PAPAHĀNAUMOKUĀKEA

Dark Ecology, Strange Toys, and the Acceleration of Environmental Activism

Mark Foster Gage with Ryan Wilson

[Studio site: Na Pali coastline, Kaua‘i Hawaii]

“To disobey in order to take action is the byword of all creative spirits. The history of human progress amounts to a series of Prometheus acts. But autonomy is also attained in the daily workings of individual lives by means of many small Prometheus disobediences, at once clever, well thought out, and patiently pursued, so subtle at times as to avoid punishment entirely.” — Gaston Bachelard, “Fragments of a Poetics of Fire”

In the little gaps between disasters, might as well try to have fun.” — Lionel Shriver, The Mandibles: A Family

This is the second advanced studio in a series that explores the relationship between architecture and the frequently shifting ecologies of coastal boundaries through the design of a single building. The first studio and trip was for a research and exhibition facility to house the Mediterranean Science Commission, part of the Musée Océanographique in Monaco-Ville, Monaco. The Fall 2016 studio will be for a related program—this time for Papahānaumokuākea, the largest marine conservation area in the United States, a UNESCO world heritage site, and as of 2006 a designated U.S. National Monument—located northwest of the westernmost and most remote Hawai‘ian Island of Kaua‘i. Papahānaumokuākea is massive—the size of Germany—and is geologically and ecologically unique in the world, covering roughly 140,000 square miles of reefs, atolls, shallows and deep sea in the Pacific Ocean, and containing forms of life found nowhere else on earth. Despite being larger than all of America’s National Parks combined, it is almost entirely unknown to the public at large. While in 2015 Yellowstone National Park received 3.8 million visitors, Papahanaumokuaka, which is forty times larger, received less than 500. This is largely a problem of access, as the only visitor center to this (literal) national treasure is the Mokupāpapa Discovery Center, currently located 455 miles to the southeast of Papahānaumokuākea on the distant main island of Hawai‘i. The project for this studio will be to consolidate existing, and currently vastly dispersed, visitor, exhibition, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) research functions related to Papahānaumokuākea, into a single building or small complex of buildings to be located on the pristine and resplendent Na Pali coast of the Island of Kaua‘i—the only landmass in Hawai‘i from which Papahānaumokuākea is visible or regularly accessible.
The fundamental problem will be to, conceptually or perhaps even literally, weave the extremely biodiverse terrestrial and marine ecologies of Na Pali and Papahanaumokuakea with what is almost always seen to be as an invasive and damaging one—that of humans. From these ingredients students will aim to produce new prototypes for how architecture can begin to address the redefined ecologies of the emerging 21st century. This conflict raises not only architectural but existential questions of the nature of nature, contemporary understandings of “nature” and “ecology” and the ontological status of being. Accordingly students will be asked to consider their project within the context of contemporary philosophical positions including Timothy Morton’s theories of Dark Ecology and Ecognosis, as well as those of Accelerationism, Catastrophism and speculations on the Anthropocene. From these positions students will be imagining new possibilities for how architecture can be ecologically radicalized and activist in ways above and beyond the isolated performance of single “green” building - or the standard script that the presence of humans is inherently “un” natural. In doing so the studio seeks to develop perhaps sneaker, more sophisticated means of neo-environmental thinking that move beyond using recycled blue jeans as insulation, holding sharped-drawn picket signs, and steering inflatable boats in front of flying harpoons.

While philosophical engagements in architecture typically prompt images of dry readings, and vague conversations or séances with dead white men, this studio will flip this particular script and engage this material through what Morton describes as the philosophical “Realm of Toys.” Instead of assuming the students singular designs need necessary and absurdly bear the weight of the world’s entire ethical response to questions of architecture, ecology and boundaries, students will operate under the assumption that, in Morton’s words, “We need a politics that includes what appears least political – laughter, the playful, even the silly. We need a multiplicity of different political systems. We need to think of them as toylike: playful and half-broken things that connect humans and nonhumans with one another. We can never get it perfect. There is no final, correct form that isn’t a toy. There is no one toy to rule them all……Making toys would include meaningful collaborations between the arts, the humanities, and engineering, rather than the mutual suspicion that reigns today.” By temporarily removing the typical gravitas associated with human ecological destruction and that architecture alone must stop the eventual extinction of the human race in it’s entirety-- students will be freer to pursue perhaps unconsidered trajectories of thinking not normally associated with either architectural or ecological thought.

