

ABSTRACT

The Salton Sea is a saline lake and the largest inland body of water in southern California, formed by a geologic depression below sea level at the bottom of an isolated basin similarly titled the Salton Sink. Once an outlet for the Colorado River to the Gulf of California, the depression was isolated over time through the deposition of sediments. The current volume of the Salton Sea originated in the first decade of the 20th century with the failure of infrastructures built to redirect the Colorado River for irrigation. The Salton Sea now functions both as an agricultural infrastructure, albeit one increasingly degraded by nutrients and contaminants present in the agricultural run-off irrigating the Imperial and Coachella Valleys, and as an ecological resource. This paper argues that the example of the Salton Sea demonstrates the capacity of material failure and entropy to generate novel landscape conditions that have properties which are valued.

The theoretical work of this paper ties together three distinct but related strands of contemporary theory impacting the field of landscape architecture: emergence and indeterminacy, new materialist thinking in philosophy, and discourse related to the concept of the Anthropocene. Theoretical arguments that engage these strands and a selective environmental history of the Salton Sea work together to advance our case for the generative capacity of failure and entropy. This case develops concepts for understanding how failure and entropy operate, applying a discourse that, within landscape architectural theory, has primarily focused on ecological phenomena and discrete sites to the behavior of geological, hydrological, sedimentary, and infrastructural assemblages at very large scales. Ultimately, the paper argues that there will be an important role for landscape architectural design that understands how to operate within the context of very large scale landscapes experiencing failure and entropy.