
FOOD IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: FIELD NOTES IN ACTION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The question of *how can we or should we* envision human agency in the current era is of high relevance in the evolving Landscape Architecture discipline. What frameworks do we use to inform modes of engagement and how can we use them to engage values in the co-production of spaces?

This paper proposes a 12-year project-based report on several food related curatorial entanglements with larger artistic, cultural, environmental, and place-based subjects within the international discourse of the Anthropocene project (2012-2022 House of World Cultures Berlin.) Specifically, it scopes from Berlin to the Mississippi River utilizing engaged action research and social practices in spatial design, public engagement, and education. Projects conceptually and materially use food and botanicals as inquiries of landscape relations, and agents of action, by situating them in spaces of co-production. The temporal and experiential nature of this work leads to somewhat ephemeral results that are archived through image, narration, production of physical objects, preservation of natural subjects such as seeds, and installations. Key outcomes are a reflection on how food can create open ended situations of sharing and relational experiences that lead human agency to foster deeper connection and care for our environment.

The aim of this paper is to contribute a body of reference for food related projects situated within the field of landscape architecture that push the expectations of visual representation, master planning, and community engagement. Borrowing from the artistic practice of relational design, these projects invite supplemental methods that cultivate the practice of landscape architecture to be more interactive and heuristic. Engaging social practices present opportunities to build and repair human relations with the world around us and opportunity to generate more agency. In this way, we may continue to expand the discipline of landscape architecture as a participatory practice that responds to unfolding circumstances.

Keywords

Relational and Social Practice, Action Research, Food Systems, Anthropece

1 INTRODUCTION

Food has always been an expression of how humans form relationship with the land. The connection between food systems and human consumption patterns with their impact on shaping the landscape has long been evident. "Landscape and food are both the most vital and necessary topics, as the first comprises the total environment that sustains us physically, culturally, and emotionally, while the second is both the necessary fuel for our existence and the symbolic center of our metaphoric lives". (Waterman and Zeunert 2018) Food is not just something we consume; food is something that occupies space. At all scales, food both influences the design of a place and thus the development of urban landscapes and in turn influences by it (Parham and Abelman 2018). Every organism's food is a manifestation of its interaction with its environment.

Although there has been longstanding attention to food within the design practice it is still categorically somewhat of an outsider in both landscape architecture education and professional practice. There is a building academic field of food studies in anthropology, sociology, public health, environmental sciences, geography and cultural studies which have contributed to the understanding of food in relation to human existence. The literature review in Architecture points to some recent examples of food discussion in the design practice including Eating Architecture (2006) Culinary Lessons: The Space of Food (SAC Journal 4 2016) The Routledge Handbook of Landscape and Food (2018) Food and the City (Dunbarton Oaks 2015) and Food Urbanism: Typologies, Strategies, Case Studies (Birkhauser 2020) among others.

In professional practice, landscape architects see their skills being put to use in an increasing amount of integration of food systems into public design, green spaces, educational farms, urban agriculture, private kitchen gardens, & orchards. In 2005, Landscape Architecture Magazine cites examples of urban farming projects led by landscape architects in Toronto, Ontario and Rochester, New York as part of a growing urban agriculture movement. The skills of representation, visualization, and master planning continue to be useful to community groups looking to raise resources improve partnerships and move towards implementation of these projects. It is also important to note the intersection of this kind of food systems work in urban planning and design which has taken a more comprehensive and strategic approach linking regional and local systems (Kaufman, Pothukuchi 2007) and became a working division of the American Planning Association in 2018. Professionally these applications may reach limitations when they lean into conceptual frameworks and assessments that offer top-down directives for institutional funding and policy structures but few actional objectives for partner engagement, especially at the grassroots and individual level.

This paper aims to contribute a body of reference for food related projects situated within the field of landscape architecture that push further expectations of visual representation, master planning, and community engagement. Specifically, it builds from examples of performative social practice that uses food as subject in relation to *The Anthropocene Project*, a platform for the exploration of the felt urgencies of our time directed by the Berlin based House of World Cultures (HKW) from 2013-2022. The work is a reflection on how food can create open ended situations of sharing and community and relational experiences that lead to human agency and foster deeper connection and care for our environment.

1.1 Research objectives

This paper is a reflection of a body of work from 2013-2024 and is organized as "Field Notes" rather than following a prescribed research design. It suggests that a research strategy can be conceptual and shaped by the heuristic, "finding out" of an epistemological position as it relates to the body of work (Deming & Swaffield p.3).

