

A Ten Point Guide to Assemblage

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one

The notion of assemblage has been used in a number of disciplines to describe a collection of different types of objects and relations that act on, and with, each other to form a dynamic arrangement or organization of material conditions. In archeology, for instance, assemblage identifies a collection of diverse things unearthed by a dig, that 'hang together' not only through their having been discovered on the same strata, but through their expression of some aspect of a life (or lives) that has brought the specific things together in the first place. Bowls, cups, bones, figurines etc express a certain condition of everyday life-ness in pre-Columbian Mexico. In geology, assemblage refers to 'a group of fossils that, appearing together, characterize a particular stratum' (Wise 2005: 77). Wise notes that there is a contingency to the arrangement of fossils that might be discovered on a stratum, but that it is not random, as only certain animals existed in that form in that location at that time. The fossils constitute a *group* and express a certain *character*. In art of the 20th century the word assemblage is a term associated with collage, Dada and other avant-garde or pop art styles, designating works assembled out of diverse objects (like Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel and Jean Arp's *Trousse d'un Da*, an assemblage of driftwood, paint and found board).

two

Landscape architects are most likely to have come across the word assemblage with reference to ecology, however, where it refers to a biological community of organisms living in a localized area of habitat. (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-3404800185/biological-community.html>). All animals and plants associate themselves with particular combinations of environmental conditions. In so doing they form part of a biological community that includes plant, animal, bird, reptile and insect species as well as themselves. A biotic community is an assemblage of organisms living together and interacting. A lizard assemblage (say) is a sub-unit of such a community. Biotic communities and their component assemblages are without rank and scale. A reptilian assemblage, for instance, could be as small as a dead log, or it could be the entire forest floor. It could even be the rainforest itself. (Heatwole and Taylor 1987: 185). Important aspects of ecological assemblages are the numbers and kinds of species they contain, and how these structural characteristics change in space and time in relation to environmental conditions. Different lizard species can comprise an assemblage: at any one location it is possible to identify an assemblage that contains half a dozen species of lizard. The nature of the habitat is an important determinant of assemblage structure. The more diverse the vegetation, and the more complex the geometry of the habitat, the greater the number of spatial niches available, and the greater the species richness that is possible.

three

The idea of assemblage has been extended and enriched through the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Their work has particular appeal to landscape architects for four reasons:

- a) The French term *agencement* (often translated as assemblage) does not refer to a static condition. It refers to a 'putting together' or 'laying out,' or 'fitting.' An *agencement* is not so much an arrangement or organization as a *process* of arranging, organizing, fitting together.
- b) Assemblages create territories. They make the milieux in which they thrive. These milieux are much more than spaces, but involve a sense of belonging to, and causing change within; they do something – stake a claim, express a relation or set of relations.
- c) Assemblages are as much about intensive qualities as they are about extensive qualities. That is to say, how something occurs is as important as what occurs. Not just: the lizard ate the insect, but a lizard-insect event occurred when the sun was at its highest and the wind was in the west. Or, in order to maximize heat gain the lizard perches on a twig in the morning and lies flat on a rock in the afternoon.

- d) Assemblages are discursive. They are systems of signs. They include discourses, words and meanings. 'Archeological assemblages are not just the things that are dug up and their qualities and relations, but the discursive assemblages through which the things, qualities and relations are expressed through nomenclature, jargon and the semiotics of the dig: the semiotic system that transforms a cup into a particular type of cup' (Wise: 80).

four

Human beings may participate in many assemblages at the same time. They may make new ones, transform existing ones, bending and twisting them into new conditions. Humans enter into an assemblage through a process of taking on the conditions that make it up. It's like going to stay with some relations for a few weeks. You take on their patterns of inhabitation, their slownesses and speeds, their directions and connections, their patterns of everyday life.

five

The components of an assemblage can be characterized according to their material content, their expressive content, and the processes in which they become involved. A landscape assemblage might be composed in the following way:

Material components: soil, sunlight, trees, animals, humans etc

Expressive components: forms, textures, colors, habits, trajectories of the material components

Process components: food chains, adaptive traits, microclimatic requirements etc that maintain the components and their relationships, and thus the viability of the assemblage.

Each of these components is subject to disturbance. For instance, a specific terrain's soil profile can be disturbed by flooding and the resultant sedimentation or erosion; climate change can affect the range of species that are involved in an assemblage; an exotic species can enter an assemblage of native species and redistribute its structural characteristics. Disturbance gives rise to the recombination or reformulation of an assemblage by eliminating, replacing, or relocating relationships. Components can be unplugged from one assemblage and plugged into another without losing their identity.

six

The relationship between an assemblage and its components is nonlinear. Assemblages are formed and affected by the populations and elements of lower-level assemblages, but may also act back upon these components, causing adaptive strategies to occur. An assemblage may therefore be regarded as emergent.

seven

Landscape architects develop, transform and create assemblages. They do this by gathering, composing, redistributing, emphasizing and enhancing existing material, expressive and processual components.

Included in this orchestration are human and nonhuman elements. As described in the Ten Point Guide to Natureculture, landscape architects may develop assemblages without prejudicing or privileging components, with the objective of developing collectives of human and nonhuman objects and relations – with the objective, that is, of creating interactive, democratic ecologies of becoming.

eight

What is critical is that landscape architects assemble elements in such a way as to create a world in which it is possible for all components of the assemblage, human and nonhuman, to engender their own possibilities of existence – to become what they may become (see the Ten Point Guide to Difference). Rocks, trees, insects, birds, animals and humans are regarded as having in common a fit relation to an assemblage that continually evolves through its encounters with disturbance.

nine

The evolution of an assemblage includes the previously-mentioned discursive component in the ongoing rearrangement of connections. The discursive element refers to the way in which the assemblage enters into discourse: how it is described, framed, allocated meaning. For instance, a landscape condition such as a small urban park, which assembles a wide range of species and their interactions (birds and bread; squirrels and spilled grain; residents in summer shade feeding birds and watching squirrels) will feature in a community discussion about housing development. Future states of the assemblage and its components may hinge on the outcome of this discussion. Whole 'regimes of signs' will affect this outcome. These signs may have to do with the evaluation of the terrain with respect to different criteria: tidiness, economic inputs and outputs (maintenance, use as a concession site), inhabitation by homeless people, and so on. These signs are important components of the assemblage and should be taken into account by the landscape architect.

ten

Landscape assemblages include but are not limited to ecological assemblages. The heterogeneous objects that enter into relations with one another include social objects, events, signs and utterances ("That dirty / beautiful place!") along with the physical ones. Deleuze talks about assemblages having lines, like paintings. 'There are all kinds of lines. Some lines are segments, or segmented, some lines get caught in a rut, or disappear into "black holes"; some are destructive, sketching death; and some lines are vital and creative. These creative lines open up an assemblage rather than close it down' (quoted on the blog Larval Subjects). Some forms of discussion, for instance, are generative (the park is redesigned and increases in size). Other forms of engagement suck all discussion into their orbit, preventing it from moving on. Working with open systems and emergent properties, landscape architects are concerned with assemblage-formation. One of the main tasks facing landscape architects who create and maintain landscape assemblages is to prevent them from being pulled into black holes by components that do not 'fit' properly.

References

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