes: Geology and Its Cultural Influence in Britain, 1765-1835, Dennis R. Dean points to the unseparated condition of the arts and sciences in the 18th century and demonstrates how the geological developments of the era closely related to that of the Picturesque. More specifically, contrary to seeing the Picturesque as a direct consequence of the enclosure movement in England (the prevailing interpretation), Dean reveals that the "Picturesque was itself a kind of enclosure movement since it endeavored to reduce problems caused by an awareness of geological forces to pictorial dimension."04 While proposing the Sublime, the Picturesque, and the Geological as three major classifications of the Romantic landscape, Dean sees geological theories as aesthetic constructs in themselves:

By reducing space to manageable "views," the Picturesque bounds, frames, and subdues its potential energy...In general, the Sublime recognizes and delights in present (or latent) force; the Picturesque seeks to deny or contain it; and the Geological stresses the roles of natural forces through time ... Romantic geological theories are rational attempts to discover origins and processes of the inanimate world—scientific endeavor as it was then understood—but they are also ... aesthetic constructs designed to affirm a particular version of the geocosm.<sup>05</sup>

What is particularly striking about both Heringman's and Dean's affirmations on the relationship between the geological and the aesthetic is the fact that it was not only that late 18th- and 19th-century landscape painting was affected by the developments in geology but that geology itself was also affected by art and aesthetics. Art historian Marcia Pointon sheds light on this point by exposing the conceptual alliance between geologists and landscape painters, especially during the 19th century. She argues that, while both groups shared a strong interest in developing a new visual language for registering geological features, each also favored imagination over the empiricism and accuracy of topographers:

Since the accurate recording of features of the landscape without improvement or embroidery was essential to the geologist . . . one might reasonably expect the empirical tradition of the topographer to have had the greatest influence on the development of landscape painting in the nineteenth century, the period when geology becomes a science of major importance . . . But the topographical artists, whose main tasks had been antiquarian or military (the recording of ancient buildings, harbors and coastlines) used an outline technique which was not well suited to the needs of the geologists . . . Thus, on one level, the growing interest in geology in the 19th century was readily absorbed into an existing tradition remote from topography; and the ground was prepared for an alliance between landscape painting and geology which would operate as much through the imagination as through empiricism.<sup>96</sup>

Pointon's analysis is even more noteworthy when one considers the much-preferred emphasis on empirical research and "evidence" within the design disciplines today, in discussions of environment, landscape, and territory. How can we talk about similar kinds of interactions between aesthetic imagination and the new geological age of the Anthropocene when it comes to understanding material both as resource and recalcitrance of raw matter? Rather than limiting the role of the Anthropocene for design merely to a visualization problem (empirical research of data) or to an issue of mastering or solving (righteous scenario planning or environmental engineering of data and performance), might we see it as an opportunity to prompt renewed relationships between the material and the representational?

As an alternative to relying on prescriptive efficiency measures, one could instead see an emerging body of speculation in the field of eco-criticism and history that understands environment in its temporal and spatial "longview"-that is, within a longer span of time and larger span of earth, offering an important, expanded interpretation of our relationship to the earth as humans. "To call human beings geological agents," as historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, "is to scale up our imagination of the human."<sup>07</sup> As "the distinction between human and natural histories-much of which had been preserved even in environmental histories that saw the two entities in interaction-has begun to collapse," he writes, "it is no longer a question simply of man having an interactive relation with nature" but rather of humans as a "force of nature in the geological sense."08 Here, one thinks for instance of Timothy Morton's "hyperobjects," which depict environment both within a temporal and spatial long-view; environment as the compilation of immense objects that are vastly spread out in time and space relative to humans. Morton writes:

Capitalism is a boiling whirlwind of impermanence. It reveals how things are always shifting and changing. But, it isn't the ultimate horizon of meaning . . . Materials from humble Styrofoam to terrifying plutonium will far outlast current social and biological forms. We are talking about hundreds and thousands of years. Five hundred years from now, polystyrene objects such as cups and takeout boxes will still exist. Humans have manufactured materials that are already beyond the normal scope of our comprehension . . . Plutonium will be around for far longer than all of recorded human "history" so far. If you want a monument, look around you.<sup>09</sup>

Additionally, from historians Jo Guldi and David Armitage's critique of short-termism in historical studies and call for a new conception of the longue durée in their book History Manifesto (2014), to media theorist Jussi Parikka's geological studies of media-which builds an alternative media theoretical lineage for materials, metals, chemistry, and wasterecent explorations similarly attempt an intellectual shift in our understanding toward a longer span of time as well as a larger and deeper span of earth.<sup>10</sup> The raw materials of the earth, Parikka writes, "articulate the high-technical and lowpaid culture of digitality. They also provide an alternative materialism for the geophysical media age."11 While understanding environment in its temporal and spatial long view, these explorations offer alternative future possibilities for criticality and speculation for building unconventional relationships between the politics and aesthetics of materiality for design disciplines.