The objective of this paper is twofold. The first is to expand the field of Landscape Architect to consider more emergent relational design situations as legitimate forms of practice that have the ability to influence human agency. Secondary is to highlight specifically the role of food as a subject of interrogation to explore landscape complexities. The objectives aim to challenge and expand traditional perceptions and methods within the field by incorporating action research and relational design practices.

I argue that the visibility of Anthropocene rhetoric linked to the role of food in our lives is an opportunity to identify food as a relational approach to generating agency. Landscape design as actionable social

practice offers such a tool for guiding a deeper relational understanding between food, the environment and its inhabitants. Thus eschewing the tension generated by the visual culture dominated by Anthropocene narratives.

1.2 Food in the anthropocene

After a debate spanning nearly 15 years, as of March 2024, the scientific proposal to declare the Anthropocene as the start of a new geologic new epoch was officially rejected (International Union of Geological Sciences. (2024). *The Anthropocene*.

https://www.iugs.org/_files/ugd/f1fc07_40d1a7ed58de458c9f8f24de5e739663.pdf?index=true). A committee of scholars could not find agreement on when it began. Despite the rejection, the term Anthropocene seems likely to persevere, possibly as a boundary event rather than an epoch, at least for now. In terms of popular discourse, the term may live on as more of a metaphor that mildly reminds humanity of its impact on the planet and more rigorously embodies the cause and effect of the widespread idea that the planet is under innumerable stresses headed towards dangerous futures. In other words, the Anthropocene is interchangeable with the climate crisis we find ourselves in. There is no question that passionate debates will continue in the arts and sciences about how to situate our time in the narrative arc of earth history.

The relationships between humans and food has progressed for some 300,000 years. As the population swells, there is hardly any denying that proof of human impact on the earth can be seen and felt through our most daily consumption patterns of food. The agricultural land area today is approximately 38 percent of the global land surface, about one-third cropland, and remaining two-thirds pasture for grazing livestock. (FAO Statistics Worldwide <https://www.fao.org/sustainability/news/detail/en/c/1274219/>). At the expense of the ever-growing population, modern society and global economies operate in ways that separate and conceal the systems that produce our food – disconnecting us from the negative externalities in terms of food production and consumption. We are disconnected from the reality that how we eat impacts the earth and contributes to climate change. We are disconnected from the land.

Food production has been identified as one of the main drivers of the climate crisis. The global assessment, *Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT- Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems*, was released in 2019 offering strategies for global transformation on how the world will continue to feed healthy diets to its growing population by 2050.

As stated in the report: “Global food production threatens climate stability and ecosystem resilience. It constitutes the single largest driver of environmental degradation and transgression of planetary boundaries. Taken together the outcome is dire. A radical transformation of the global food system is urgently needed. Without action, the world risks failing to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement.” (Johan Rockström, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research & Stockholm Resilience Centre 2019)

The soon to be released EAT Lancet 2.0 report (2024) demonstrates just how imperative this ongoing effort is. The diplomatic report suggests, yes! it is possible to change and necessary but will require the adoption of a “planetary health diet” and a focus on social justice and social food system goals.

The environment is not the only expense of the industrialized food system. As humans get more disconnected from the food systems that produce our food, we lose our connection to the land. During the first wave of the US farm crisis, writer, farmer and cultural critic Wendell Berry wrote that Agriculture is (in) a crisis of *culture*. He recognized that food as a cultural product cannot be produced by technology alone and requires farmers, producers, land and the supporting biodiversity of non-human relations to nurture this culture. (The Unsettling of America 1977) One key question of sustainability is how then do we protect and foster values for the land and producers our food? I argue that food, and the systems that produce it offer us a relatable material link to the challenges of our time, which can be a useful space to work out the here and now of landscape inquiry. The more connected one is to their environment, the more one can notice things changing.

1.3 Representing the anthropocene beyond the Visual

One way to represent the unfolding ideas of the Anthropocene is that the concept of nature as we know it is something that belongs to the past. The Anthropocene is not merely descriptive, it is a social imagery as Heather Davis & Etienne Turpin elaborate in *Art and the Anthropocene* (2015).

The Anthropocene Project, directed by HKW in Berlin was a global nine-year project from 2013-2022 that became a platform to explore experimental arrangements and ways of being that address and challenge the idea of the Anthropocene (HKW is *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* in German, translated as *House of World Cultures* in English). The scope of the project served a global audience to explore how art and science meet while producing curricular material, a multitude of exhibitions, installations, conferences, workshops, performances, and publications. Today it is represented by the global network of the *Anthropocene Commons*. The growing body of work suggest an expanding discourse that responds to the urgency of our time. As we encounter the sixth mass extinction in earth's history the shameful reality of human centric activity is unfolding around us in forms of violence, extraction, migration, and control, challenging us not to look away. These forces have become so rife in daily life on this planet that there is a palpable emergence of felt urgency that is erupting in all forms of instability around us.