In order to think more freely, students will be stripping away the baggage of expected architectural convention, or what Rayner Banham describes as our “operational lore,” – thereby eliminating assumptions of what is assumed to be a “successful” student architectural project today. Students will still be designing a building, but will not be required to analyze anything, or produce arrow-laden diagrams of sun angles, wind patterns, or vector line overlays of migrating orca or bird patterns, -- and there will definitely be no bamboo, recycled blue jeans or token use of solar panels. Instead of aiming to make a merely sustainable building, students will aim to produce perhaps small (in that sense toy-like) but actual, intellectual and architectural contributions that help our profession to address the larger-scale questions of ecological boundaries, and their possible redefinition, on which the studio is predicated—those of land/sea, human/nonhuman, natural/artificial, and possibly even moral questions right and wrong. This makes the studio inherently political, which we will be discussing in terms of the upcoming presidential election, where the Republican and Democratic candidates have so clearly staked out such clear dystopian (Republican) vs. utopian (Democratic) visions— both so critical to positioning the debates of contemporary ecological thought. All material read or discussed in the course will have been written in the past five years-all by living figures. The studio will capitalize on the actual presence of many of these figures including Jacques Ranciere, Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, and Elaine Scarry -- all visiting the school as part of the “Aesthetic Activism” symposium organized by Mark Gage from October 13-15.

Students will travel to the Island of Kaua’i, the most remote, least developed, and hardest to reach of the Hawaiian Islands. While staying in the village of Kapa’a the studio will take a series of day trips to visit various research and visitor facilities and will study coastal and geological conditions of the coastline via the Na Pali, Hanalei, Tunnels, Poipu, Kahuna, and Mahaulepu beaches. The trip will also entail a stay on the main Island of Hawai’i where students will visit the existing Papahanaumokuakea-focused NOAA Mokupāpapa Center, as well as investigate another type of ecological boundary- that of an active volcano. The studio will visit the Hawai’i Volcano National Park and observe the ecological interplay between the ocean, land, and frequent destruction and resurrection of life along the edges of the, still active, lava fields of Kīlauea. As this particular exotic natural boundary can be considered the world’s most intensified example
of the fundamental questions of the studio, it will be used to prompt a series of peripatetic discussions during the trip—
the walking discussion format used by Aristotle and his students on the shorelines of Greece, albeit for our studio,
barefoot and along the pristine white sand beaches of Kaua`i.

The exact studio site will be individually determined by students, pending their visits to the candidate coastal and beach
areas. The building or complex may be located in the dramatic cliff structures of Na Pali, straddling the coastline, or
extending into or even partially under the water for marine access. As Papahānaumokuākea is, itself, a new kind of
ecological monument, students may, but will not be required to, investigate new research and access technologies that
link the marine site with the terrestrial building designed to observe, document, research and represent it—through the
integration of docking facilities for air, surface and underwater research drones, electric boats, robotic submersibles, and
satellite underwater modules for human occupation. The final program development and site parameters will be
emerging from the student’s individual positions regarding the philosophical material of the studio, and pending the
studio visit to the sites. The building program is initially set at roughly 100,000 sq. ft of wet and dry research
laboratories, a marine visitor’s center, a research library, administrative offices, dining spaces, conference and meeting
areas, and aquatic access docking ports—although that will likely be altered by each student after the studio trip. Thus
each project in the studio will be not only individually developed, but significantly different in their philosophical
assumptions, program, size, relationship to the site and formal ambitions. In short, the studio will be extremely
biodiverse.