## **Nine Islands**

The *Nine Islands: Matters around Architecture* project aims to start such alternative conversations about materiality by focusing on nine expensive building materials. From the recalcitrance of a particular raw matter and its extraction from a specific geographic location, to its processing, transportation, and construction into a desired finished effect in a building, to its demolition and waste, the project aims to open future dialogues in relation to the spatial and temporal long span of architectural materiality.<sup>12</sup> By emphasizing the contrast between the raw and the finished, the project renders architecture's direct relationship with resource geographies visible.

The project consists of an archipelago of nine islands, each of which is represented through an axonometric drawing. Each island is made from a particular, lavish building material (certain types of leather, marble, wood, glass, travertine, gold, limestone, steel, granite, and so on). The upper portion of each island consists of an archetypical building form, achieved through the elementary extrusion of primitive shapes. In opposition to this upper part of the island, the lower part of each consists of a formless landmass, from which the raw matter is extracted (quarry for the marble, tree for the wood, cows for the leather, and so forth).

Opposite page: Neyran Turan, Nine Islands: Matters around Architecture.





Drawing 5 from NEMESTUDIO'S Architectural League Prize Installation, June 2016.

Accordingly, by juxtaposing the finished surfaces and archaic extrusions of typologically simplified monuments at the top with the vulgar formlessness of the naked landmasses below, each island dramatizes the recalcitrance of a particular raw matter as an object. This juxtaposition of monument and landmass works through two registers: first, the collapse of the finished and the raw aims to call attention to the underconceptualized space in between; second, by suspending the archetypical slow time of architecture (the extended timespan of a given typology) and the slow time of geology in the objective space of the axonometric, the project presents the "reverse obsolescence" of each island as a resource ruin.<sup>13</sup>

Aiming to couple an inquiry of matter in architecture with its seeming opposites—representation, monumentality, and composition—Nine Islands poses an alternative conception of materialism within the discipline. In an era when humans are described as "geological agents,"<sup>14</sup> architecture is both a background and a measure against which the world might be read. Like architecture then, Nine Islands represents the world back to itself. The author would like to acknowledge and thank David Richmond and Patrick Daurio for all of their help with the Nine Islands project.

- **01**. "One Shell Plaza: Tallest Building West of the Mississippi," *Architectural Design* 42, no. 1 (January 1972): 22.
- 02. For further elaborations on these questions in the context of climate change, see Neyran Turan, "Measure for the Anthropocene," in *Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary*, ed. James Graham et al. (New York and Zurich: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City Lars Müller Publishers, 2016), 120–128. See also Neyran Turan, "How Do Geographic Objects Perform?," *ARPA*, vol. 3, *Performance* (2015), http://www.arpajournal.net/how-do-geographic-objects-perform.
- Noah Heringman, Romantic Rocks: Aesthetic Geology (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).
- 04. Dennis R. Dean, Romantic Landscapes: Geology and Its Cultural Influence in Britain, 1765–1835 (Ann Arbor: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 2007), 62.
- 05. Ibid., 66.
- 06. Marcia Pointon, "Geology and Landscape Painting in Nineteenth-century England," in *Images of the Earth: Essays in* the History of Environmental Sciences, ed. Ludmilla Jordanova and Roy Porter (Oxford: Alden Press), 95–96. For a similar discussion in the American context, see

Rebecca Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature: Geology and American Landscape Painting*, 1825–1875 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

- Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Enquiry* 35 (2009): 206.
- 08. Ibid, 207.
- 09. Timothy Morton, *Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 130–31.
- Jussi Parikka, *The Anthrobscene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 11. Jussi Parikka, The Anthrobscene, 98.
- 12. The luxury or economy embedded in any particular material is more complex than simply calculating a unit cost, especially if one factors in embodied energy and embodied carbon in relation to the lifecycle of construction materials. Consider concrete, for example. As the most widely used building material, concrete might not make it into the list of most expensive building materials, on first inspection. However, concrete is a mixture of the constituent materials cement, sand, aggregate, and other additives such as plasticizers. The processing and transportation of some of these materials (cement and aggregates, for instance) contribute substantially to the cost of concrete, as well as its energy and carbon

impacts. See G. P. Hammond and C. I. Jones, "Embodied Energy and Carbon in Construction Materials," *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers*—Energy 161, no. 2 (2008): 87–98.

- 13. Borrowing from Vladimir Nabokov's observation that, "the future is but the obsolete in reverse," in his article "The Monuments of Passaic" from 1967, Robert Smithson used the phrase "ruins in reverse" to refer to the construction sites of the suburban developments in Passaic, which were going to be eventually built. He wrote: "This is the opposite of the "romantic ruin" because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built." Emphases in original. Robert Smithson, "The Monuments of Passaic," Artforum (December 1967): 54. For Smithson's reference to Nabokov, see his "Entropy and the New Monuments," Artforum (June 1966): 26-31.
- 14. B. Wilkinson, "Humans as Geologic Agents: A Deep-Time Perspective," Geology 33, no. 3 (2005): 161–64. Also see Peter Baccini and Paul H. Brunner, Metabolism of the Anthroposphere: Analysis, Evaluation, Design (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

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