The climate activism network, the Extinction Rebellion proclaims "This is an emergency! Life on earth is in crisis. Our climate is changing faster than scientists predicted and the stakes are high...We have a moral duty to take action – whatever our politics." (<https://rebellion.global/>)

Scholar Donna Haraway writes about generating agency and action in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), suggesting two reasons that cause folks to stick their heads in the sand and ignore the pressures of the moment; first, an over trusting faith that technology will save us and second, that it's simply too late. These deeply cynical approaches are pervasive and stagnate change. Yet there is another side to the coin that other folks gravitate towards- using the urgencies to confront reality as a call to action "making collaborations and oddkin, that is we require each other in unexpected collaborations and hot compost piles" (p.4).

As we navigate the complexity and entanglement of our lives on this planet on a daily basis- our agency is what we choose to engage with and what we choose to look away from. The narratives we perpetuate and the imagery we generate are our agency to reimagine futures. In *Art and the Anthropocene* Davis and Turpin set out to present a well curated collection of examples of what it means for art to encounter the Anthropocene and how aesthetic practices can address social and political spheres that are being set in stone. As Claire Bishop explains in *Artificial Hells* (2012) art in its aesthetic and social practices offers alternative ways of thinking, of being and of the ideas, experiences, and possibilities that result from these practices. As educators in landscape architecture, we offer tools and thinking for students to develop a visual translation of the cultural zeitgeist. We can borrow some insight from the artistic practice.

Visualizing the complexity of the contemporary food system benefits from a kind of mind mapping exercise in which we can see the dynamic interplay of the material production of food in relation to time and space. In *Hungry City* (2008), Carolyn Steel lays out the underlying relationship between food and the formation of cities in a lesson on urban design history. Categorically teasing out the components of land, supply chain, market, kitchen, table and waste systems she demonstrates systemic relationships in spatial networks and the resulting issues at each stage of the food cycle. Eventually she makes way for Sitopia, the resulting sequel that expands beyond urban areas to explore more universal scales of food in relation to human experience.

The macro approach to conceptualizing and visualizing food systems is useful for systems work in both private and public sectors and often shows up in relation to policy, planning and intergovernmental cooperation. As a result, the American Planning Association has adopted Food Systems as one of its core professional areas. As landscape describes places as relationships and processes it presents a challenge of representing past present and future worlds at a multitude of scales. The many nested scales of food systems complexity often require independent visual design exploration.

In *Against the Anthropocene* (2017) T.J. Demos sets out to develop the idea that Anthropocene relies on visual imagery to perpetuate itself through a discursive framework related to image technologies- such as photographic, video based, satellite imaged, website delivered, and network dispersed. These compelling

mediums represent the expression of the idea so that “we might comprehend the present intersection of human culture and the environment that is remaking the world as we know it.” These images are so rife in our visually dominated world that they thread together a what has become a collective subconscious experience.

It is important to tease out the effect of the collective “we” who are responsible for contributing to a vision that perpetuates and makes us all complicit in its destructive project. It is the objectification of this imagery that creates a differentiated responsibility. For example, the effect can be felt from the initial circulation of *Earthrise*, a 1968 photograph taken of the earth from the moon by the crew of the NASA Apollo 8 mission and the subsequent *Blue Marble* photo from the 1972 Apollo 17 mission. These images, which today are universally known, were popularized by Stewart Brand through the circulation of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. It was the first-time humanity could visualize itself objectified as belonging to one planet. These powerful images came to catalyze an entire movement towards a global universalizing discourse about the planet. Yet critics of the Anthropocene point out that this “master reality” is in fact, an example of human blindness. The belief of a collective humanity does not address the complicated cause and effect of the changing planet that are unequally distributed to those who did not necessarily cause them.

As we unpack the power of visual aid in the Anthropocene, we should also include the work of landscape representation and the potential for relational social design practices. As a practice, landscape representation directly points to the relation of human activities in the landscape- especially as it contributes to the activity of shaping futures. Ideas about landscape, what they are and can be are commodified and purchased through the use of visual culture as much as anything else. How so should we teach responsibility for the dreams we weave and the visions we spin upon the world? How do we create pathways for agency, so we do not succumb to the paradigm of commodified imagination?

2 METHODS

The projects referenced are blended in methodology and suggest new avenues for the construction of knowledge as it relates to landscape architecture. Constructivist strategies tap into emergent social engagement practices.

Social engagement is an expanded field of relational practices less interested in aesthetic gallery production than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity. Actions often draw from performance, exchange, and process-oriented experiences in which emergent narratives are shared between collaborators. The artist is positioned as a co-producer with his or her collaborators. These tools may be used to effect social dynamics and emphasize participation, dialogue, and action (Thompson 2017). Social engagement practices share some intersectionality with the practice of landscape architecture design processes especially in regard to community-based design and work in the public sector.

Also utilized are subjective strategies using engaged action research (or transdisciplinary action research) to produce creative interventions. Action research is experimental, collaborative, and combines an interdisciplinary set of tools and skills, according to Deming & Swaffield. Action research produces new knowledge based on processes of direct engagement, cognition, and social change. Its motives are simultaneously *pragmatic* and *emancipatory*. As such, action research is one of the newest and most controversial of research strategies (Deming & Swaffield p.192). In some ways it references a postmodern research strategy in that the subjectivity of all experience, including the experiences of learning and knowing, is accepted and acknowledged as knowledge.

Methods applied in social engagement include the construction of situations, and shared experiences, including design of tools and systems, the gathering of materials and data through feedback and narrative building exercises. Some limitations to this kind of methodology are the temporal nature of the events that may or may not be replicable. Also, whether by public or private invitation, one may not always be able to precisely control the participant group. This is especially true in public space. In some cases, the recycling of participants through multiple events may steer the outcomes in specific ways.

3 RESULTS: FIELD NOTES

3.1 Metabolic Kitchen- raumlaborberlin January 2013

Context: The Metabolic Kitchen was a four-day production staged at HKW, during the opening of the Anthropocene Project from January 10-13, 2013. The HKW is a national center for contemporary art from non-European cultures. The Metabolic kitchen was conceived and operated by the award-winning social architecture group raumlaborberlin.

The kitchen was setup as a series of five architectural food stations connecting the exterior rooftop to the interior of the HKW. Station 00: Grill, Station 01: Mincing, Station 02 Steam, Station 03: Assembly, Station 04 Distribution. Each day presented a different menu in which each station contributed some action to produce a final product and incorporated the ingredients from the day before; Day 1: A whole roasted ox; Day 2: ground pizza; Day 3: beef broth with flädle (German pancake ribbons); Day 4: labskaus (a Northern German corned beef hash with beets).

Statement: “The kitchen looks at metabolism as the basis for all life on the planet. It happens all around, most of the time unnoticed. The kitchen looks at a range of contemporary recipes and slightly alters them, performatively introducing a metabolic step into the space. In the metabolic kitchen, we shift the focus away from the physical form of food to its experience. The metabolic dishes are served in a way that highlights the extra treatment they have undergone before being offered for consumption. In this way, the metabolic kitchen touches some aspects of the Anthropocene: humans (as part of nature), plants, animals and the machines (a fourth “population” on earth) are all integral parts of the life and death cycles that are inherent in food production. The metabolic kitchen takes this step.” (<https://raumlabor.net/the-metabolic-kitchen/>)

Engagement: Each station operated a stage in which the material (food) was altered performatively and reassembled. Conceptually, the project challenges the institutional space of HKW by presenting one of the most intimate and controlled interior spaces, the kitchen and therefore making the production and labor behind food visible. The metabolic organization decentralized the space and created a system of nodes in which the food circulated according to its place in the process. The ox, after roasting on a spit traveled indoors to become ground into a wet patty, then assembled into the likeness of a burger, served in a jar, eaten with a spoon. The following day, the ox bones were simmered into a broth and the remaining meat was pickled. The next day a soup was served with the consume and the final day a hash was assembled with the pickled meat. Every part of the animal was used.

The architectural structures provide a performative space in which the public can watch and interact with the flows of materials and energy of their food. Take for example the ox as a physical form of the embodied landscape and relationship to the field. The ox contains the sum total of all the material flows in its environment, the sun, the water, the grass, the microbes, etc. The metabolic step allows a slowing down of the process by which it becomes integrated into the human body and represents the production of knowledge through the experience of eating. Although we bring outside food materials into our homes every day to be consumed, it is rare to slow down enough to think of it as our potential to connect with the environmental conditions in which our food was produced.

It may seem contradictory to use a project about eating meat to foster deeper connection and care for the environment. However, part of the purpose of engaged action research and relational practice is to preserve contradictions and allow participants the agency to decide for themselves whether or not it is effective.

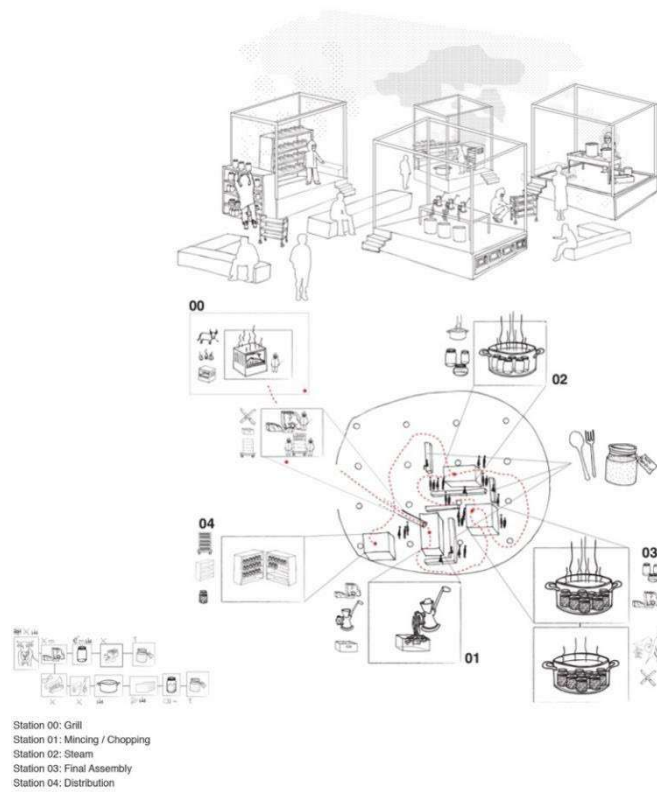


Figure 1. Diagram of Metabolic Kitchen (2013) raumlaborberlin. Permission granted from raumlaborberlin



Figure 2. Ox from Metabolic Kitchen (2013). raumlaborberlin. Permission granted from raumlaborberlin.

3.2 Mississippi. An Anthropocene River- Field Station 3: “Anthropocene Vernacular” 2018-2019

Context: The Edible Narrative was the culminating event of a year-long investigation of the human relation with the cultivation of native plants in the Midwestern United States along the Mississippi River, specifically, the American Bottom, the alluvial floodplain of the Mississippi river to the east of the St. Louis metro region. This project was embedded in Field Station 3 “Anthropocene Vernacular” as part of the HKW project: Mississippi. An Anthropocene River. Conceived by Lynn Peemoeller, the project assembled ethnobotanists, anthropologists, chefs, ceramicists, and gardeners to explore temporal assemblages of seed and human material that represented the landscape of the American Bottom. For thousands of years, going back to the Mississippian culture approximately 800-1600 CE, Indigenous people of the area cultivated a small group of native grasses, seed crops sunflower and squash that are rarely seen today in cultivation. These plants are known as Lost Crops. Today, their uncultivated descendants like *Polygonum erectum* (erect knotweed), *Iva annua* (Sumpweed) and *Chenopodium* (goosefoot) are mostly identified as weeds in the landscape.

Statement: “Tonight we propose to build a collective narrative from the seed’s point of view. I would like to say that seeds are neutral, but they really aren’t. Seeds are living cultures that represent thousands of years of selective breeding. Every seed has some package of DNA that carries with it the alterations from the past. We have to ask, would the seeds of today exist without the humans of the past?” (Lynn Peemoeller opening remarks 2019)

The “Edible Narrative” engaged eaters with the idea of how our relationship with plants greatly determines their future. From A list to B list what changed about how humans were growing and eating these native plants? Are we able to identify and interpret the remains of these relationships in the landscape over time if we examine what is intentionally grown (crops) next to what is not (weeds)?

Engagement: The project involved many stages of co-production, specifically through conversations, site visits, weed walks and garden activities. Paleoethnobotanical research on the Lost Crops was drawn upon from Archeologist and Ethnobotanist Natalie Mueller and the later context of Cahokian Agriculture from Archeologist Gayle Fritz. During the summer of 2019, an interpretive garden was planted at the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site interpretive center to represent and learn through cultivation practices from the Cahokian era 1050-1350 CE. The material relationship between food, landscape and ancient technologies was also explored with local ceramicist Susan Bostwick and interpretive clay vessels were crafted for the final performance.

The Edible Narrative was a choreographed bricolage of locally found and procured materials that have co-evolved to feed humans over time. The final performance was a public event staged outdoors in a late September native plant garden designed by New American Gardening, Studio Land Arts at the Granite City Arts District. A long table intersecting the garden was setup with several stations of storytellers, each holding a vessel or operating a cooking device. The menu, conceived by James Beard recognized Chef Rob Connoley featured four of the lost crops and responded to their qualities with compositions that represented their intrinsic challenges. Each storyteller acted as server to engage directly in conversation with participants about the food they are eating and its role in early agriculture as well as evidence of it in the landscape today.

Events and gatherings are ways of staging specific interactions with an audience. Held outdoors in a curated space it enabled heuristic engagement where participants were encouraged to discover for themselves the dis/connection between the past and present local landscape through edible encounters. Thus generating connectivity between community and environment beyond visual representation.

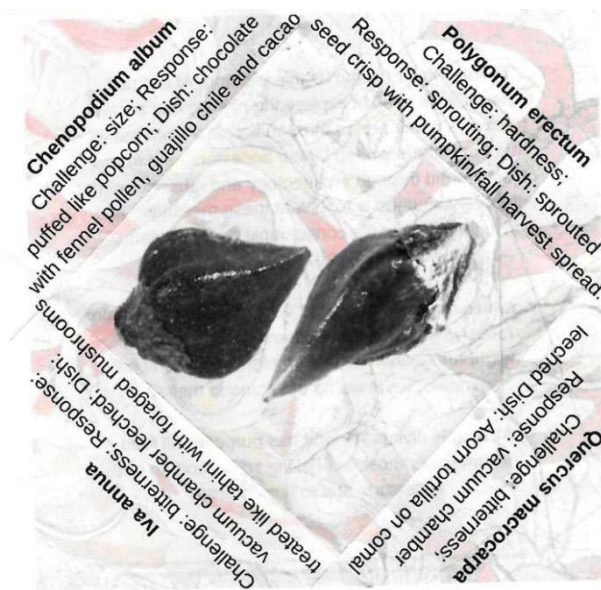


Figure 3. Experiment with Seeds (2019). Chef Rob Connoley. Permission granted from Chef Rob Connoley.



Figure 4. Edible Narrative (2019). Alisa Blatter. Permission granted from Alissa Blatter.

3.3 Mississippi River Open School for Kinship and Social Exchange - Mid River Field School 2021-2024

Context: The Mid River Field School is a three-year collective social group spanning both sides of the Mississippi River around the St. Louis metro area. The project is one of five hubs that make up the larger Mississippi River Open School for Kinship and Social Exchange, an expansive educational and research collaboration spanning the river's headwaters to the Gulf. For many partners this project is a continuation of the aforementioned Mississippi. An Anthropocene River (2018-2019) and was an opportunity to continue to collaborate on a multi-year project regarding issues spanning the length of the river. The Mid River Field school is a multigenerational group of artists, community leaders and botanical thinkers working on immersive social community projects throughout St. Louis to explore the idea of 'Crossings' in the river landscape. One outcome has been the development of a Seminar entitled, "Kindred Landscapes" in the Washington University MLA department. However, the Field School places intentional

emphasis on moving outside the university system, into the field in order to de-center the hierarchy of institutional learning and work towards the coproduction of knowledge with community.

Statement: “Our project seeks to develop innovative humanities-based curricula and related educational activities that critically engage with issues at the confluence of race, environment and extraction. We examine the Mississippi River watershed as a site for this exploration, envisioning the entirety of the river as an immersive learning environment, through the establishment of five community-engaged “river hubs” from its Headwaters to the Gulf.” (<https://mississippiriver.school/>)

Engagement: The Mid River Field School moves at the speed of trust, that is slowly and non-linear. This emergent way of working together is what Landscape Architect Rod Barnett might call an adaptive open system; That is, without predetermined outcomes (Emergence 2013). Ten active participants have worked together to develop ongoing project-based work that has addressed a span of site responsive issues including placemaking in Black Freedom Villages, Historic Markers, Spatial Stories in East St. Louis, Mindful Meandering on the Mississippi, An Exquisite Corpse Seed Vessel, Land Back to Black Farmers, an edition of the American Bottom Gazette, and an Acoustic Platform for the embodied performance of crossing the river with sound.

As the group continues to develop project work together it relies on the strength and guidance of the elders and asks participants to call upon wisdom from the ancestors. Two field activities bring the group together regularly- the weekly water blessing on the Mississippi River and foraging on different sites in our region. Foraging has allowed an active participatory transfer of knowledge between generations that spans botanical, folk, medicinal and culinary practices. Of particular interest is the proliferation in our region of the native plant *Phytolacca americana*. Otherwise known as Pokeweed, it is a typical ruderal species and is common on the disturbed land that borders the river and the weedy vacant spaces that define the post-industrial landscape that St. Louis is known for. It a towering sight to behold with strong pink stalks and deep purple black berries that strikes fear into many as a toxic plant. The truth is that Pokeweed has edible leaves and stems that have helped many populations survive in tough times, and other parts of the plant have been valued in folk medicine. Sadly, the knowledge of how to harvest and prepare it safely has been lost through the generations and so many simply avoid it. Pokeweed is the subject of one of our ongoing inquiries as we generate a body of knowledge documented through foraging, preparing, and sharing that we call “Pokelore”. The focus on one nimble plant that is emblematic of both the environmental conditions of our region and the strength of its adaptive qualities allows us to reclaim a relationship with time and place. As this Pokelore is shared out it provides a roadmap through nonlinear time where people can connect with pasts and futures as needed using Pokeweed as remedy and recovery from our own self-inflicted damage.



Figure 5. Pokelore (2024). Jennifer Colten. Permission granted from Jennifer Colten.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Putting Methods to Practice

What can an ox, seeds and weeds can tell us about food in the Anthropocene? It shows that there is opportunity to utilize the material movements of food as a way to situate human time in the narrative arc of earth history. The project methodologies referenced in the field note engagements suggest new avenues for the construction of knowledge as it relates to landscape architecture. These strategies tap into emergent social engagement practices i.e., social practice, that have largely up until now been utilized through the artistic lens.

Utilizing social practice for the production of knowledge is a form of procedural knowledge that comes from an embodied phenomenological experience. In other words, the “know how” is produced if one is able to experience something. In the case of the metabolic kitchen, that performed step of breaking down the ox station by station slows the pathway between the eater and food. Active participation leads to an embodied encounter between the eater and its environment. The interactive performance presents this relationship in the form of a kitchen, making transparent the system and bringing us closer to the production of the food through its material flows.

The resulting ox in a jar is an excellent example of a “nature culture” slurry, or act of translation that Bruno Latour speaks about in the context of the Anthropocene- that is, the hybridization of the idea that nature and culture cannot be separated. Latour asserts that in order to understand the world we must consider the material flows that make it up and nor can we extract ourselves from them (We Have Never Been Modern 1993). In other words, in order to understand our relation to the environment or landscape that gives us our food we may bravely dive our spoons into the slurry of ox.

Food is the embodied energy and product of landscape interacting with sun, water, soil, microbes, labor, manipulation of genes, and knowledge over time. This is something that can be tasted, beyond metaphor, beyond thought but as action. The French term “*terroir*” perfectly captures this idea as a specific and unique place character, or taste of place. Attributed to ancient winemakers, the concept developed by observing the correlation of different characteristics of wine to a variety of specific geographic variables such as soil, rainfall, light, and climate among others (Nowak 2018 p.543). In recent times the idea of *terroir* has expanded beyond wine to represent how the taste of food can impart a relational understanding of place or more specifically “patterns of habituation and the practices of daily life that have evolved in an area as a complex relationship between landscape and its inhabitants” (Waterman 2001 p.64).

While everyday eating is an activity that integrates elements of the landscape into our bodies it is the slowing down, performative, and engaging aspect of the metabolic kitchen and the edible narrative that allow pathways for this idea to manifest itself as knowledge. This propositional knowledge may lead to more agency because the experience is able to inform future actions. This is a constructivist approach. When one experiences an encounter through participation, Lawrence and Annie Halprin refer to it as “Take Part Processes” in *Taking Part, A Workshop Approach to Collective Creativity* (1974). These types of creative intervention can bridge time between creative urbanist strategies of the 1970’s and contemporary relational practices through social engagement using experimental, collaborative, and interdisciplinary tools. Artistic Curator Mary Jane Jacobs asks; “When values are held in common, could collective hope spark problem solving?” (Sholette & Bass 2018)

The goal is the same: to insight agency and action about how to navigate the complexities of the moment or what we want to be true.

The Pokelore project is an ongoing knowledge generation loop. Pokeweed provides a focal point for the collective to come together and explore the river landscape searching for food and medicine. The repeat attention to this activity through the seasons and at different sites is building a shared procedural body of knowledge. It also builds relational experience with the landscape over time. “Poke” has been called the Jedi of the plant world because it has a light side as a powerful healer and a dark side as a toxin (Lee 2017). This great power, or “the force” must be used carefully. For centuries this wisdom has been used in many healing traditions. In this group, that knowledge is held by the elders who share African American and Native American ancestry. It is great responsibility to distribute this knowledge responsibly through collective action-based work like foraging, preparing, cooking and eating it together. There is no start or

end to this work, it is an ongoing evolution of practicing these methods together that perpetuates the strength of the traditions.

4.2 Broader Implications for Landscape Architecture

Framing these types of social practices as pedagogic tools in landscape action research in a methodologic way may help scale up the concept in measurable ways. These methods offer yet another way to approach food in landscape studies. The 2021 Turner prize nominated Architecture Collective *Cooking Sections* is an example of a contemporary practice that “uses food as a lens and a tool to observe landscapes in transformation to examine the systems that organise the world through food. Using site-responsive installation, performance and video, they explore the overlapping boundaries between art, architecture, ecology and geopolitics”. While *Cooking Sections* has found a role in the public eye to bridge ideas between food and landscape, the field notes here suggest a body of work that demonstrates that there are many avenues for integrating food forward creative interventions into landscape practice and pedagogy.

The use of these methods may have broader implication for the practice and curricular development of Landscape Architecture. Beyond relying on visual culture and representation with the goal to get projects built, the profession can expand its impact through these relational design strategies that link communities to their environments using experiential programming and open-ended emergent strategies. It also has the potential to affect more ridged systems that foster economic development and generate policy by offering an “out of the box” counterpoint through unexpected experiences. Engagement leads to action. This in turn may generate the kind of agency that people crave in the uncertainty of our time.

5 CONCLUSION

As we are still in the early part of the 21st century, the Anthropocene concept having had its moment in scientific discussion and neatly archived through a global body of work, now gives way to the complexity of our changing planet without categorical classification. The scientific community continues to debate the legitimacy of the Anthropocene as an epoch, failing to agree on the point of origin. A great many more social critics, artists and philosophers continue to find direction in responding to what Donna Haraway calls “the felt urgencies of our times”. Despite the critical objections that ring true, claiming the Anthropocene is misnomer for the unthinkable damage that systems of extraction have done to this earth, even Haraway will agree the term is useful for rounding up provocation around issues that must be addressed... “what and whom the Anthropocene collects in its refurbished netbag might prove potent for living in and even for modest terran recuperation” (Haraway p.47).

Netbag or meshbag, what we find is that ready-at-hand solutions for these felt urgencies seem to be failing us and there is a need to bring new creative practices into knowledge building. “We must change the story; the story must change” (Haraway p. 40). What methods can we look to expand this kind of storytelling? Davis and Turpin claim that “art as a vehicle of aesthesis is central to thinking with and feeling through the Anthropocene” (p.1). Utilizing creative intervention strategies like social practice are one such methodology that can expand procedural knowledge. It has the ability to generate more meaning in a field that is dominated by visual culture. The value of this kind of knowledge building and life experience is that it may drive action or agency. It is a tool that adds to the discipline and can be integrated into practice and design. Motivation is a valuable asset, combined with action it creates agency. The hope is that more practices like this are intentionally integrated into both formal and informal pedagogy beyond visual representation as it relates to landscape architecture and care for the earth. The objective of this paper is to position another way to integrate food and landscape into the study and practice of landscape architecture in order to expand the impact of the field.

As stated before, food is such a universal language it is a subject of immense potential for both social practice and landscape architecture. As a material, food itself has a traceable history that comes from the land and has undergone cultural inputs and transformations along the way to our bodies. Food is derivative of the attention we give to landscape relationships and processes. How we sort through and represent these elements is of upmost significance to the landscape architecture practice and pedagogy. If we have the agency to experience and sort for ourselves then we may have the freedom to define our

own times. As Latour says, “It is the sorting that makes the times, not the times that makes the sorting”. (p.76)

It may be idealistic to think that one bite can change the world. Writer Michael Pollan is famous for saying “vote with your fork,” but no one can deny that we are in unprecedented times on planet earth. Maybe it's not only the eating, but the making, the growing, the people, the inter-species relations, the water, the waste, or the stories that motivate us along the way. The projects shared here in the field notes are just some examples of work situated as social practice with the intent to generate know-how. We can use these examples to align and expand the discipline more creatively in order to create pathways of agency.

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